

Intergenerational Generativity: The Legacy of Richard J. Bernstein

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The world dimmed on July 4, 2022, when one of its brightest stars was extinguished. Dick Bernstein's luminous presence bathed everyone privileged to come into his orbit in clarity and warmth. Never one to stand in his own light, Dick took great joy in illuminating the value and accomplishments of others. Perhaps, he would have been rare in any profession, but in academic philosophy he was unique in his generativity and his eagerness to promote his students and junior colleagues, and, indeed, anyone who might have something to contribute. He held the very highest standards, but he did everything he could to help others meet them. Never stingy with praise, though never giving it undeserved, he knew that people thrive best, become their best, only in an atmosphere of welcome and encouragement.

Dick was a famously dedicated teacher, rare in his ability to unleash the creative intellect of others. He demanded a student's best and generated the confidence and commitment necessary to achieve it. Over the years, I frequently asked favours of Dick for my own students: would he let them into a seminar where enrollment was limited; would he serve on their dissertation committee; would he advise them on their career path. He never said 'no', despite the fact that he was always carrying a heavy administrative and teaching load.

Dick was also famously dedicated to his community. He believed in the mission of the New School, as he had believed in the mission of Haverford, and he did everything in his power to advance the welfare of the institution. He was a savvy and clever administrator, but his real administrative asset was that everyone trusted him. His colleagues knew he had their best interest at heart. They knew you could consult or confide in Dick, and he would never betray that confidence. As a result, he was beloved and respected by everyone, from the undergraduates to the trustees.

Dick also displayed an intellectual character that has become exceedingly rare in academic philosophy. In a discipline that is increasingly siloed and partisan, Dick was the inverse of tribal. He had a voracious curiosity, and he was ready to find insight and inspiration wherever it lay. Perhaps best known as an American pragmatist, Dick was equally at home in phenomenology, 20th century French thought, hermeneutics, critical theory, analytic philosophy, or feminism. He knew the history of philosophy thoroughly, with an intimate and subtle appreciation of thinkers as diverse as Plato and Aristotle, Hobbes and Descartes, Kant and Hegel, or Marx and Nietzsche. He loved literature and art and history. Dick seemed to have studied and read everything, and he took great joy in shedding some light on whatever might be your passion of the moment, whether it was a painting or Proust or the French Revolution or

Montaigne or your child's latest accomplishment.

I have the privilege of knowing his beloved wife Carol, but I never had the chance to meet Dick's children or grandchildren. He talked about them in every meeting with enthusiasm and love. He was so proud. If I had to guess why Dick adopted me, it would be an incident that occurred in August of 1996. Dick and Carol had organized a five-day conference on memory at the Adirondack Work Study Centre and invited me to participate. On the last day, we were all out on the terrace drinking wine when my husband and son came to pick me up. My son, Alexander, then just turned six, rushed up to me, yelling 'Mommy', and grabbed me for a big hug and kiss. Dick frequently reminded me of this incident, and I can only think he had noticed how I was loved and that this reflected well on me.

Dick's generative legacy as a person is matched by the extraordinary legacy of his work. Though he may have been best known as a political philosopher, he made significant contributions in almost every field of philosophy, from metaphysics and epistemology to ethics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of history. From conversations with him in recent years, I believe his last work, to be published posthumously, on the evolution of the idea of nature in the history of philosophy and his own philosophy of nature will be his magnum opus.

A true public intellectual, Dick had no patience for narrow, inward-looking philosophy that did little to illuminate real life or to offer hope for the future. Despite his disgust at the descent of recent politics into gridlock, acrimony, violence, and neofascism, he never despaired. It is, perhaps, fitting that Dick, like Jefferson and Adams, died on the 4th of July. He believed in democracy and in the capacity of good government to improve people's lives. And, he understood just how fragile democracy is, how it depends on solidarity, hope, and good will, and, above all, on the truth.

A eulogy proves a difficult genre, because one inevitably winds up talking about oneself and one's grief, when the task is to memorialize the other. I will not escape this fault here. There are many like me who will be ready to admit that surviving, let alone thriving, in academic philosophy would not have been possible without Dick's guidance and support. At the very lowest point of my life, Dick taught me to never give up hope, to stick to the truth, and to keep working, and I could do it because of his generative presence. Why he adopted me, I was never sure; perhaps, as I have often thought, it was that incident with my son Alexander. That would have been like Dick. At any rate, I was never his student and only briefly his colleague; but he did adopt me, and for more than thirty years I was privileged to count him among my very best friends. Whatever I wrote, he read. He seemed to care what I thought,

and that made all the difference to a woman who came into the profession in the late 70s, who had so often been treated with indifference, if not derision or abuse, by male colleagues, and even some female colleagues. I am more proud of Dick's review of my book *Just Life* than anything else in my career, except the accomplishments of my students.¹ The depth of my sorrow at his loss only measures the profound joy that he gave me in life.

I don't mean to imply more intimacy than I should: while Dick was one of my best friends, I am sure I was one of many to him. But he had a way, without lies or flattery, of making you feel close, just by attending to you in the moment. Some people flatter you to gain advantage or because they want a favour, but he never did. He always told the truth, and still he made you feel that you counted.

I don't mean to make Dick sound like a saint. He was a man of great passion, with a robust love for life. He enjoyed a good meal with as much gusto as a good conversation. He could be impatient, and certainly did not suffer fools or pretension gladly. But he had that rare quality that Keats called "negative capability." Without denying the fragility of life, without sentimentalizing loss, with a clear-eyed view of the capacity of humans to inflict horror on one another, accepting uncertainty and ambiguity, he nevertheless celebrated life and met every day with enthusiasm and generosity. I'm not sure he would have approved of me calling him a poet, but if the choice were, as Keats makes it, between narrow reasoning and the flight of the imagination, I have no doubt on which side Dick would fall.

I don't really believe in an afterlife, but I do sometimes imagine if maybe something like Nietzsche's "eternal return of the same" might not be waiting for us after death, whether we might not exist as disembodied souls left only with memories shorn of illusion without any hope of novelty or renewal or redemption, condemned only to repeat what has already been. No doubt he would have his regrets, but I imagine that Dick would revel in the joyous memory of all those who were nourished and enlightened by his presence, whose creativity and capacity for good were realized because he shone his warm light on them.

Those of us who are left can only try to emulate his intergenerational generativity, as the way of countering the darkness and of thanking the man we loved who is now gone.

¹ Mary C. Rawlinson, *Just Life: Bioethics and the Future of Sexual Difference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Richard J. Bernstein, Book Review *Just Life*, *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2017) 159-157.