



I Am My Own Egg: Reflections on the Development of a Woman Humanistic Psychologist

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The life and challenges of a woman humanistic psychologist is told through the life story of one particular individual who lived through the founding and development of the field of humanistic psychology. In this article, she recounts her mentors and the feminist thinking that influenced her politics, her practice of psychotherapy, her writing style, and her view of mentorship and legacy throughout the developmental stages of women's development. Recurring themes in this narrative will be highlighted and discussed.

Public Significance Statement

The history of psychology in general and humanistic psychology in particular is often told through the narratives of the prominent men in the field. To correct this imbalance through the lens of cultural sensitivity and cultural humility, this article discusses the importance of the women's perspective in humanistic psychology by focusing on key themes through the life narrative of one prominent woman in humanistic psychology.


Keywords: humanistic psychology, women, narrative, autobiography, legacy

This article was written over a period of 2 years, starting with the beginning of COVID. Reviewing it again at this point when restrictions from COVID are lifted lets me track the movement of events over time and highlight key recurring themes.

The first section will consider women's ways of knowing and writing, using those as a way of framing the kind of writing in this article. The second section will look at the importance of role models in the life of a women psychologist. The third section will consider existential and humanistic themes of death and rebirth, freedom and limitation, the individual versus the collective, and meaning and meaninglessness

Women's Ways of Knowing

The usual cultural myth for writers was normally based on the myth of the solitary male hero (Kafka), holed up in his room on his mountain top, straining his health and pushing

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limits, dying early and romantically (Byron). Women writers have proposed an alternate myth. While Virginia Woolf (Woolf, 1989) wrote that what women writers need is a “room of one’s own and an independent income” (like the men writers whom she surveyed), some women writers, like Ursula le Guin and my own teacher Irmgard Bartenieff, tell stories of writing at the kitchen table, bouncing babies on their knees amid the hubbub of everyday family life. If men’s thinking and action are stereotypically goal-directed, conceptual and linear, then women’s perception and communication are curved, context-dependent, dialogical (Belenky et al., 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Goldberger et al., 1996; Haraway, 1991; Tannen, 1993) and embodied (Spretnak, 1997; Starhawk, 1988). Nonverbal communication also shows gender differences. For my Dance Therapy MS thesis at Hunter College in 1973, Labanotation was used to analyze the movement style of couples in couples therapy at Bronx State Hospital. We found that the women, indeed, had a more indirect, asymmetrical movement profile, whereas the men were more symmetrical and direct. This nonlinear expressive style is expressed in Catherine Bateson’s weave of themes through the stories of five exemplary women (Bateson, 1989). The theme of the solitary male hero in Western mythology and existential psychology, versus the feminine relational and the everyday (Feinstein & Krippner, 1988; Jordan, 1991; Yalom, 1980), is one theme that ran throughout my life and will be explored in this article.

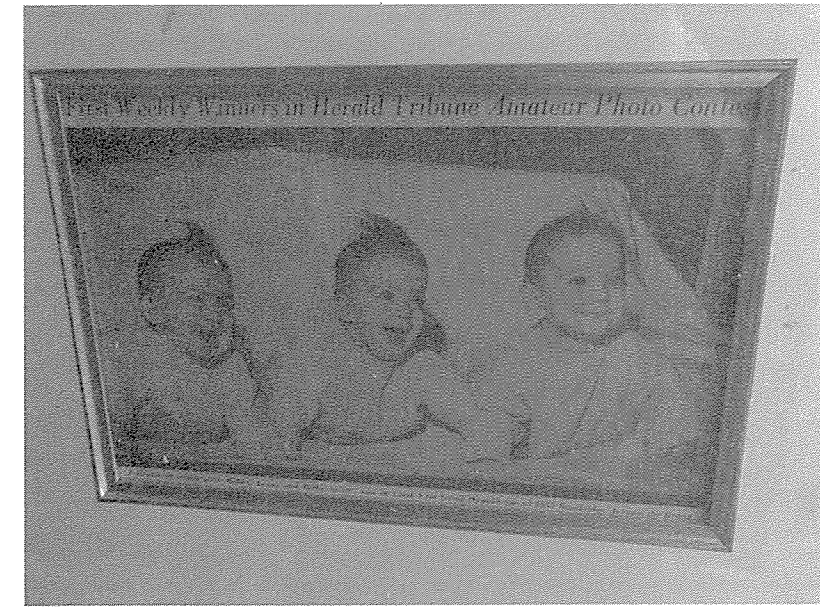
Another theme concerning women’s ways of knowing is the slogan: “The personal is political.” As Carolyn Heilbrun notes in *Writing a Woman’s Life* (Heilbrun, 1988), history has been written mostly by men. Because so much of the intention of this special edition and this article is to share the experience of women in humanistic psychology and to teach future generations of humanistic psychology, “herstories” will be told.

