

In Memoriam

Lester Eugene Embree (January 9, 1938 – January 19, 2017)

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Our friend and colleague Lester Embree passed away in January of 2017, after a struggle for a few months following a fall that had left him bedridden. He had spent eight weeks in the hospital during the summer of 2016, recovering from compression fractures; by early September he was living alone at home with daily home health care for a couple of hours a day. He hoped to be off his walker sometime in October. At that time he was still eager to be able to participate in upcoming conferences, possibly even Poland, and he was emailing me back and forth about possible speakers that he knew there. It was sometime after this that complications developed.

Lester died on Thursday, January 19, 2017 at the Boca Raton Regional Hospital. Born to a working class family in pre-war California, Lester had served our country in the Marine Corps before heading to college and eventually earning his Ph.D. from the New School for Social Research in New York, where he studied under the tutelage of Aron Gurwitsch. From there, his career trajectory would take him to Duquesne to teach in the Philosophy Department, concentrating on the work of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Gurwitsch, and Schütz.

Upon his death, Lester's friend and colleague Michael Barber, a fellow Schütz expert, commented in an email to Lester's colleagues: "We are grateful for his many contributions and will continue his work in keeping phenomenology a vibrant scientific and interdisciplinary enterprise in partnership with colleagues from across the world." A beautifully written "In Memoriam" was published by Hisashi Nasu in *Human Studies: A Journal for Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (Vol. 40, No. 1, 2017, pp 1-6).

In this more personal memorial, I will simply comment on how I came to know Lester as a teacher, mentor figure, and friend. Lester Embree appeared at Duquesne around 1975, fresh from the New School for Social Research in New York City. Tall and sturdy like a tree, his affable style and boyish grin made him feel accessible to us, and we enjoyed entering into dialogue with him both in and out of the classroom.

On the first days of class, he would pass out mimeographed syllabi and proceed to offer a biographical sketch of whomever we'd be reading together. Each semester it was one philosopher, one text: Husserl's *Ideas*, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Gurwitsch's *Human Encounters in the Social World*, and so on. Never much of a fan of Heidegger, he preferred his phenomenology "straight" -- that is, descriptive, but not hermeneutic. Aron Gurwitsch and Alfred

Schütz had been his teachers at the New School, and he carried their Continental style with him into the classroom.¹ His classes—like all the other philosophy classes at Duquesne in the 1970's—were lecture courses. Sometimes Lester would stand but he was often prone to sit squarely at a table in the front of the room reading from a prepared set of lecture notes, pausing along the way to offer his embellishments, with a dash of his wry humor. He loved sharing harmless gossip about the thinkers, and he was particularly fond of passing along stories of Merleau-Ponty's failed love affairs, as detailed by Simone de Beauvoir in her memoirs (though using a pseudonym to hide Merleau's identity). He was one of the few who would affectionately refer to Merleau-Ponty as simply "Merleau" in the classroom.

Lester's class lectures were detailed and edifying, peppered with statements where he would manage to boil down complex notions like the phenomenological epochè to a simple sentence or two. While addressing his class with the doctrines of orthodox Husserlian phenomenology, he would assume the amiable tone and demeanor of a kind uncle teaching his nephews how to construct a kite. That is to say, he was patient, never condescending, and always seeming to enjoy this knowledge that he loved to share with others.

His office door was always open when he was in. He was not one of those Profs who clicked away on his typewriter behind closed doors. He enjoyed the interaction with his students, and he welcomed us to come talk phenomenology. A broad smile would sweep across his face, whether the topic was transcendental subjectivity or where to find a good cheeseburger down the hill from Duquesne. When I was a grad student playing at being a teacher while substituting for a professor on medical leave, I spent many hours in the office of the colleague on leave, just two doors down from Lester. He would sometimes call me over to his office without leaving his own chair, as his resonant voice had no trouble reaching out to me from down the hall. Many an afternoon we spent discussing ideas like "video phenomenology," pondering whether the new technology of VHS tape would enable us to take phenomenology to the streets.

Lester did more than take phenomenology to the streets—he took it to the whole world! His Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology served since the 1970s as publisher for countless books and eventually as co-sponsor for many seminars held at Delray Beach, Florida. When in 1999 we ran into each other after a several year hiatus at a summer meeting of the Merleau-Ponty circle in Wales, he invited me to join an intimate gathering of international scholars to be hosted by him that same fall to discuss Merleau-Ponty's reading of Husserl. It was projects like these that helped to push phenomenology beyond its limits, that placed the philosophers themselves into dialogue, while facilitating discussion and collegiality and a sense of sharing a common project among us as participants.

