Performing a Life (Story)

Lois Holzman

I grew up in a silent house. No one talked much in my family. My mother and father didn't gossip about their co-workers or the neighbors, recite the little successes and failures of their day, give voice to their dreams, or ask my sister, my brother and me, "How was school today?" Ours wasn't a tense silence of things unsaid, of anger or love repressed. It was just how we were together.

My mother had seven sisters and brothers and, until my teens, the families would get together a lot. In these gatherings, we all held our own in constant chatter. When visiting my friends for play or a sleepover, I was no more or less talkative than anyone else. I *was* fascinated, though, that they and their mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers talked so much to each other.

Since we didn't talk much, my family didn't have many stories. Not even the coming to America of my Russian-Jewish immigrant grandparents, or how my parents met, or the story of my birth. So it's kind of funny to me that one of the few stories, repeated often, was that I didn't talk until I was three. Actually, it was hardly a story. It was merely a statement – not followed by "and she hasn't stopped talking since" or "and see how smart she is" or anything. It was up to the listener to fill in the next line.

I tell *this* story in that same spirit – leaving it to the reader to continue it, or not. I find it interesting to reflect on my family's relationship to language in light of my love of words and over 30-year inquiry into speaking and thinking, but I draw no connections – causal or otherwise. Both are, simply, who I am/am becoming.

I knew when I accepted George Yancy and Susan Hadley's invitation to participate in this volume that doing so would take me to new places philosophically, psychologically and linguistically. I was excited by the journey I would create in writing this chapter (and was flattered at being asked). I did

wonder, though, if it was dishonest or at least disingenuous to agree to "narrate my identity" and engage in "self-construction" when I don't believe in either identity or self! George made it clear from our very first correspondence that he was aware of the paradoxical nature of his invitation to me; had he not, I suspect I would have declined.

So, here I am, having told one little story and then another. I am trying to embrace the paradox of my task through *creating stories* of the people and events and ideas that "shaped" me, rather than telling *my story*. There is no such thing as my story. This is our story.

Fred Newman, my dear friend, mentor and collaborator for nearly 30 years (you can call him a major influence on me, as long as you don't turn him into *an explanation*), recently read me an essay he was writing. In it, Fred says he wound up at Stanford University's PhD program in philosophy by accident. (That's part of the story he tells. And it's part of the one I'm telling too – the story of how I wound up devoting my life to changing the world.)

I wound up with a PhD in psychology more by default than accident. I think I wanted to be a writer as a child and teenager. I wasn't burning with things I wanted to say, but I very much liked the activity and accoutrements of writing. When my mother took me to work with her when I was little, I would gather cardboard, paper, scissors, staples and glue and construct books and newspapers and magazines. Occasionally, I would write something in them, but mostly I left them blank. Throughout school I was a serious and good student; I especially liked literature and writing, but I adored geometry and grammar (I kept this latter proclivity to myself, so as not to appear too weird). To me, constructing and deconstructing proofs and sentences was fun and creative.

Like most of my friends, I was bored with school by the time I was a junior in high school, but I had the support of my best friend who wanted to do more than complain. In the early spring, she and I figured out how to graduate without doing our senior year. We convinced the principal to let us go to summer school and take the required subjects and exams for graduation with a college-prep diploma. My friend knew she wanted to study art and had already picked out her school. I just wanted to leave high school. I went to a college night and picked up brochures. I drooled over images of artsy Bennington College, but knew it was financially out of the question and that if my family could afford anything it would be a state school. At the State University of New York table there was information about a small college in Binghamton that had recently become part of the state system. Harpur College was the place, the woman at the table told me, for kids who get into

Cornell but can't afford it. I liked that, and the fact that it had fewer than 2000 students and no fraternities or football team. I presented my parents with my plan to leave school and go to college pretty much as a fait accompli. At first shocked, they were soon won over to the reasonableness of what I was proposing. Perhaps they were relieved that I took care of this myself, for they knew nothing about how to find a college or apply to one; neither of them, nor my older sister or brother had gone to college and, sensing that I wanted to, they might have been anxious about how they could help.

