At the end of Ain Gordon’s *The 217 Boxes of Dr. Henry Anonymous*, Ercel Fryer insists that his son John was not extraordinary. “I feel putting extraordinary on top of my son is almost to give you, me, all of us, a free pass,” he says. The term “also belittles him,” Ercel continues, arguing that assigning John this label downplays his heroism. Instead, Ercel encourages his audience to recognize John’s ordinariness—not to minimize his achievements, but to realize that this ordinariness “makes him more brave—to have taken this risk bigger than his whole life.”

We know Fryer’s name because he took this risk. At the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1972, Fryer announced to his colleagues that he was gay—a tremendous statement from a man whose own profession officially defined homosexuality as an illness. From its inception in 1952 until 1973, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the psychiatrists’ guide to identifying and diagnosing mental illnesses, included homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disorder. Indeed, this belief was so pervasive that Fryer only agreed to speak if he could do so in disguise. He had been fired from
jobs before for being gay, and he knew that he could be again.¹ Job loss, moreover, was only one form that discrimination against gay men could take.

How, then, did an “ordinary man” do such an “extraordinary thing?” John Fryer was not a philosopher or a politician, and so he did not leave any statements that thoroughly explain his actions. But by looking at his family upbringing, his religious devotion, and his commitment to self-determination, as well as the broader social and political changes taking place at the time, we can understand something of how he became this person.

Fryer’s childhood was conventional in many ways, yet commitment to social change was the rule, not the exception, in his family. Both of his parents participated in altruism, and his sister, Kathy, was later active in her local branch of the National Organization for Women (NOW).² By 1967, Fryer had settled in the Germantown section of Philadelphia, where he regularly participated in community events with his mostly African American neighbors. Riots had erupted in this part of the city three years earlier, but Fryer was less worried about his safety than he was about continuing the family tradition. “You raised a peculiar son,” he noted to his parents, “But YOU raised him.”³

Religious devotion also helps explain Fryer’s willingness to take a stand. In 1985, city and state police bombed the West Philadelphia headquarters of the black liberation group MOVE, killing eleven, including five children, and leaving hundreds homeless. Fryer was

¹ John Fryer to family, Oct. 17, 1964, box 21, John Fryer Papers (Collection 3465), Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/13363. All citations from this collection.

² Kathy Helmbock to John Fryer, Oct. 20, 1975, box 42, folder 8.

shocked by the apathy many Philadelphians displayed toward these deaths. “Somewhere back in my Kentucky evangelical roots,” he wrote, “I was taught that only the Lord reserves final judgment . . . I cannot feel truly justified in the death of any person.”

Regardless of what his religious upbringing actually entailed, Fryer believed in adulthood that it demanded he withhold judgment.

There is evidence to suggest that, in the years leading up to the Dr. Anonymous speech, the Episcopal Church to which Fryer belonged was open to a plurality of viewpoints. Fryer was an advocate for Bishop Robert DeWitt, controversial for his support of the radical Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC). Led by Muhammed Kenyatta of Chester, Pennsylvania, BEDC spoke in favor of reparations and the right to self-defense and against capitalism and colonialism. It also called specifically on white religious leaders to correct the church’s historical role in perpetuating racism. DeWitt recognized the need for such action, and so did Fryer. After meeting with Kenyatta, he wrote to DeWitt to “put on paper my strong endorsement of the support which you and Fr. Washington, along with some other brave men on Diocesan Council, gave to the Black Manifesto.”

The 1969 Diocesan Convention also discussed issues including apartheid, racial discrimination in the workplace, and opposition to the war.

Armed with this background, Fryer developed a twofold philosophy. First, he emphasized community empowerment and self-determination: the right for members of a community to define themselves and their needs and to work toward solutions to these needs. People should have the power to shape institutions to meet their needs rather than be forced to conform. By the early 1970s, these ideas had filtered into popular culture and psychology, including Richard

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Bach’s *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (1970). A parable of individuality and conformity in which a seagull defies the rules of his community to fly high into the air, the tale became wildly popular with American audiences, including Fryer, who read it approvingly.⁶

