

Remembering Dr. A. James Morgan, and my “Serious Problem”

By Sandy Mesics © 2025 • sandy@sandymesics.org

Many years ago, Dr. A. James Morgan was my shrink. I think he while he is still alive, I owe it to him to say that he saved my life. Thank you, Dr. Morgan.

In 1974 I entered the Gender Identity Clinic at Pennsylvania Hospital. The clinic was operating under the Johns Hopkins model, where candidates for gender confirmation surgery were evaluated by a psychiatrist who either approved or did not approve them for hormones. Next came the “real life test” of living in ones’ gender for a minimum of a year before being evaluated for surgery. Psychiatric follow-ups continued during this time of transition, and eventually the psychiatrist either approved or did not approve a candidate for surgery. Most of us young trans folks rolled our eyes at this: we knew it was a kind of gatekeeping, a way for them to gather clinical data about us, and a way to generate money while “covering their asses.” We trans folks pretty much knew what answers to give them to their questions. We knew how to present ourselves, how to walk, talk, and act. What stories to tell, what stuff not to tell. It was a game with very high stakes.



At about the time I entered the Pennsylvania Hospital program, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported that “four sex-change operations are known to have been performed in Philadelphia, all at Pennsylvania Hospital.”¹ Morgan outlined the requirements for surgery, “the surgery would not be performed on persons who had ever married or who had legal obligations to a spouse or children; who are only homosexual; or who are psychotic to the extent that they can’t evaluate the significance of the operation. Simply stated, the candidate must be a true transsexual ... All candidates must also ‘cross dress’ and live the life of the sex they elect... for at least a year.”²

When I began seeing Dr. Morgan, I was married, but I decided not to play the game, though I knew the stakes were high. I KNEW that I was a woman, and wanted the surgery to verify that, but I also reasoned that just maybe, even if just maybe a little bit, this wasn’t the right path for me, Dr. Morgan could keep me from making the worst mistake of my life. And he couldn’t do that if he didn’t know the real me. He didn’t reject me because I was married, though he told me that if I was to go on to have surgery, I would have to divorce.

We started with the usual battery of psychological tests: IQ test, Rorschach, (to me, most of the ink blots looked like pelvic x-rays), and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). With the smugness that only a 22-year-old with a B.S. in Psychology could muster, I told Dr. Morgan that I studied under Dr. Dale Harris, one of the developers of the test, and probably could sway the results on the MF scale. He chuckled and told me to just go ahead and take the test anyway.

After a while, of course, our sessions grew more intense, and inevitably, sexuality became a topic. I mentioned that with all likelihood, after surgery, I would continue to be interested in women and would most probably be a lesbian. I remember thinking after I said that it was probably all over for me. All of us

in the trans community at that time knew that these clinics expected us to be heterosexual women after surgery: no lesbians allowed. To his credit, he simply said, “let’s explore that a little more.” Wow! It wasn’t all over. And explore it we did.

He encouraged me to more fully explore my sexuality, to at least try things with men. He sent me to women’s conscious-raising groups, so I could get a feeling of the issues facing women in the 1970s. I did all he asked of me and reported back. Ultimately, Dr. Morgan wrote the recommendation that I have gender confirmation surgery, though he described me as “prissy.” As it turned out I did not have surgery at Pennsylvania Hospital (that’s another story!), so I lost touch with Dr. Morgan. But I took his advice and did explore my sexuality (another story – maybe!) and probably became a bit less prissy. Maybe. But I was correct all along about my sexual preference.

Dr. Morgan did not rubber stamp approvals for surgery. He could be challenging. In a paper he published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, he stated, “Any person applying for sex reassignment surgery has a serious problem. Most of the time, operative intervention is not required or desirable, and vigorous efforts must be made to redirect the patient into more appropriate channels. Even when surgery appears indicated much psychotherapeutic work must be done before and after the surgery to help the patient adapt to his or her new role.” Much to his credit, Morgan did take a holistic approach to therapy for trans clients. “Before we embark on the mission of helping the male-to-female transsexual to be a woman or the female-to-male transsexual to be a man, we must begin to explore the necessity of the candidate to develop as a person – no small task for anyone.”³ In 1978 Morgan was an expert witness for a transgender woman who lost her teaching job after sex reassignment surgery. A newspaper report said by then Morgan had counseled more than 450 sex change candidates.⁴