I declared psychology as my major. I didn't know what psychologists did. I didn't associate psychology with therapy (of which I was completely ignorant) or helping people (which I hadn't ever been interested in). I must have gotten the notion that psychology had something to do with the mind and would be a pretty interesting intellectual pursuit. Or maybe it sounded glamorous. But my encounter with psychology at Harpur College was neither intellectually interesting (large lecture courses and multiple-choice exams on classical and operant conditioning) nor glamorous (my very own rat in a Skinner box). And so it was shortlived – but nonetheless vital in my becoming. It generated a healthy skepticism toward social science experimentation, a passionate dislike for what I now refer to as pseudoscience, and an emerging interest in methodological questions of how to study life-as-lived.

It also was the occasion for my first adult love affair. In that cavernous hall where Psych 101 lectures were held, students were seated alphabetically by last name. To the right of Holzman (me) was Hood (a junior transfer student), the person on my left long forgotten. We listened to the professor and studied together that semester. He loved the course, and came to love experimental psychology and me. At the end of my sophomore and his senior year we moved to Providence, RI where he began Brown's PhD program in psychology and I transferred to the local state college, majoring in English. (We married a year later when I was 20 and lived our lives together for 10 years.)

Almost immediately, I found myself with an identity – graduate student wife – and I didn't like it at all. Graduate student (and faculty) wives had *jobs*; they were social workers and nurses and teachers. But graduate students (and faculty) had passions and intellectual pursuits and *important work to do*; they were scientists and writers and discoverers. If I had to have an identity, that was the one I wanted!

As I write, I realize that I am creating myself as I write. I am creating stories of a me with a disposition toward postmodernism. I feel pleased with this discovery and process.

From as far back as I can remember there are a few things I never believed in – Santa Claus, god, an innate human nature and an inner life (obviously, these last two I didn't have terms for right away). It wasn't that I thought a lot about their existence – weighing the evidence on both sides and reaching a conclusion – or went through any kind of philosophical or soul-searching process. I simply didn't believe. Even though I now live my life in the continuous activity of philosophizing, neither doubt nor certainty plays a role in my thinking about such matters. When I was young and unschooled, accompanying my "non-doubting-non-certain" not believing was an inability to understand how others could believe in such things, and a kind of acceptance of that fact of difference rather than a desire to debate or convince anyone to change their mind. And today, while I love to explore with people how all sorts of things (including people's beliefs) came to be and am enriched by that activity, I still am no closer to understanding how it is that they believe (any more than I understand how it is that I believe). I've come to appreciate (believe?) that seeking such understanding is seeking an explanation by another name. I also think it's a misguided illusion born of our culture's cognitively biased understanding of understanding.

Sheila McNamee and Kenneth Gergen have spoken, and invited others to speak with them, on the subject of relational responsibility (McNamee, Gergen and Associates, 1999). At the beginning of their book, relational responsibility is put forth as a discursive reaction to the "deeply flawed" and "long-standing tradition" of placing individual blame. However, by the book's end the concept becomes more inclusive, largely due to their dialogic partners who suggest such terms as relational responsiveness, relational appreciation and relational resonance. Relational responsiveness (a contribution from John Shotter and Arlene Katz) is the one that speaks to me.

In terms of my life, from quite a young age I think I had some sense that who-and-how I was couldn't be separated from context. I was keenly aware of how different I was depending on where I was. It was in my late teens that I began to articulate this (to myself). Going from high school to college was a shock – and a catalyst for questioning: I went from "being" a smart kid to "being" pretty average. I found this fascinating! How could that be? Which was I, smart or average? How would I know? How would people decide? Was there such a thing as smartness? Was there a me independent of other people and places?

I couldn't see any evidence for it. Me-and-the-environment were partners, like it or not. Sometimes we were good partners and sometimes not so good partners. Putting a contemporary philosophical-psychological spin (of which

I had no inkling at the time) on my teenage musings, I was questioning isolated individualism, identity, a core self, essences, duality. And perhaps I was discovering relational responsiveness.

In terms of the development of my psychological perspective and practice, the issue of context, environment and relationality loomed large. From descriptive linguistics to sociolinguistics and developmental psycholinguistics, from Piagetian developmental theory to Vygotsky's socio-cultural activity theory, from an ecologically valid psychology to social therapy, from mentors Lois Bloom to Michael Cole to Fred Newman – I investigated self and other/person and environment. Today I am wary of the concept of "context" as subtextually implying a separateness from what is (presumably) "in" it, for I now see person-and-environment as historically and radically monistic.