My story starts with my birth as the fraternal member of a set of triplets. *I was my own egg*. We said “our” mother and thought in “we’s,” a theme of *sisterhood* and sister transference that continues to influence my relationships with colleagues and clients (Serlin, 2010). I was both determined by this fate, but also struck out for freedom. These existential themes of *individual/collective, freedom and limitations*, and the importance of *uniqueness*, continue to play out in my life and it what I understand in my clients (see Figure 1).

In a way, my story is also very much part of the Baby Boomer zeitgeist of my time, and the history of my own family’s immigrant story. I came of age during the women’s movement, in which the freedom and rebelliousness of the 60s was an intimate part of our relationships and beginning to show up in our psychology training and practices. At the University of Michigan in the 1960s we organized the first course in humanistic psychology and studied the beginnings of feminist psychology with Judith Bardwick. I participated in the student demonstrations in Paris in 1968 and met Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre (see Figure 2).

Instead of continuing to graduate and medical school as did many of my classmates, I went out west in 1970 to study dance with Anna Halprin, who had worked with Fritz Perls and developed an avant-garde and therapeutic form of dance. I met Anna at the Second Humanistic Psychology conference in Washington, DC, and went to San Francisco to join her apprenticeship training. We did yoga on mountain tops and danced with our multicultural group about cultural conflict, AIDS, and other social justice events. I lived on a commune and was interested in creating new forms. On the other hand, it was only much later that I became interested in my roots, intergenerational trauma, and understood more about what important role they did play in my life. My grandparents were from Ukraine and spoke Yiddish. They fled the pogroms and settled in the Bronx. I grew up with their ambivalences about our roots; roots were full of pain and poverty, and America was the great new hope. It is shocking now to be in a new conflict in a Ukraine run by a Jewish president. I am currently visiting

Figure 1
Triplets

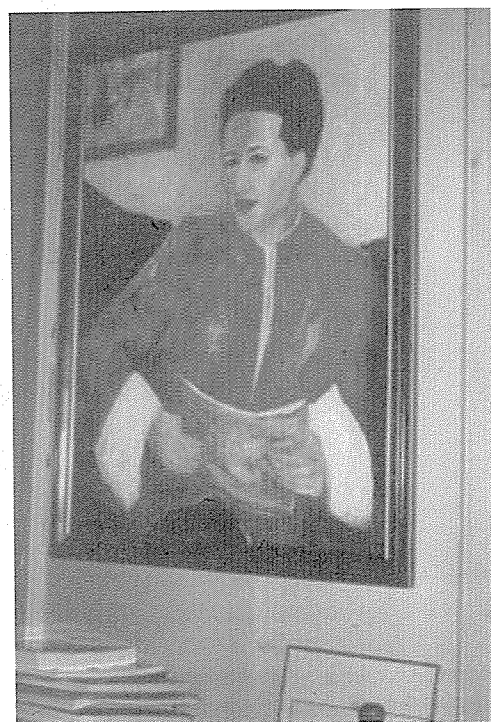


Israel, home of many of these Ukrainian Jews fleeing a new tyrant, some say a new Hitler, a new Haman or a new Amalek (it is Purim today; see Figure 3).