Psychiatry, Fryer believed, was often guilty of enforcing such conformity. Later in life, he wryly suggested that the “goals of medicine” were to encourage people to adjust to physicians’ arbitrary definitions of health.⁷ By contrast, Fryer recognized that “healthy” and “sick” were constructions that reflected the ideologies of dominant groups, not self-evident, objective categories. “In my worst dreams,” he wrote, “I see my psychoanalytic friends with their concern for my head and their bank accounts for my money. WANTING TO CURE ME—I don’t want to be cured . . . It all goes to show—what is illness? Is depression sick—Is mania sickness?”⁸ Though he spoke here of the bipolar disorder with which he struggled, the same was true of his sexuality. He spared no words for the psychiatrists who enforced these judgments. While at the APA in 1971, a year before his speech, he insisted that the leaders of the organization “wield . . . a night stick as surely as they would if they wore the Gestapo uniform.”⁹

The second aspect of Fryer’s philosophy focused on the self. Though his most famous moment was in costume, he nonetheless insisted on the right to inhabit and express his whole self, rather than one that was divided, fragmented, costumed, closeted, or hidden. As he noted in

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⁶ John Fryer, notebook, undated (1973), box 54.


⁸ John Fryer, idea book, undated, box 53.

⁹ John Fryer, diary entry, May 4, 1971, box 52.
his diary the day after the speech, he had “for the first time . . . identified with a force which is akin to my selfhood.”\textsuperscript{10} Even in disguise, he felt more himself than he had ever felt before.

These concerns reflected, among other things, Gestalt therapy, which emphasized the wholeness of the individual, and the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow and others, both of which were popular after World War II. Fritz Perls, author of \textit{Gestalt Therapy Verbatim}, argued that “this achieving the center, being grounded in one’s self, is about the highest state a human being can achieve.”\textsuperscript{11} Elsewhere, Perls defined the goal of Gestalt as “the re-integration of your disowned personality.”\textsuperscript{12} Fryer would have been exposed to these ideas through his medical training, and in the 1970s he attended conferences dedicated to Gestalt therapy—indeed, the Perls quotations, which seem as if Fryer could have written them himself, come from a flyer for one such event. Fryer believed that a person was “finished w/ therapy” when they were “approaching wholeness.”\textsuperscript{13} “My life has been a series of transitions,” he wrote, continuing this “quest for the transfigured self” into the last year of his life.\textsuperscript{14}

Issues of fragmentation and wholeness were important to Fryer beyond his professional role as a psychiatrist. He refused to believe, for instance, that religiosity demanded self-

\textsuperscript{10} John Fryer, diary entry, 1972, box 52, and \url{http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/7687}.

\textsuperscript{11} Fritz Perls quoted in “Gestalt Therapy Weekend Workshop,” undated (1973–74), box 127, folder 10.

\textsuperscript{12} Fritz Perls quoted in ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} John Fryer, diary entry, Dec. 15, 1971, box 52.

abnegation. As he put it circa 1966–67, “I submit that Christ himself was aware of his selfhood and promoted it, and that only as this selfhood was fulfilled could he, can we possess a spirit worth to be commended to our Father when our last hour comes.”\[^{15}\] Instead, he argued that “Church should promote the growth of self.”\[^{16}\]

Fryer first applied these beliefs to his participation in the movement for racial justice. His trajectory was not uncommon; as a *Time* magazine article put it in 1975,

> Homosexuals have made much headway by using the model of the black civil rights struggle, from the routine singing of *We Shall Overcome* at rallies to specific complaints such as that of Gay Activist Franklin Kameny protesting the Army’s ban on gays: “When you had problems with racism, you didn’t throw out the blacks, you threw out recalcitrant racists.”\[^{17}\]

As social movements proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s, many of them, including the gay rights and gay liberation movements, drew on the example of the black freedom movement.

As a young man, however, Fryer’s support for this movement was inconsistent. As he wrote while a resident in Toledo, Ohio, “the people up here are as depressing in their radical integration as the people in the south are as segregationists…I just wish that they would find some other cause than integration, just for a while.”\[^{18}\] By the second half of the decade, his views had changed.


\[^{16}\] Ibid.

\[^{17}\] “‘I am a Homosexual’: The Gay Drive for Acceptance,” Time magazine, Sept. 8, 1975, box 42, folder 24, and http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/13536. In 1948, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the military.

\[^{18}\] John Fryer to family, Aug. 19, 1962, box 21.
The church was one of the first places through which Fryer enacted this new commitment, which called for more than just integration. Rather, he argued, the church must extend its welcome beyond those who conformed to middle-class, white notions of respectability. “We greet with open arms the Negro person who has become like us, who wears the kinds of clothes we wear, who obeys the rules we set, who is nice to his elders,” he wrote, excoriating white churchgoers who “despise the man of color who challenges the power which we have, and which we do not want to give up.”19