In 1976 a new friend invited me to a series of lectures on "Marxism and Mental Illness." I liked this new friend of mine; he was unlike anyone I ever knew. He was "political." He did something he called community organizing. He walked through the subway cars of New York City selling a left newspaper. He stood on street corners and stopped people to talk about the current fiscal crisis and ask them to help support the building of an independent union for people who were on welfare or unemployed. He read Marx and Lenin and Mao and also many others I hadn't heard of (I had barely heard of those three). He wanted to know what I thought about what was going on in the city, the country and the world. He wanted me to meet the person who taught him, the man whom he followed, the guy who was giving these lectures. Of course I went.

Having had no experience with the left, never having read Marx and knowing virtually nothing about mental illness (despite having a PhD), I had no expectations walking into the impressive Ethical Culture Society building on Central Park West (really none, as I didn't know what ethical culture was either). The hundred or so folding chairs were nearly all filled, mostly with people in their twenties and thirties. Fred Newman took the microphone and began to speak. He was large and loud. He was eloquent and erudite and funny. He spoke like I imagined union men to talk one minute and like I knew intellectuals to talk the next. I listened to him speak about economics, capitalism, Freud, the ego, the working class, science, Marx, Quine, power and authority – all new to me – and the mind, language, Chomsky, Skinner, and Goffman – which I was familiar with. He described a new kind of radical therapy he was developing called social therapy. What kept me spellbound as much as trying to follow the very sophisticated content was how passionate Fred was as he gave expression to both his politics and his intellect. In the dis-

cussion period after the formal talk, I asked him questions about things I knew about. I was probably testing him, and if I had asked about something I knew nothing about I wouldn't have a way of judging his answers. Fred passed my test and I signed up for a six-week seminar with him entitled, "The Crisis in Science and Society." I was sure he was someone I could learn a lot from. I responded to his style; I liked how he thought (to the extent that I could tell, given that what he was talking about was so over my head); and I resonated with his general topic (how the world got into the mess it was in and how to change it).

That resonance didn't surprise me, despite never before having been in a conversation about it with anyone (including myself). I wouldn't have known that I wanted to change the world, that I was in agreement with Fred's and my new friend's political views, or that I would choose to become a political activist and participate in creating a revolutionary method. I wasn't searching. It wasn't, "Here's what I've been looking for!" It was "This makes sense; it seems like a way to live my life." From my current philosophical-psychological perspective, I'd say it was a Vygotskian *completion* of my thinking.

Lev Vygotsky is my closest dead friend. I've been talking to him for years. Early in my relationship with Fred, I would talk to him about Vygotsky, but in the early 1990s, the three of us got together. *Completion* played a big role in that. It's a long story.

Before I met Fred, I thought little about therapy – and even less *of* it. My disinterest wasn't born of experience (for I had none) but came from skepticism toward what I took to be its premise – that an explanation or interpretation for how you were feeling could change how you were feeling. On his part, Fred's study of philosophy of science and foundations of mathematics at Stanford had led him to reject therapy's premises and major conceptions – explanation, interpretation, the notion of an inner self that therapist and client needed to go deeply into, and other dualistic and otherwise problematic conceptions.

So it was a big surprise to him when, in the late 1960s, Fred went into therapy and found it incredibly helpful. As he tells the story, this experience raised a contradiction for him:

> It never occurred to me that some of the attitudes and beliefs I had about what I took to be some of the mythic and irrational qualities of therapy were inaccurate. But it didn't make sense that therapy should work; it didn't make sense that it should be so successful. So I had to deal with the fact that therapy is of incredible value to lots of people, and the question that kept occurring to me was, "How in the hell could this thing possibly work?" (Newman, 1999a)

As Fred initially developed it and as it has emerged over 30 years, social therapy is a method of helping people with whatever emotional pain they are experiencing without diagnosing their problem, analyzing their childhood, or interpreting their current life. Its effectiveness must have something to do with what people were doing together in therapy, he reasoned.

All during the 1980s, Fred and I talked about this. What was going on in social therapy? What were people doing together? How was it the case that they not only were feeling better but were, by their own admission and apparent to others, growing emotionally?

Social therapy clients work in groups whose explicit task is to create an environment in which they can get help – to "grow the group" – because in that activity everyone can develop emotionally. This emphasis on the group activity of creating environments in which people can give expression to their emotional life challenges the notion of an individuated, isolated and internal life.