One path through life is to listen to the stories embedded within us, starting with our names and our births. As the youngest of the triplets by (4 min), I was given the names of deceased grandparents. Hence my name starts with an “I,” as in my mother’s father Isadore. My middle name is Ava, after my father’s father Avraham. Finding out about my father’s side of the family led to a family secret. Although my father’s father had come from Poland with several siblings, we did not know that others remained. His grandmother was either burned alive in a wooden synagogue or sent to Treblinka. In 2000, I went with family members to Bialystok, found records, and made a pilgrimage to Treblinka. At the obelisk in the center of the field of stones, the words “Never Again” embedded themselves into my heart. Now I understand much more about my interest in intergenerational trauma and the Jewish principle of Tikkun Olam, repairing the world. I’ve understood the need to draw on wisdom from our roots while continuing to create in the face of the void (May, 1989). Working with refugee groups and trauma from COVID, I am discovering ways that the creative arts and psychotherapy can bring a client-centered (person empowerment), culturally sensitive, relational form of psychology to working with trauma (see Figure 4).

While the religion of Judaism was nominally practiced in our family, we were nevertheless steeped in the cultural experience of being Jewish in New York City and strongly connected to Israel. During a trip to Israel in 1962, I fell in love with the idealism, the energy, and the feeling that we could build a perfect democracy. I joined a Socialist Youth group called Habonim (“The Builders”), began to do Israeli and international folk dance. The experience of connecting and energizing by dancing with others was a big influence on my attraction to dance therapy. The music, rhythms, and dance of Israel stayed with me throughout my life and influenced my later desire to reexperience my roots. Back now in Israel as I write this

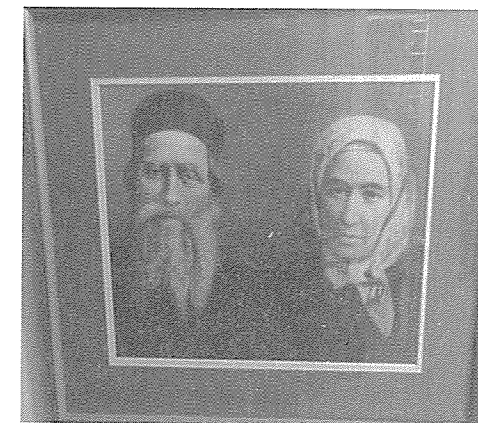
Figure 2
*A Painting of Simone de Beauvoir by Her Sister,
 Helene de Beauvoir*



revision, I am exploring not just the Ashkenazic folk dances I was taught, but have new appreciation for the diversity of Sephardic, Mizrahi, Yemenite, and Ethiopian Jewish traditions and dance.

Understanding my life through a Jewish lens is relatively new to me. During the 1970s I was involved with Trungpa Rinpoche and Naropa Institute, finding in Buddhism the silence, spaciousness, and concrete practices that I missed in Judaism. The foundations of meditation practice and Buddhist psychology taught me a great deal. After 10 years, however, I found myself homesick, not just for family but for tribe. While the Buddhist tradition of transmuting passion into compassion was important, I missed the dynamic pulsing energy of New York, Israel, Judaism. I recognized that much about Judaism to which I am attracted has to do with its relation to time: Judaism, as I now experience it, is a rhythm. I returned to Israel in 1986 and wrestled mightily with the question of identity and commitment: Was I a Buddhist or a Jew? I began psychoanalysis with a Jungian analyst and wrote about this search in a chapter in *A Modern Jew in Search of a Soul* (Serlin, 1986). I had the chance to discuss my questions with Joseph Campbell, who said that we must wrestle with our own traditions and should not skip over into another. As I read a book by Paul Cowan about his return to his roots in Judaism, I recognized the descriptions of "wrestling with God" and the archetype of the Wandering Jew as my own. Since that time, I have returned many times to Israel to teach dance therapy and visit sacred sites. I am now involved with creating women's groups, researching traditional Jewish sacred dance, and bringing a feminist and embodied (Shekinah) presence back into Jewish practice.

