My Mentor Ernst von Glasersfeld

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> Upshot • Paul Silverman is Professor in the Psychology Department of the University of Montana. He completed his doctorate at the University of Georgia in 1977 with Ernst von Glasersfeld as mentor. His essay focuses on his personal encounters with him during that period.

I first met Ernst von Glasersfeld in 1970 when I began graduate school in developmental psychology at the University of Georgia. Ernst taught a seminar on Piaget's theory correcting the misinterpretation that it was primarily a maturationist orientation, and framing it in terms of radical constructivism even then. My timing was fortunate. Many years later I learned that this may have been the first seminar that he had taught. He presented us with readings for discussion and was a magnetic and mysterious presence who stood out from other faculty, striking me as a rare example of a scholar who was interested in and expressed profound ideas beyond a traditional academic domain. He was engaged in a search for meaning and invited the class to join him. Despite his intellectual openness, there was little he revealed of his origins or personal life at the time I knew him: certainly no hint that he possessed no degree, had recently lost his beloved first wife, or had remarried.

This was a time in the States of continued social upheaval among many 20-somethings, related to political deceit, the Viet Nam war, and "counter culture" activities and life styles. Some of us were fascinated by the personal changes that could take place within the experience of reality and possessed an intuitive sense that this suggested that experience was constructed rather than transmitted. I was unformed, uncertain, seeking a mentor without being aware of this, and interested in child development and philosophy. I was lucky enough to have Ernst take me under his wing for much of the time that I was in school. It was he who encouraged me intellectually and personally, invited me to publish some of my ideas, and even provided guidance as I became interested in woodwork. Indeed, when I received my Ph.D. in 1977 Ernst introduced me to French primatologist, Mereille Bertrand, and encouraged her and me to collaborate in research on social cognition. My wife, Felicia, and I subsequently spent two years in France where Ernst visited us.

During my years in graduate school Ernst invited me to join a small interdisciplinary reading and discussion group of professors (biologists, psychologists, philosophers, linguists, mathematicians) who would occasionally bring along a graduate student. The topics tended towards epistemology, cybernetics, evolutionary theory, and cognitive developmental psychology. I became an avid member and it was this informal, friendly group, with Ernst serving as the guide and "glue," that shaped me intellectually, gave me some confidence in the value of my ideas, and encouraged my own writing. Charlotte, Ernst's wife, who was an artist, would sometimes participate. She lent an attitude of enthusiasm and wonder, and would sometimes make a comment that left us pondering what she understood. When she made a left-field observation, Ernst seemed always able to incorporate it into the discussion. She was a warm presence and I felt welcomed into their lives in which they blended art, craftsmanship, and conversation. Ernst built Charlotte a ceramics kiln and did woodwork that supported her art. She, in turn, provided him with devoted admiration and support.

My specific memories of Ernst may very well reflect as much about me at the time as about Ernst. We drove to Philadelphia together to a Piaget Society meeting. After many hours on the turnpike, we pulled into a Howard Johnson's cafeteria, where the cashier startled me by asking the unshaven Ernst whether he was a truck driver (he would have gotten a discount). I remember feeling shocked that anyone could make such a mistake. To me, his very appearance (he was handsome, refined) was connected to both his inner life and his status. I had placed Ernst on a pedestal, and it is the times that he stepped off that are my clearest recollections. On the same, high-speed, trip, this car enthusiast mistakenly did a fast, jarring u-turn over an elevated road divider and I wondered how this was possible. He was completely unperturbed. We checked for any obvious damage and proceeded as before. I had known him for a few years when an event occurred that left me feeling betrayed. A psychology professor who was an integral part of our reading group failed to receive tenure and was in the process of being terminated. I considered him a part of our intimate "family" and was shaken when it seemed that Ernst did not actively support him. Without being fully aware of it, I began avoiding Ernst. He noticed this and asked if he had done something to offend me, implicitly welcoming me back when I was ready. Of course I was completely unaware of the nature of academic politics at the time, or even a good judge of the professor's competence.

I was surprised to discover that Ernst (and Charlotte) had little personal connection to or interest in children or animals, though child development was ostensibly his field and primatology was a focus for a time. Somewhat as with Piaget, it appeared that cognitive development was a domain of intellectual interest in which philosophical ideas could be tested but that children just happened to be the research material. I never saw him connect intuitively with a child. When my wife and I raised an abandoned infant monkey from the research lab in Paris, Ernst had little to do with him when visiting. When we had our first child and

visited Ernst and Charlotte, they presented us with a hollow rubber squeak toy – a banana with a face – that our dog immediately took as his own. I suppose that this memory speaks to a sense of disengagement or emotional detachment that Ernst presented – or that I felt. I think he expressed disinterest, perhaps discomfort, in topics related to emotions and intimacy. At the same time, however, he was accepting and generous.

Without doubt the most valuable gift Ernst offered me was learning the thrill of the discovery and pursuit of ideas regardless of their origins or where they might lead. When I knew him the psychology of "grand theories" was coming to an end. His ideas about knowledge and its origins offered a haven for exploring abstract ideas without the need to find "applications." He engendered in me the joy (terror, and challenge) of making meaning and linking ideas. At the same time that I relished considering constructivism, I remained a skeptic and we sometimes talked about the problem of a shared social reality. I wondered, do each of us construct the social world, including its inhabitants and their interior characteristics, in ways that create enormously complex and internally consistent realities but that include no shared realities? Ernst's proposal that, indeed, this was the case never quite satisfied me and I still struggle with this. His later ideas about "viability" as a standard for "truth" stump me although I adopted them for a time. While I am comfortable with ontological agnosticism, I continue to wonder about the place of phenomena such as interpersonal mindfulness and emotional attunement in early development: how can these apparently complex inferences arise so quickly in infants who still have little understanding of their worlds? My early encounter with radical constructivism first led me, years ago, to discount the capacity of infants to infer and respond to others' mental processes and I viewed evidence supporting infant intersubjectivity as open to other interpretations that I believed were more compatible with the process of relatively slow construction of interpersonal understanding. But the evidence for early development of understanding of mental processes in self and other, as well as their important role in influencing subsequent development (e.g., attachment, emotional regulation) now seems overwhelming. Indeed, my own interests have turned to such topics as social and emotional understanding and development: I eventually became a child clinical psychologist.

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Ernst lived several lives – he was a multicultural bohemian, pioneering down-hill skier, farmer, exotic car admirer, linguist, psychologist, philosopher, and teacher. We all profited from this prolific and long life. Hearing of his death prompted me to reflect on the influence he had on me. I had not had contact with him in many years. He was a powerful presence; I could not remain a disciple: I needed to construct my own path. Today, when academics and learning are too often equated with acquisition of applied skills and possession of credentials, and a key civic function of the University is to produce increasing numbers of graduates to fuel economic growth (at the risk of ecological instability), Ernst, his life, and his ideas serve as a model for free intellectual pursuit and generosity as ends in themselves, along with personal growth – risk and adventure. I continue to aspire to his level of intellectual curiosity and hope that I may have passed on the thrill of constructing and exploring new ideas, the importance of being open to diverse view points, and the awe of attempting to know, to some of my own students.

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