It was Vygotsky who helped us see that social therapy was a unique kind of tool for emotional growth that had everything to do with the dialectical socialness of speaking. One statement of his, in particular, seemed remarkable:

> The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study. (Vygotsky, 1978, p.65)

Here was an entirely new way of understanding method as something to be practiced, not thought up and then applied to "real life." From as far back as 1979, Fred and I coined the phrase "tool-and-result methodology" for Vygotsky's grasp of dialectics which, it seemed to us, described social therapy to a T (Holzman and Newman, 1979).

Vygotsky's understanding of how young children learn and develop was itself an application of his tool-and-result methodology. Young children and their caretakers create what Vygotsky calls zones of proximal development (ZPDs), developmental environments that support children to do what is beyond them, to perform who they are becoming (even as they are who they are). They play language games, speaking before they know how. Their creative imitation of the language spoken to and around them is fully accepted. They learn to speak by playing with language; they perform as speakers (who they are becoming). The process of creating the ZPD *is* the joint (ensemble) creation of their becoming language speakers.

Fred and I found this accounting of children developing as speakers of a language to be equally coherent as an accounting of social therapy. For, in social therapy, adults are supported by the therapists to do what is beyond them (create the group), to perform who they are becoming. The work/play in therapy is helping people to create new performances of themselves continuously as a way out of the rigidified roles, patterns and identities that cause so much emotional pain (and are called pathologies). In social therapy, people create new ways of speaking and listening to each other; they create meaning by playing with language.

By this time, we had added Fred's old friend Wittgenstein to our conversation. Fred had studied Wittgenstein's writings but he hadn't until now explored the influence of Wittgenstein's unique philosophical sensibility and methodology on social therapy. Nor had he examined the family resemblances between Wittgenstein's and Vygotsky's views of language and language learning. I read Wittgenstein's work for the first time, and together Fred and I explored the idea of Wittgenstein as therapist. We found that others had commented on this, including Gordon Baker, the prominent Wittgensteinian scholar (e.g., Baker, 1992). In 1993, while on a speaking tour, Fred and I visited Baker at Oxford to learn more of what he was thinking. We talked together about how Wittgenstein had developed a method to help free philosophers from the muddles they get into because the way that language is used and understood locks them into seeing things in a particular way.

We began to see social therapy as a method to help ordinary people get free from the constraints of language and from versions of philosophical pathologies that permeate everyday life. Making the focus of the group's activity be the creating of the group exposed ways of talking that perpetuate experiencing ourselves as individuated products, at the same time as it generated new ways of talking. Wittgenstein's conception of language games as a form of life helped us see that social therapy groups were makers of meaning, not simply users of language.

So far, so good. But something was still missing. What are people doing together when they are making meaning? What is going on when people are speaking? Re-enter Vygotsky.

While I was doing post-doctoral research at Michael Cole's lab at the Rockefeller University in the late 1970s, I met and became friends with Valerie Walkerdine. Now a well-known critical psychologist, Valerie was beginning her career then and had come to the Cole lab as a visiting scholar. We greatly respected each other's work and stayed in contact over the years. When Valerie, along with John Broughton and David Ingleby, became co-edi-

tors of the Routledge series, Critical Psychology, she invited Fred and me to contribute a book on Vygotsky. So we began a re-examination of his writings.

One day as I was re-reading Vygotsky's *Thinking and Speech* (entitled *Thought and Language* in earlier English versions), I came upon a few passages I hadn't really noticed before. In presenting his understanding of thinking and speaking, Vygotsky challenges the belief that we speak our developed thoughts. He challenges a transmittal, or expressionist, view of language. His alternative struck me as very odd, but it also felt "right." I was very excited – I had discovered something important and I had no idea what! I went to Fred and said, "Listen to this!"

> The structure of speech is not simply the mirror image of the structure of thought. It cannot, therefore, be placed on thought like clothes off a rack. Speech does not merely serve as the expression of developed thought. Thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word. Therefore, precisely because of the contrasting directions of movement, the development of the internal and external aspects of speech form a true identity. (Vygotsky, 1987, p.251)

Vygotsky was seeing thinking and speaking as one dialectical process, one activity. Children can perform as speakers – and thereby learn to speak – because speaking-thinking is a completive social activity. This non-expressionist understanding of language was a particularly satisfying alternative to the two separate worlds view (the private one of thinking and the social one of speaking) that Fred and I had rejected. Even more, though, it helped us understand what is going on in therapy. Here is how Fred described this discovery some years later:

> One of the immediate implications that I drew from this extraordinary new picture was that if speaking is the completing of thinking, if what we have here is a continuous process of building, then this undermines the notion that the only allowable "completer" is the same person who's doing the thinking. For, if the process is completive, then it seemed to me that what we're looking at is language – and this goes back to Wittgenstein – as an activity of building. That is, what is happening when speaking or writing, when we are participating in a dialogue, discussion or conversation, is that we are not simply saying what's going on but are *creating* what's going on… And we understand each other by virtue of engaging in that shared creative activity. (Newman, 1999b, p.128)

As Fred and I continued to develop our method, articulate it theoretically and expand its practice, it became clearer to us that the human ability to create

with language – to complete, and be completed by, others – is, for adults as well as for little children, a continuous process of creating who we are becoming, a tool-and-result of the activity of developing.

I love dogs. How they are with each other and with humans intrigues and amuses me endlessly. Maybe if I lived in the country or the suburbs I wouldn't see so much of this, but in a city with a million dogs I probably run into a hundred dogs a day. (I had a dog during my twenties and thirties – who was of course the best dog in the world – and there are now two canines in my life, collectively owned, so my dog interaction is higher than the average New Yorker's.) One thing my dog fascination does is reinforce my non-belief in essences. When I look at dogs, it's impossible to see any one thing that's common to all (think chihuahua, Newfoundland and Basset hound, for example). I see, instead, almost endless ways they are related. I think dogs display beautifully what Wittgenstein called family resemblances – "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail" (Wittgenstein, 1953, para 66) – which overlap and criss-cross in the same way as "the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc." (Wittgenstein, 1953, para 67). Family resemblance was Wittgenstein's response to the insistence that he must tell "what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is" (Wittgenstein, 1953, para 65). Dogs are a delightful reminder to follow his advice and "look and see" what is common, in language and in life.

My first published academic paper should have mentioned Vygotsky, but it didn't. It was a research study entitled "Imitation in Language Development: If, When and Why" that appeared in *Cognitive Psychology* (Bloom, Lightbown and Hood, 1974). I had begun graduate school at Brown University's PhD program in linguistics, switched to Columbia's linguistics department upon moving back to New York, then switched to Columbia's psychology department, and finally wound up where I belonged, working with Lois Bloom in the developmental psychology program at Columbia's Teachers College. Patsy Lightbown and I (still Lois Hood) were Bloom's research assistants developing, with her, longitudinal, observational research methods of studying early language development. Our orientation was in process; while theoretically we were drawn to both Chomsky and Piaget, our sensibilities were socio-cultural and ethnographic. But even at this early stage of the Bloom lab research, context and meaning making were primary.

Among the issues of debate at the time was how important imitation was in early language learning, the subject of this particular article. Our data for

this study came from participant observations of six children who were transitioning from single word utterances to syntax from roughly the time they were eighteen months to two years old. We found that some of them imitated and others did not, and all were developing normally, so it was clear that imitation was not necessary for them to become speakers (I still think that's an important finding). What interested us even more was the overall context of their imitative speech in the flow of the conversations they were having. For the children who imitated did not imitate anything and everything they heard, but only words and structures they appeared to be in the process of learning (that is, ones they had only recently begun to use non-imitatively). Had any of us done more than skim the 1962 edition of Vygotsky's *Thought and Language* at the time, we would have realized that what we were seeing was the process of creating the ZPD where learning leads development. For those children who imitated, doing so was one way they performed as speakers. Twenty years later, after Fred's and my epiphany about others completing for you, I returned to this research study with a new understanding of the role of imitation in language learning (Newman and Holzman, 1997, pp.110–113).

"An experimental psychologist turned maverick cross-disciplinary explorer of human cognition" – that's how I described Michael Cole in a recent semi-autobiographical essay (Holzman, 2003, p.39). Not bad, but it does not do him justice. Mike had created a unique scholar-community institution and marvelous ZPD in his Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at Rockefeller University. He was the first to make me aware of the link between politics and psychology – by his commitment to bringing women, minority and non-western scholars into his work, his concern with inequality and the ways that psychological theory perpetuated it, and his Vygotsky-like "search for method" for an ecologically valid cognitive psychology. I worked closely with Mike from 1976 until 1979 when he moved his lab out west to the University of California at San Diego. It was a time of serious adult play – with ideas, methods of study, data collection and tools of analysis. What was it about schooling and about everyday life that made it the case that street smart kids were school dumb? Could we find even one instance of an individual cognitive act outside of a classroom setting? Could we pinpoint racism in a classroom? Could we show how learning disability was socially constructed? Could we not only provide evidence that experimental, cognitive psychology was ecologically invalid, but would we also succeed in creating an ecologically valid alternative?