Figure 3
Joseph and Chaika Perlmutter

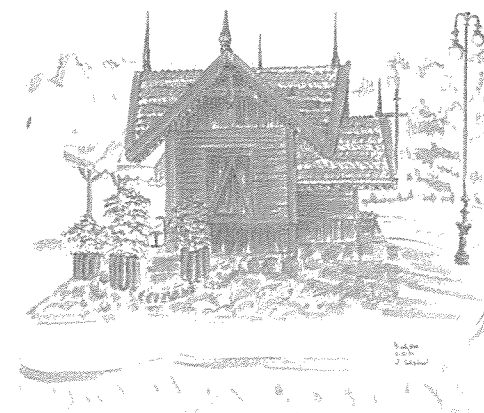


Role Models

Besides being a teacher, Anna Halprin was also a significant role model for me, and I stayed close to her and her work for the rest of her life (Serlin, 1996). She died just recently at the age of 100. My experience with her confirmed my appreciation for the healing power of dance, and I headed to New York for the first MA program in Dance Therapy in the winter of 1971 to NYU. There we studied kinesiology, cultural forms of expression around the world, Labanotation (language of dance), group dynamics, and psychopathology.

In New York, two other women stood out as role models for me. I studied with Irmgard Bartenieff, age 84 when she was teaching us (Bartenieff & Lewis, 2002). She had been a member of Rudolf von Laban's (Laban, 1980) performing company and fled Nazi Germany with her Jewish husband to New York. Her class on "Space Harmonics" connected us to

Figure 4
Bialystok Drawing by Ilene Serlin



Note. This is a drawing I made of a wooden house in Bialystok

vectors and qualities of forces in the spaces both within and outside of us. It not only sharpened our perception of three-dimensional reality, but it also gave us a sophisticated nonverbal language with which to describe any organic process. The architectural and ritual quality of the Movement Choir she taught us helped me work with large groups of people, as the movement choir for the opening of an APA convention (Serlin, 1993). I fell in love with the richness of community rituals as I worked as a dance therapist on the back wards of Bronx State Hospital. The patients and I moved together in a circle, mimicking the movements of planting and stomping down seeds, images of making pizza and stirring soup, as we all created stories together and built community.

Laura Perls was my next mentor. She had been a dancer and pianist and came from the same German cultured background as Irmgard (Perls, 1992; Serlin, 1992). She was a student of Martin Buber and she cocreated Gestalt therapy with her husband, Fritz Perls. I trained with her at the New York Gestalt Institute from 1975 to 1978 and was with her when she died in Germany (Serlin & Shane, 1999). I had the privilege after that in coleading sessions with her, where we would improvise turning a verbal theme into a movement improvisation or vice versa, avoid interpretation (Sontag, 1966), and clarify the meaning of the movement as the theme emerged. Organically. Phenomenologically. With its own unique voice.

I realize that I have always been attracted to what feels like wisdom and have gravitated to Wise Old Woman archetypes. I worked in nursing homes and learned about narratives of Life Review (Butler, 1974). I realize now that I am the archetype to many as the Good Grandmother (Harding, 1975), and mentor many young colleagues from China, Istanbul, and Jordan (Eisendrath & Wiedemann, 1987). This role brings me much pleasure. I now have five grandchildren, and have many opportunities to reflect on the aging process.