I’ve been able to cobble together some of Morgan’s career path. He was born in 1930 and graduated from Ursinus College. He studied at Hahnemann Medical School and completed his residency in psychiatry at Norristown State Hospital.⁵ In 1970 Morgan was named director of the Hall Mercer Community Mental Health Center of the Pennsylvania Hospital and a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.⁶ He was a busy man, as he was also Director of the Day Hospital of Pennsylvania Hospital Community Mental Health-Mental Retardation Center at 8th and Locust Street in Philadelphia. This is where we had our sessions. He had been psychiatric director since June 1969. Pennsylvania Hospital was planning on extending their care to the trans community, and the Philadelphia community at large. “Plans call for an increase in outpatient treatment.”⁷

Around 1968, he met and wed Mary Dennesaites, who was about a decade younger than him. “When James met Mary, he was thirty-eight years old and was the clinical director of the Community Mental Health Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Mary had a degree in nursing and was an aspiring editor for the Lippincott Publishing Company in the same city. ... The first time they saw each other was in the Pennsylvania hospital where Mary was admitted for some tests. A mutual friend, who wanted the two of them to meet, had sent Dr. Morgan to the hospital to see Mary. As she walked into her room, Jim was waiting for her. He held out his hand and said, “Hi! I’m Jim Morgan. I’m a shrink, but this is a social call.” Mary took an immediate liking to him and recalls thinking, ‘I love you! I love you!’”⁸

The Morgans married, and for a while collaborated on a couple of publications. Morgan authored a book on Mental Health Nursing in 1973, “The Practice of Mental Health Nursing: A Community Approach.” In 1976, he co-authored another nursing text, “Mental Health and Mental Illness.” In 1980 he and his wife Mary co-authored “Manual of Primary Mental Health Care.”

Morgan had an inquisitive and open mind. He was a gourmet cook, a musician, and an amateur artist. At least in the early 1970s, Morgan was a liberal Democrat. In 1972 he signed onto a full-page newspaper ad paid for by Health Professionals for Democratic Presidential Nominee George McGovern, supporting him for president.⁹ Around 1972, he was initiated into Transcendental Meditation: "I began to meditate with skepticism and doubt... When the fragile method was taught to me, it seemed impossible that this delicate thing could hope to accomplish anything beyond being a delightful way to relax twice a day. I began because the consensus of the testimony I heard was too unanimous to be rejected and compelled me to try it first-hand. It was clear that there could be no danger in such a natural, delicate and guileless procedure and so I began, expecting nothing. The effects were as others reported. They were immediate and increased with time. I began to feel more alert and awake at work, and even through the evenings after particularly busy days. I no longer say 'What a grueling day' even though I am now doing much more than I had previously. Work just doesn't seem tiring. I have more energy with which to relate to people, and not feeling drained, I no longer feel put upon by the needless details and trivia with which I must deal."¹⁰

"After they were married, they put their money together and for some years concentrated on restoring an 1837 home in Philadelphia, which Jim had purchased before their marriage. They were both successful in their professions and living life on the executive scale. Eventually, though, they felt they were putting too much energy and money into the housing project, so they sold it and moved into a double apartment overlooking the Delaware River. They could see Independence Hall and all of Society Hill out of their thirty windows. It was a balcony view of life." But after a trip to Hawaii, the couple decided relocate there where they could buy some property and grow vegetables year around. Morgan began practicing at a state mental hospital, and "For two years they lived on the island of Oahu, in a cottage on the State Hospital grounds. Jim was in private psychiatric practice, and Mary gave up her profession to try being a housewife and amateur farmer. Mary hated it."¹¹

In 1982, "After two years on Oahu, an opportunity arose for Jim to go into private practice on the island of Hawaii. Coincidentally, Mary was offered a position as director of nursing at Kona hospital, and she gobbled up the opportunity to return to work. The work was extremely hard, but it took away her feeling of uselessness. She had a title again, she had her identity back, she had her business card. And this is what she was doing when the missionaries knocked on their front door and changed their lives completely."^{12 13 14}

Then, in 1983, disaster struck: "Dr. A. James Morgan, 53, of Keei, South Kona, has been indicted by the Hawaii Grand Jury on 40 counts of Medicaid fraud. ... Morgan was released without bail after being booked at the Kona Circuit Court before Judge Paul de Silva, police records showed. ... the alleged fraud consisted of false reports on a number of patients during 1982. Morgan practices medicine in Kailua-Kona."¹⁵ He pleaded not guilty to the charges on April 22.¹⁶ The trial began on November 22, 1983. "Morgan was sentenced in February [1984] ... and was fined \$8,000 for the 40 counts, ordered to make \$2,315 in restitution and put on probation for five years. He also was directed to do 320 hours of free psychiatric service."¹⁷ Under a settlement agreement with the Board of Medicine, Morgan's medical license was suspended for 40 months.¹⁸