These were challenging and socially-politically important tasks (ones "raised by history," to use a Vygotskian phrase, quoted in Levitan, 1982). Our

recommendations? That the unit of analysis needed to be the "person–environment interface" and not the "individual" and that the laboratory was not merely a place but a methodology, a misguided paradigm that systematically distorted what was going on when children were and were not learning.

"Hi, my name is Lois Holzman. I teach psychology. I'm out here today because I think it's so important to support young people doing something positive for their communities. That's what the All Stars Talent Show Network, a city wide anti-violence program, is. I'm talking to people like you and asking you to support the young people of the All Stars by giving a dollar or 5 dollars or 25 dollars."

This was the "R and D" for what became known in the activist community of which my work is a part as "the street performance." Like all the programs my colleagues and I created, the All Stars Talent Show Network was built by volunteers like me reaching out to ordinary people – for financial support, for participants, for audiences, for fellow builders. For years we had gone door to door in city apartment houses and suburban homes. Now the idea was to talk a little bit to a lot of people. We created a 45-second "rap" that could stop and engage passersby on NYC's busy street corners. Five or six of us set up a literature table as home base, fanned out a bit into the crowd, made eye contact with someone and delivered our personal versions of the rap. Those who were interested we would speak with in more depth at another time. (We invited people to give us their names and phone numbers so we could call them back, give them an update and ask them to contribute more. Many, many did.)

Of all the research I've done, this is the project of which I'm most proud. Today the All Stars (www.allstars.org) not only continues to reach tens of thousands of New York City kids, but through its expansion to cities up and down the east and west coasts, thousands more are participating. My involvement with this extraordinary youth development/supplemental education project is many faceted (some of them more psychological in the traditional sense), but to have contributed in this way is very special to me.

How was it that I and artists, actors, social workers, teachers, doctors and secretaries could do this? We could and did by performing as other than who we were. We created the "stage" upon which we could perform bold and friendly and outgoing and proud of what we were doing, rather than behaving shy and intimidated and embarrassed. And in doing so, we became bold and friendly and outgoing and proud.

This kind of grassroots fundraising is essential if you've decided to be independent from government, university and corporate funding (as all the projects I'm involved in are). But it's more than just a way to raise money. It's

community organizing. It's relationship building. It's giving people the opportunity to do something small. It's allowing them to be touched and to be giving, if they choose. It's finding out what people think. It's discovering that they care. For about 20 years I regularly talked in this way to people on the street and at their doors, as a community organizer who happens to be a psychologist. It's an antidote to cynicism.

From 1979 to 1996, I was on the faculty of Empire State College teaching and mentoring students in human development, community and human services and educational studies. The non-traditional part of the State University of New York, Empire was the kind of school I would have gone to if it had existed at the time – its organizational structure and design actually supported learning. Students got to create their own programs of study and degrees with the assistance and expertise of the faculty. A degree could consist of different kinds of learning activities, including individualized courses with a faculty member, independent study, group studies, courses at neighboring universities, practica and internships, and credit for life experience. As long as students could demonstrate "college level learning" it didn't matter how they developed it. The whole set-up presumed that the students were learners. These students were mostly working-class adults: changing careers; out of prison or off drugs; finishing their degrees after raising children; managers, administrators and mental health workers being pressured to get a bachelor's degree; NYC police officers required to obtain an associate's degree; artists and musicians wanting to work with kids. The few forays I made into traditional colleges and universities to teach an occasional course taught me just how radical this was.

Empire was a dream for an academic like me. It was a place that provided primarily working-class undergraduates with the attention, support, respect and responsibility that elite PhD programs provided to their graduate students. I had been privileged to have that at Columbia University and I loved being able to give it to these students. Besides, you could teach pretty much what you wanted in ways that you wanted – and, most wonderful to me, there were no tests or grades.

My colleagues were primarily progressives (several of them leftists) who had left more traditional and prestigious institutions to create this experimental college. At first, I fit right in. I was a leftist, and a political activist – a builder of a new independent political movement challenging the entrenched two-party structure of US electoral politics. Little did I know that, for some of my colleagues, this was politically incorrect. Unbeknownst to me, an underground letter denouncing my political affiliations and containing false

accusations about the work Fred and I were doing (including social therapy) was making the rounds of the faculty. This McCarthyite tactic was spearheaded by progressives loyal to the Democratic Party who were not happy about the possibility of an independent party to its left. The letter recommended that I be fired or stop the political work I was doing.