With support from Irmgard, I published my first article (Serlin, 1976), "Portrait of Karen: A Gestalt-phenomenological approach to Movement Therapy." This process of movement is a way of clarifying innate themes and emotions as a discovery process in action. I later understood it to be a form of interpretation theory (Ricoeur, 1976) that I called in my dissertation "Action Hermeneutics." The discovery process is in itself a kind of inquiry that is rooted in phenomenology and Husserl's "things in themselves (Serlin, 2013; Sheets-Johnstone, 1981). It is congruent with other forms of incarnate perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), personal knowledge (Polanyi, 1958), narrative knowing (Howard, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988), and feminist and arts-based research methods (Reinharz, 1992). Embodied knowing brings together Gestalt, personal knowledge, empathy (Rogers, 1980), I-Thou relationships (Buber, 1985), and the imagination (Sartre, 1968). The discovery process is imagination-in-movement. Based on Sartre's teaching that the imagination is an interactive process and not a product, and Ricoeur's idea that we should use the verb form of "imagining," I call my approach KinAesthetic Imagining (KI; Serlin, 1996a). I have been able to try out cultural differences in different countries, and experiment with the use of video Tool Kits to work with trauma from COVID. The groups create rituals to deal with grief and move toward new growth. This approach of using nonverbal, existential, and creative approaches is now part of the Intergenerational Task Force on the Pandemic from the APA. It feels like my work with trauma and intergenerational trauma in Jordan, China, and Turkey is connected to the Jewish value of Tikkun Olam, Healing the World (Serlin, 2017).

Here is a link to a video made about this work in Jordan with Syrian refugees:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/6nvtwcrsxxgabzpb/AADFNCjDS37w8VEsuVBLhmra?dl=0>

There were indeed more women mentors for me, but I do want to single out a special one here: Simone de Beauvoir. At age 19 I read her books, walked the streets of Paris following her footsteps, and met her there when I was a student there during the riots of May 1968.

Figure 2 is a painting made by her sister, Helene de Beauvoir. I took the photo of this painting during a day I spent with Helene de Beauvoir in Strasburg.

Finding and Creating Meaning

Coming Home

I'm now happily married to a Jewish man who also came from New York. He gifted me with a plaque above our door that says: "Time to Come Home." I settled in the Wild West. I love the open spaces and nature and have planted strong roots. We try to bring the sacred down to earth through some shared rituals and leadership roles in our neighborhood synagogue. Together we have built the home we both dreamed of, one that welcomes friends and generations of family, and one that is filled with love. At our synagogue I formed a women's Rosh Hodesh group (new moon), and together we celebrate ritual and share our stories. I'm involved in circles of Sacred Dancers and am studying forms of traditional dance rituals here in Israel.

Confrontation With Mortality

Then in August 2022, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. I underwent a thyroidectomy and one vocal cord was paralyzed. After two kinds of radiation, I am now free. . . to live forever with uncertainty.

The shock of COVID brought new waves of death anxiety, and my brush with cancer shook me to new levels of reflection about what was important in life. *What does it mean to face death? What does it mean to grow old? What is meaningful, what does the good life mean? What is my legacy? How to be a mensch* (Becker, 1997; Maslow, 1962; Serlin, 2002)?

Gloria Steinem, in "Into the Seventies," described coming "ever closer to the unknown" (Narboe, 2017, p. 176). The nonbeing we face forces us to also let go of our stories (Perera, 1981). We spend lifetimes creating them, learning the limits of what we can create or control in life. We build stability in the face of chaos, and hopefully learn to love.

The loss of our stories as we age is one of the most difficult to face.

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older

The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated

Of dead and living. . .

Old men ought to be explorers

Here and there does not matter

We must be still and still moving

Into another intensity

For a further union, a deeper communion

Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,

The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters

Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

T. S. Elliot, East Coker (Elliot, 1943)

Impermanence and Resilience

I watch my friends become frail and unable to travel. When people ask me how I am these days, I say: "So far so good." And do feel grateful for each day, finding joy and awe in each moment (Schneider, 1998). I try to dance through life, equating grace with Fred Astaire.

Grace is gracious and grateful. I look forward to being part of creating a psychology that includes the feminine, the body, symbolic, nonverbal, and transcultural communication. A psychology that is both universal and unique, global, and local, that balances embodied development of the individual with embodied development of the networks of interconnection.

And I am grateful to be able to leave a legacy for a new generation of women.

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Received June 24, 2020

Revision received March 28, 2022

Accepted March 29, 2022 ■