In 2002, Lester founded the philosophical "Organization of Phenomenological Organizations" (O.P.O.) at the meeting in Prague of representatives of 59 phenomenological organizations from all around the world. In its press release, Lester and his co-founder Ivan Chvatik wrote:

The O.P.O. is composed of centers, societies, archives, and working groups promoting the phenomenological tradition and its offspring. The O.P.O. aims at fostering communication and cooperation among philosophers around the globe.

This century old tradition is enormously rich and complex and reflected in all areas of philosophy, e.g., aesthetics, ethics, and philosophy of science, and in over a score

of other cultural disciplines. New areas of investigation include, for example, ecology, technology, and intercultural relations.
(<http://o-p-o-phenomenology.org/>)

With his Organization of Phenomenology Organizations (OPO), Lester became the glue that held together phenomenologists everywhere. He began to wonder if the future of phenomenology might not reside with those in the human science traditions who were breathing new life into phenomenology by picking up the program of research begun by Husserl, Gurwitsch, Schütz, and transforming the sciences themselves with the methodology envisioned by these early collaborators.

This was all happening around the time that Lester began to show interest in the International Human Science Research Conference (IHSRC), one of the many conferences held worldwide that was devoted to its phenomenological foundations. The original “Human Science Research Conference” was the brainchild of Lester’s colleague (from his Duquesne days) Amedeo Giorgi. About a decade after the appearance of Giorgi’s (1970) *Psychology as a Human Science: A Phenomenologically-Based Approach*, Giorgi co-founded this conference with several colleagues at an inaugural meeting in Michigan (in 1982). The following year, a second meeting was held at Duquesne and the “Human Science Research Conference” was established. It was about 20 years later that Lester began to take a closer look at what was going on in this organization. It began with Lester asking me questions, when would we see each other at SPEP or the Merleau-Ponty Circle, about what was going on among this new breed of “human science researchers.” Unlike other philosophical colleagues who often scoffed at the idea of psychologists “running with” complicated philosophical ideas such as one finds in Husserl and Heidegger, Lester seemed fascinated and encouraged by a new generation of researchers in a myriad of disciplines and professions who were coming together annually at the now *International Human Science Research Conference*. He began attending these meetings in 2006 at Ramapo in New Jersey, and he would become a stalwart figure representing the very foundation of the conference in the years to come.

Lester enjoyed not only listening to what psychologists, nurses, physiotherapists and anthropologists were doing with phenomenology; he also enjoyed edifying us with his own papers, offering clarification of the most challenging concepts of phenomenology. One that stands out was his paper on the Seven Epochs of Husserl. But he was also quick to incorporate the research interests of his new colleagues into his own work; and so, after he listened to one of my papers about my “Conversations with a Bonobo,” he drafted a paper on “Chimpanzee Phenomenology”! With Lester it was always a two-way street. He certainly enjoyed his position as one of the luminaries of the conference; but he was always there on the receiving end, as well, attending and appreciating the presentations of his former protégés, while always offering polish to our work.

In addition to Lester’s involvement in the aforementioned conferences and organizations, he was also instrumental in setting up conference-based organizations across the world. At one point, he realized there was a “gap” in the Americas, with all the areas of Latin America and South America represented by their own phenomenological organizations; so he called upon a group of his colleagues in the United States to found a North American organization of phenomenology. Given Lester’s own interest in interdisciplinarity, he called together a group of about a dozen of us at Delray Beach, Florida in June of 2008, and we founded the Interdisciplinary Coalition of North American Phenomenologists (ICNAP). Each of us presented papers to the group, and we discussed how to best structure the organization, as one that would meet annually at a conference

sponsored by participating institutions. The next year, the first annual conference was convened at Ramapo College, and the rest is history: ICNAP is now in its 10th year.

Lester's scholarly influence and presence at our conferences will surely be missed around the globe.

I know that I will continue to miss Lester in my professional life. It hasn't been a year since his passing, and I find myself still feeling the impulse to reach out to him for his always steadfast and helpful advice. Lester was a venerable force on whom I could always rely to respond to my philosophical queries, while continuing to carry on our personal friendship that lasted four decades. It is with both sadness for the loss of his presence, and joy for the many years spent in his company, that I share these memories with our readers.

ⁱ In fact, Lester once wrote a paper documenting that it was plausibly he who had originated the expression "Continental thought" because one time at a conference he was looking to distinguish the British analytic philosophers from all of those others who were on the main continent of Europe. So he offhandedly referred to the phenomenological, existential, hermeneutic, and postmodern traditions as "Continental" thinking. Ever the historian, Lester sent me a draft of the paper he was preparing for publication in my journal, in which he had included a section detailing this claim. It seemed that he was amused at this possibility; and at the same time he thought it was worthy of being put on record. Lester had a penchant for documenting everything down to the last detail.