When I finally found out about this from a friend, I immediately went to tell the dean who, it turned out, already knew. Naively, I thought he and my closest colleagues would be as outraged as I was. They weren't. No big deal, they said. Just forget it. I didn't. Instead, I called a faculty meeting at which we could have open dialogue on freedom of speech and academic freedom. We had the meeting and I remained at the college for many more years.

Fast forward to August 2003. About a week before the American Psychological Association (APA) convention, I received an email from one of APA's top executives telling me that they would be providing security at my presentations. It seemed that the APA office had received some phone calls and emails demanding that I not be allowed to present because social therapy was dangerous and harmful, and that Fred Newman was a cult leader. (Since then, I have been "graduated" – by some who attack our work – from a cult follower to a cult leader.)

In between that early 1980s secret letter and the 2003 APA convention, there were many other attacks on my work, character and associates. I have always tried to learn from these offenses: what it is about institutional psychology and popular psychology that contributes to people believing, even for a moment, ridiculous charges they may hear; what my own vulnerabilities are; and how to find a way to build something positive from such ugliness. Most recently, in the face of charges that social therapists violate boundaries, Fred and I have opened up dialogue among psychologists on the need to re-examine the very concept of boundaries if new postmodern and relational psychologies are to exist. Such approaches, in which human life is understood as relational rather than individualistic, raise a new set of methodological issues and call out for a new way of thinking through ethical issues.

Psychotherapy's legitimate concern with the possibility that therapeutic relationships might become exploitative and violate an individual's rights has turned to a worry about boundary violations, attempts to define and regulate how therapists and clients interact, and critiques of such attempts. But all this rests on the assumption of the individual as the primary human unit. If your practice does not accept that assumption, then what is a boundary violation? (For example, a tenet of social therapeutic practice is that people need to be organized as a social unit in order to carry out the task of getting therapeutic

help and developing emotionally.) It's important to keep in mind such differences in the logic and ethics of paradigm-shifting psychotherapeutic practices so that they are examined and questioned as what they are – self-conscious attempts to transform psychotherapy – rather than as distortions of standard paradigmatic practices.

Tall and thin, Vesna Ognjenovic looked wispy at first. She spoke, too, in a soft voice. I walked in a little late and sat in the back of the room where she was presenting her work on poetry and drawing workshops with children affected by war in what had been Yugoslavia. Then I noticed her strong hands, watched her expressive face and listened to what she was saying and I felt what a strong woman she was. Her strength – I was to learn over many coffees that day – was born of pain and sadness (of war and destruction) and love and passion (for the work and play of creating life). It was 1996, and we were in Geneva for the Second International Conference for Socio-Cultural Research: Vygotsky–Piaget. I went up to Vesna at the end of the session and said, "We have to talk!" She and her colleagues were focusing on the emotional development of these children, not on their psychic states. The children's collective engagement in creative activity (poetry and drawing), they believed, was growthful for them – and growth was the way to deal with trauma.

I'd say we fell in love those days in Geneva, so moved were we by each other's lives and work. Vesna kept shaking her head in disbelief that here I was, a Marxist from New York, who had a practice and a community that were giving expression to all that she believed about building a better world. She said it gave her hope. I was deeply touched by this – and by her story. I heard how when the war broke out, she had sat in a café for days despairing over the end of socialism, the end of Yugoslavia, the horrible war, the end of meaning. How she then left the university to do something (she wasn't sure what) for the tens of thousands of refugees (especially the children), the trickle (at first) of friends and students who joined her, the growth of their community (called Zdravo da Ste/Hi Neighbor), and how much there is to do. Vesna was a Vygotskian who saw the revolutionary Vygotsky. She was a kindred spirit.

Just about every year since then, I have gone to Serbia or Bosnia-Herzegovina to participate in Zravo da Ste's trainings and seminars or Vesna and her colleagues have come to New York to participate in the broad community of which the institute is a part. Our separate work has been growing and expanding over these years. (Through its dozens of educational and cultural projects involving many thousands of children, teens and adults, Zdravo da Ste/Hi Neighbor is doing among the most radically humanistic educational, human development and community building work anywhere.) So has what

we have been creating together – at first out of our similarities and then, once we gave voice to them, our differences (for starters, we relate very differently to country and land, to tradition, to ritual, to performance, to emotionality). I think we have learned from our being together how American and how Slavic we each are, how these differences play out in how we support people to exercise their creative power to develop and build community, and how to accept and be more playful with these cultural identities. I feel greatly enriched.