At about this time of crisis in their lives, the Morgans became converts to the Church of the Latter Day Saints and moved to Utah. "Both Mary and Jim feel that they were inspired to move to Utah after their conversion. Jim is enthused with his work as director of behavioral medicine, and Mary is excited about



her work as his wife. She says that “things are very different now. Once we joined the Church I started to take a look at our whole relationship. I pay much more attention to our marriage. We’re happier now than we ever were. Not that we were unhappy before, but it’s just so much better now. Although I have given up my profession again, I no longer feel the loss of identity.”¹⁹

While Mary gave up her nursing career, James resumed his medical career. Initially, he was clinical director of the Geriatric unit at the Utah State Hospital, where he also served as Medical Staff president and member of the research and utilization review committees.²⁰ In 1986, he was appointed medical director of Behavioral Medicine at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center. “Morgan says he has a keen interest in medicine’s rapidly developing understanding of the biological basis of emotional states, especially depression, anxiety and dysphoria. ‘The emerging philosophy is that mental and physical illness are inseparable, and the most effective treatment involves experts in both areas.’”²¹ The couple settled into the LDS community: “Morgan and his wife Mary, live in Springville, where last spring he sang in the chorus of the Mormon Oratorio, presented by Opera West.”²²

In 1989, Morgan was appointed Chief of Psychiatry at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center in Provo, Utah.²³ He remained there until 1992, when he joined the medical staff of Dixie Regional Medical Center in St. George. “Specializing in adolescent, adult and forensic psychiatry, Dr. Morgan has opened a private practice in St. George.”²⁴ In 1997 Morgan was president-elect of the Washington County Medical Society.²⁵ At that time he was medical director of the Behavioral Medicine Unit at Dixie Regional Medical Center, St. George.²⁶

In 2007 Morgan was living in Santa Clara, Utah. He wrote a letter to the editor of *The Daily Spectrum* advocating for the rights of immigrants by providing them with free ESOL programs.²⁷ He continued in practice until at least 2010, but after that his trail becomes cold. As of this writing, he is 95 years old and living in Santa Clara, Utah.

Endnotes

¹ The Philadelphia Inquirer, 10/21/1973, p. 1

² The Philadelphia Inquirer, 10/21/1973, p. 2

³ Morgan, Arthur James. Psychotherapy for Transsexual Candidates Screened out of Surgery. Archives of Sexual Behavior, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1978 pp. 273-283.

⁴ Philadelphia Daily News, Dec. 15, 1978, p. 16

⁵ The Philadelphia Inquirer, 2/18/1970, p. 33

⁶ Provo Daily Herald, 1/30/1986, p. 15

⁷ The Philadelphia Inquirer, 2/18/1970, p. 33

⁸ deHart, Virginia M. Jim and Mary Morgan – Building a “Super” Marriage. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Mormon Journal February 1987. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1987/02/jim-and-mary-morgan-building-a-super-marriage?lang=eng>

⁹ Philadelphia Daily News, 11/31/1972

¹⁰ Forem, Jack. Transcendental Meditation: The Essential Teachings of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Carlsbad, CA. Hay House, Inc. 1973.

¹¹ deHart

¹² deHart

¹³ Honolulu Star-Bulletin, May 27, 1982

¹⁴ Hawaii Tribune-Herald, Nov. 1, 1983, p. 3

-
- ¹⁵ Honolulu Star-Bulletin, Apr. 1, 1983, p. 16
- ¹⁶ Honolulu Star-Bulletin, May 3, 1983
- ¹⁷ Honolulu Star-Advertiser, Aug. 7, 1984, p. 1
- ¹⁸ Honolulu Star-Bulletin, Apr. 21, 1985
- ¹⁹ deHart
- ²⁰ Provo Daily Herald, 1/30/1986, p. 15
- ²¹ Provo Daily Herald, 1/30/1986, p. 15
- ²² Provo Daily Herald, 1/30/1986, p. 15
- ²³ Orem Geneva Times, 5/31/1989 p. 3
- ²⁴ The Daily Spectrum, St. George, Utah, 7/2/1992, p. 16
- ²⁵ The Daily Spectrum, St. George Utah 8/28/1997, p. 18
- ²⁶ The Daily Spectrum, St. George Utah 12.28/1997 p. 19
- ²⁷ The Daily Spectrum, St. George Utah 11.28/2007, p. 6