

Part II
Navigating the Bruner's Ocean

Homage to Jerome Bruner

Howard Gardner

As we celebrate your 100th birthday, I think back to when we met, exactly fifty years ago. You were already a legend: in psychology, in education, in broader intellectual circles, a personality in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in a good many other corners of the world. As my Harvard student contemporary Andrew Weil phrased it in a Harper's Magazine portrait at the time, *Harvard's Bruner and His Yeasty Ideas*. Your achievements before the age of fifty were already stunning; and they gained in significance because they emanated from a man who was blind for the first years of life, who required enormous corrective lenses throughout life, and who in so many categories was not only "the first person to..." but also "the first Jewish person to..."

That we met when we did was an incredible coincidence. Having finished Harvard College, as a protégé of Erik Erikson's with an interest in psychological disorders but no interest in attending medical school, I decided to visit the University of Michigan's well regarded graduate program in clinical psychology. I would probably have taken a bus from Cambridge to Ann Arbor, but happened to catch a ride with David McNeill, a young postdoc who had been working with you. As David learned of my interests (no doubt, we both needed stimuli to stay awake as we motored through Ohio), he thought that I might enjoy meeting you—Jerry Bruner—and possibly working with you on a new curriculum for middle school called "Man: A Course of Study." Rather like Woody Allen casting a minor role, you, Jerry, chatted casually with me for a few minutes and said to your

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associate Annette Kaysen, “Please offer Howard a job on the Educational Services Incorporated (ESI) Project.”

To say that this was the most important moment in my personal and professional life would be more understatement, than hyperbole. Jerry, you had also hired Judy Krieger to work for you that summer. Judy and I fell in love and within a year we had gotten married. Judy and I had three children, Kerith, Jay, and Andrew, and in a non-literal sense you are their godfather. You also played a paternal role in other ways; suggesting that they attend the Shady Hill School, making it possible for Dr. T. Berry Brazelton to be their pediatrician, and above all, serving as Judy’s mentor and thesis adviser.

It would take many pages to lay out the multiple ways in which you have shaped my professional career—in terms of the topics examined (creativity, intelligence, developmental theory, the role of community in education, thinking ‘by the left hand’); the ways in which I study and write about these topics; and less evident to those who have not worked with both of us, how I work with and relate to my close associates at work.

Indeed, I have a confession to make—about ‘the anxiety of influence’. For quite a few years, your influence on me was so powerful that I was not able to recognize it consciously. Call it repression, call it forgetting, calling it unconscious resistance, I developed ideas and used phrases which I had absorbed from you. I hope that, once I became aware of this unconscious borrowing, I spoke and wrote about my debt with sufficient clarity that I’ve earned your forgiveness.

As I write, Jerry, you are about to turn 100. And while your mobility is not quite what it was a few years ago, you are still in many ways ‘the youngest and the most eager member of the class,’ an inspiration to all who know you and many who only know ‘of’ you.

It cannot be accident that we have both been attracted to and spend decades visiting the small city of Reggio Emilia, in Northern Italy. We go there, not only because of the wonderful atmosphere, food, and citizens, but also because we are looking for existence proofs of how human beings can mobilize themselves in a positive direction. (Alas, we have plenty of existence proofs of how human beings can be destructive.) That’s the reason you threw yourself into the creation of *Man: A Course of Study*, advised at Shady Hill School, collaborated with the Underwood School in Newton, and taught (both solo and team) for decades at Harvard, Oxford, and most recently the New York University Law School.

When you conceived the magnificent curriculum “*Man: A Course of Study*” you posed three pivotal questions: “What makes human beings human? How did they get to be that way? How can you be more so?” As in so many other things, these three questions not only excited the 10 years olds who were absorbing the curriculum; they also became a watchword for my own pursuits during the past half century. Jerry, more than any other scholar in our time, you have helped to conceptualize and answer this trio of big questions. You have always had it in

mind to improve human capabilities whenever possible. You seek excellence, do your best to realize it in every aspect of your life, and have inspired uncountable others to do the same. What a role model for us all, for our students, and “grand-students”, indeed for thinking and thoughtful persons everywhere!