

The Bold and Courageous Path of Vera John-Steiner

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“It is quite a leap from Budapest to Rough Rock, Arizona, but the diversity of thought and the impact of culture as part of thought were vividly manifested in both places. For Navajos, the creating of beauty in paintings and ordinary artifacts has a life-sustaining power in the midst of harsh conditions they often face. Seeing this power, I asked myself: What sustains creative and intellectual endeavor?” Vera John-Steiner, *Notebooks of the Mind*, p. xiv

With this question, Vera John-Steiner launched her inquiry into the creative and intellectual processes of exceptionally talented and innovative people across a variety of disciplines. Budapest, Hungary was her childhood home in the 1930s before she and thousands of other European Jews fled to the U.S. as Hitler began his systematic extermination of the Jewish Problem. English was not her first language, or second, or third; but her fourth. She used it in her U.S. studies in psychology at the University of Chicago, following which she relocated to the American Southwest where her remarkable career has unfolded. Her experiences under harsh conditions in Europe, and among those living harshly in the Southwest, have led her to understand how people think symbolically and construct textual worlds through which they make their lives meaningful. This work was pioneering in its inception and remains influential as the field of psychology catches up on the path she has cut through a thicket of opposition.

As the notion of cognitive pluralism has become mainstream thanks to the work of Howard Gardner and others, it’s hard to remember—especially for those of us who were barely out of diapers at the time—just how courageous it was for Vera to work against the reigning orthodoxies of her day in undertaking these questions. If I may digress and briefly tell a family

story: My sister Anne was an undergraduate psychology major at Princeton from 1969-1973, and for her senior thesis did a paper on what might be called the psychology of advertising. Now, here in the 21st century, this topic sounds like a reasonable idea, one that might help establish a career as, say, an advertising art director, which is what she did for many years. But in the 1970s, her thesis review committee took quite a dim view of her work because it wasn't carried out in a laboratory and was too grounded in mundane activity.

Anne did this work well over a decade after Vera had undertaken an even more radical departure from the clinical approaches to skull-bound cognition in her consideration not only of the multiple symbol systems through which people think but the cultural activity by means of which ways of thinking develop. Not only did she go against orthodoxy to consider this topic, she did so as one of the few women to work on a doctorate in the 1950s, as a Jew at a time when Jews were held to quotas in many universities and other institutions and were associated with communism through questionable attributions of the Bolshevik Revolution to Jewish leadership, and as an immigrant during a period of post-war xenophobia fueled by the anti-Semitism that, paradoxically, placed Jews as the third most hated ethnic group after the Germans and Japanese in mid-century America (Johnson, 1988). Virtually everything about Vera's profile suggested that she would be well-served by being obedient, fitting in, and following her professors' dicta. I imagine that if she had, the field of social-cultural-historical psychology would be less robust, more logocentric, and less advanced than it is today. Without question, Vera has been in the vanguard of our field's thinking for over a half-century now. I surely owe much of what I know about culture, communication, and cognition to her groundbreaking work in the field.

I first met Vera in 1994 at the International Conference on Lev Vygotsky and the Contemporary Human Sciences in the conference center in Golitsyna, about an hour from

Moscow, an event I attended as a wide-eyed assistant professor who had just begun to incorporate Vygotsky's thinking into my own, without the benefit of any formal training in his research program. I knew of Vera through her role as co-editor of *Mind in Society* and as the author of *Notebooks of the Mind*, both among the essential readings in the Vygotskian canon. Meeting one's heroes can be a precarious undertaking, because too many turn out to be far too human to ultimately emulate: vain, aloof, uncaring, manipulative, unethical, hypocritical, and all manner of other disappointing traits. What I found in Vera, in contrast, was someone I wanted to grow up to be just like.

First, she carried herself with tremendous humility. Vera was clearly a star at a conference filled with notable Vygotskian scholars, yet was among the conference's most approachable people, especially for the young, tentative, and callow, among whom I surely numbered. She always made herself available to anyone who wanted time with her, and I suspect that I was one of many early-career "fourth-generation" Vygotskian researchers who felt that simply getting to know Vera was worth the trip to Russia.

Along with this humility came the graciousness for which Vera is so well known. She talked appreciatively with those whose papers she liked and professed to have learned much from them, a gesture that gave us a boost in confidence and the feeling that perhaps, on some small level, we actually belonged in this company. This is not to say that she uncritically spoke glowingly of every person or paper, for she has admirable standards for what elevates scholarship above the commonplace or misplaced. When she liked an idea, however, she went out of her way to get to know the person who presented it and learn a little more, no matter how much she already knew.

A final quality that impressed me then, and continues to earn my high regard, is the most difficult to pinpoint, that being Vera's great wisdom. Many in the field are smart, but are also petty, conceited, ambitious, mean, narcissistic, and otherwise lacking in the sort of qualities that separate the intelligent from those who are wise. I think that one reason that people gravitate to Vera is that she leads by the example she sets for how to conduct oneself in great company, or in the midst of overwhelming opposition. Perhaps this disposition was forged in her days as a Hungarian Jew during Hitler's orchestration of anti-Semitic hatred into a broad-based policy of ethnic extermination. Perhaps it was fostered in her adjustment to a new culture and language upon her arrival in the U.S. Perhaps her experiences in defying the orthodoxies of the field of psychology contributed to the resolute manner in which she pursues what she believes is right and does so with conviction and integrity. Perhaps the sum of her life's work has provided the accumulation of experiences that, combined with her native gifts and resilience, has enabled her to stand for what she believes in with such admirable honor that others inevitably see her as one whose example they hope some day to follow. Those of wisdom lead, whether they want to or not.

Perhaps it's the very paradoxes of Vera John-Steiner that make her such an admirable and exemplary scholar to those who make up the field. She is as tough as nails, yet gentle with others, particularly those who feel vulnerable. She is formidably intelligent yet eminently accessible to the meekest among us. She carries herself with dignity even though she has experienced the worst of humanity in Nazi-era Europe and has spent much of her life among indigenous Southwestern people to whom injustice is a way of life. She is one of my heroes, and has more than stood up to the scrutiny that such achievement invites. I'm honored to be part of

this collection that helps to recognize her many contributions to the work and lives of so many people.

References

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