Fryer was always cautious about the problem of outside, often elite, individuals imposing their own interests on marginalized groups. He originally came to Temple to work in its community mental health center, a commitment that he took very seriously. However, he was not entirely comfortable being “a white helper in a black community.” “When one has assumed this role,” he wrote, “it is easy to decide that everything one does is good and proper, and few helpers really examine what they are doing and how the recipient” of such aid felt.20 “Effective community planning,” by contrast, “must take into account . . . the feelings and opinions of the powerless.”21 The “major question” of the conference he was planning was whether organizers were “imposing a program on them [dispossessed groups].”22

It is easy to see why the fact of an outside, elite group like the APA imposing its standards on a marginalized group was anathema to Fryer. The psychiatric profession, however,


22 John Fryer, “Ideas from Previous Meeting.” undated (1968), box 116, folder 2, John Fryer Papers.
was not immune to the wrenching changes of the 1960s and 1970s, and Fryer’s speech was not a complete anomaly. In 1970, the APA conference nearly came to a standstill over the Vietnam War and its expansion into Cambodia, which President Richard Nixon had announced just days before. In the years leading up to 1972, conferences regularly faced challenges from members of the Black Power, women’s liberation, and gay liberation movements.23

While each of these groups voiced their own demands, two common themes ran through their statements. First, because psychiatrists were members of the elite, they inevitably occupied a position of power in relation to their patients. Thus, conventional psychiatry recreated the power imbalance of society at large. Second—and not unrelated—psychiatry was intent on forcing people to conform to pre-existing institutions, rather than giving people the power to shape institutions to fit their needs.

A characteristic cartoon depicted psychiatrists as devils leading the huddled masses, some of them in straitjackets, to lobotomies and electroshock therapy—the only “help” they were willing to provide.24 In 1970, members of the gay and women’s liberation movements jumped on stage to protest a paper being presented about the use of electroshock therapy as a treatment for homosexuality, which was not uncommon. At a conference riddled with debate about Vietnam and Cambodia—and in an article devoted to this debate—this protest was labeled “the most


serious disruption.” Fryer did not always comment on these developments, but he could not have been unaware of them.

The Dr. Anonymous speech, then, was the climax of a lifetime’s work of thought and activism, in a context in which such activism was perhaps more visible than it ever had been before. Thus, it is not surprising that the speech returned to many familiar themes. “As psychiatrists who are homosexual,” Fryer noted, “we must look carefully at the power which lies in our hands to define the health of others around him.” Outside groups, that is, must not impose their values on others. He also argued that gay psychiatrists occupied a position akin to African Americans. Both groups, he insisted, faced “a variety of what we shall call ‘n—r syndrome,” forced to know their place, attempt to pass, or be twice as good as their colleagues. While problematic, Fryer’s analogy speaks to the influence his earlier activism. Finally, defining homosexuality as an illness did not only hurt those who received this label. In depriving gay men and lesbians of their “honest humanity,” homophobia led “all those others around us to lose that little bit of their humanity as well.” In other words, it chipped away at their wholeness.

“1972 should be a very good year,” wrote John Fryer on New Year’s Day, including the APA conference as one of the places where “things should look up.” He had already spoken with Barbara Gittings about appearing on the panel with her and Frank Kameny. Things did not

25 “Psychiatrists in Hectic War Debate,” Medical Tribune, June 1, 1970, box 7, folder 1.

26 John Fryer, speech to the American Psychiatric Association original draft, 1972, box 38, folder 11, and http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/7254.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 John Fryer, diary entry, Jan. 1, 1972, box 52.

30 John Fryer, diary entry, Dec. 29, 1972, box 52.
start to look up immediately—one year after the speech, in 1973, Fryer was fired again for being gay. That same year, however, the APA did remove homosexuality from the DSM, at least as a diagnosis unto itself. Over the next several years, cities began to pass local non-discrimination ordinances, filling in the gaps left by the Civil Rights Act, and a handful of openly gay politicians were elected to office. While these gains always came with remarkable opposition, it did not compare to the even more virulent homophobia that emerged amid the AIDS crisis. In 1985, Fryer reflected on the Dr. Anonymous speech and spoke about this new crisis. He also addressed the need for continued activism of all sorts. “We must align ourselves with others who are oppressed,” he implored an audience of fellow Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists (AGLP) members, “our cause has no meaning unless we align ourselves with those people whom society oppresses in other ways: the homeless, blacks, women, I could go on and on.” Fryer died in 2003, leaving the fight for equality to other ordinary people capable of doing extraordinary things.


32 Ibid.