My colleagues sometimes introduce me as the institute's international ambassador because I travel all over the world meeting people like Vesna. (I don't really like being called that, although I've never told them so because I love the pride with which they say it.) Going to conferences, lecturing, leading workshops, visiting programs, talking long into the night with newly met colleagues – whether in Belgrade, London, Moscow, Johannesburg, Amsterdam, Stockholm or Caracas – I feel very close to the New York City "street performance." This international outreach is a community organizer's dream (an organizer who happens to be a psychologist, that is). It's an adventure in community building in a very tough community (academia). It's an adventure in performing in a highly rule-and-role governed environment. It's an adventure in relational responsiveness in which I am (mostly) very responsive. It's a privilege to be able to learn firsthand about hundreds of innovative projects being developed in villages, towns and cities and to build relationships with so many extraordinary ordinary people. And just like talking to people on street corners, it's an antidote to cynicism.

I now have a name for the organizing I do – performing the world. That's the title of two international conferences and a broader community that emerged around them. The 2001 conference, subtitled "Communication, Improvisation and Societal Practice," was convened by me, Ken Gergen, Mary Gergen, Sheila McNamee and Fred Newman. In 2003, "Performing the World 2: The Second International Conference Exploring the Potential of Performance for Personal, Organizational and Social-Cultural Change" was convened by me, Sheila McNamee, Fred Newman and Lois Shawver. For all of us, performance is an alternative to individualistic, behavioral and cognitive views of what it means to be a person. We invited colleagues whose work taps into the human capacity to perform (on stage and off) to participate and put out a call to reach others doing similar work. We weren't disappointed. Both events introduced us to hundreds of people whose work – in psychology, psychotherapy, education, health care, youth development, organizational and community development – displays, investigates and plays with performance. Coming to know these committed and adventurous women and men greatly

enriches my life. I see them as leaders of the difficult task of creating a new
psychology based in social growth and collective creativity, a new psychology
of becoming. They, and their communities, are the postmodern revolution-
aries.

The events of the past century have shown that people cannot produce
lasting revolution with revolution. If you want an explanation for why, as a
developmental psychologist, I decided to become a revolutionary and why, as
a revolutionary, I'm so deeply concerned with development, this would be a
good one. But let's treat it like we should all explanations – as a post hoc story
(and not a bad one either). The process of rejecting the ideology of develop-
mental psychology (indeed, of all psychology) has helped me understand
better the danger of all ideology and watch for signs of it in my own work and
talk. So, who better to quote now than Karl Marx.

It's people who change the world, Marx said. Many take him to mean "the
working class" or "the proletariat," a sensible reading to be sure, but an ideo-
logical one that ignores Marx's substantial humanism and concern with
people (all people) developing. His language in the following quote from *The
German Ideology* is 19th century, but his sentiment is consistent with my
21st-century sensibility:

> We have further shown that private property can be abolished only on
> condition of an all-round development of individuals, because the existing
> character of intercourse and productive forces is an all-round one, and only
> individuals that are developing in an all-round fashion can appropriate them,
> i.e., can turn them into free manifestations of their lives. (Marx and Engels,
> 1973, p.117)

Developmental activity, the participatory process in which people exercise
their collective power to create new environments and new "all-round"
learning and development, is postmodern revolutionary activity. That's as
non-ideological as I can be.

My sister changed her name from Sandra to Natanya sometime in the
1960s. My brother reversed his first and middle names (the child Freddie
became the young man David) about the same time. My parents seemed OK
with it. I thought it was a little strange that they cared that much about what
they were called. But I was glad they did it if it bothered them so much.
Natanya died in October 2002, a few months after being diagnosed with pan-
creatic cancer. Some sisters are pals; others are competitive. Natanya and I
were neither. We were intimate without being close. We shared similar values
yet chose to create our lives very differently. We liked that we had different

skills and strengths and passions and weaknesses. We profoundly respected each other's independent path. It felt "right" to us that we were of the same family. We didn't reminisce or tell family stories. We talked. It was just how we were together.

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