

Remarks about and by Nelson Goodman

Howard Gardner (with Ellen Winner)

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Last evening we spoke about Project Zero and mentioned Nelson Goodman. It's true, as I argued, that institutions are not just the shadow of a single individual. But this evening I want to peer behind the shadow and tell you a bit about Professor Nelson Goodman.

Nelson was an intellectually charismatic figure. He was a professor of philosophy and, indeed, a philosopher's philosopher—most admired by those with a technical mastery of the field. He can be considered a logical empiricist, in the Anglo-American school of philosophy, with little love for Continental philosophy.

But he was also a lover of the arts—he ran an art gallery and collected art works in various genres. Some are in these very halls (of the Harvard art museums); and Nelson was a secret impresario, who liked to stage multi media artistic events.

Nelson brought these two strands together in the middle 1960s. Having developed ideas in the book LANGUAGES OF ART- which for decades we nicknamed "The Bible"-- he had the idea of starting a research project, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he took a rigorous look at artistic thinking, production, creativity.

Nelson was a very powerful intellectual presence—sometimes overpowering. He elicited different emotions from fear to love, but in my case love won. That was true also for my wife Ellen Winner, who has been associated with Project Zero for a mere 44 years. To give you a feeling for Nelson, Ellen and I are going to reproduce a few conversations. These lines rattle around in my head, and they show up, like a powerful superego, often and at unexpected times.- Ellen is going to play the role of Nelson and will attempt to capture his inimitable Boston accent.

Spring of 1967: I drove out to Brandeis University to meet Nelson who was about to move to the Graduate School of Education and launch Project Zero

HG Hello Professor Goodman

To which Nelson responds:

EW Nice to meet you, Howahdd. Do you read philosophy?

HG Well ,I am reading the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau Ponty
The book is [The Phenomenology of Perception](#)



EW GROAN

HG Well Professor, I also read Susanne Langer's Philosophy in a new Key.. TO WHICH HE RESPONDED

EW; Well that's bettahh.

So PZ begins in the fall of 1967—David Perkins and I are the first Research Assistants-- we are unpaid, a tradition that we have maintained for fifty years

In the era of the Kennedys, I asked

HG Professor Goodman, How should we think about the arts? TO WHICH HE RESPONDED

EW Ask not what the AHHRTSs can do for you , ask what you can do for the AHHRTs.

After some months, I mustered the courage to give Nelson a paper of mine to read.

HG Prof, Goodman, would you be willing to read and comment on my paper? TO WHICH HE RESPONDED

EW Yes, but when I am reading a student papUHR, or for tht matter ANYone's papUHR, the first time I come to a sentence that does not make sense to me, I stop RIGHT THEHHR.

Some time later, I published FRAMES OF MIND: the theory of multiple intelligences. The book garnered a good deal of attention But Nelson was noticeably reticent. After awhile, I asked nelson

Prof Goodman, What do you think of MI theory? TO WHICH HE RESPONDED

EW: WELL HOWAHHD, I don't believe in the seven intelligences, but I DO believe in the eight stupidities.

Project Zero had its ups and downs in the first years. We were moved, quixotically, from one inconvenient set of offices to another. We could not get the materials that we needed to function properly. Especially annoying was a rug around our only conference table , a rug that was moth eaten, bedraggled, a sight for sore eyes.

To replace the rug, We had to appeal to a manager, with the Dickensian name of Mr. Wormser. But our appeals to Mr Wormser fell on deaf ears. One day Paul Kolers, a friend of Nelson, David, and Howard, asked Nelson, who was very frustrated: "Nelson, does this test your faith in human nature?"

TO WHICH HE RESPONDED

EW: "No, Paul, it confiHRRMms it"

As those of us at PZ were trying to understand the arts, we became very interested in creativity—evidently central in artistic activity. One afternoon a group of young researchers were speculating on what it takes to nurture creativity: Said one “good modelling “: Said another “working together cooperatively on a project” : said a third “ reinforcement of creative behaviors.” We asked Nelson what he thought engendered creativity

Without blinking, Nelson responded: “You want to nuHHRture creativity. That’s simple. Just create obstacles. Just create obstacles.

Now having been at Project Zero for half a century, I can say that we have not deliberately created obstacles. But the world has heeded Nelson—it has created many obstacles—ranging from difficult and skeptical administrators, to a challenging funding climate, to an increasing focus on tests, STEM curricula, and ‘deliverables’. This has not been a benign climate for a group of researchers, many of them qualitative, with a love of the arts, and a refusal to simplify teaching, curriculum, and assessment just to satisfy the current wisdom—what Nelson, would have called (enter EW) “the current foolishness.”

And yet, somehow, we have managed to overcome these obstacles, and have not only survived, but thrived. Nelson loved alliteration—one of his many gifts to the succeeding generations at Project Zero. Thank you Nelson for proposing and promoting this project. Thank you for giving us the fortitude to convert obstacles into opportunities, and to proceed from opportunities to achievements and accomplishments and even accolades.

SO PLEASE JOIN US IN LIFTING OUR GLASSES:

TOGETHER HERE’S TO THE NEXT HALF CENTURY

