

## A Compassionate Scholar: A Tribute to Dr. Robert Eugene Haskell

April 16, 1938 – July 17, 2010

"Though no rigorous researcher would downplay the power of experimental and laboratory designs, the same generally can not be said of addressing the issue of increasing the robustness of experimental design with convergent data from everyday situations. Just as everyday phenomena need to be subjected to experimental testing, so do experimental designs need to be informed by the conditions attached to everyday phenomena for which they serve as models. No aircraft flight design is based solely on findings from wind tunnel experiments but on in-flight data from similar aircraft and from early prototypes of actual aircraft. Similarly, laboratory findings in psychology can be increasingly informed with variables and situations closely resembling those operations in everyday settings."

Robert Haskell

The scholarly community and his many friends, colleagues and students mourn the passing of one of its brightest stars, Robert "Rob" Haskell, Ph.D. Rob died suddenly due to complications following treatment for cancer. A notable figure in interdisciplinary studies, he studied with Ernest Becker at San Francisco State University and Joseph J. Kockleman at Penn State University. In an academic career that spanned more than 50 years, Rob produced an impressive and impactful corpus on the interdisciplinary underpinnings of cognition and unconsciousness.

Raised along the mid-Maine coast he loved, he combined in his own personality the rugged solitude, beauty, and magnetism of that state: he was first and always a scholar of the solitary cut who nonetheless commanded the attention and esteem of his colleagues. Passionately excited by the ideas and scholarship of his peers, he added an incisive vision and relentless commitment to their pursuit of truth.

Haskell was a working class American enlarged by the benefit of travel in the military and introduction to books. He once shared with me that he read his first book at 19 after entering the Army. (I never learned what that book was, but would not be surprised to learn it was Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* or Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* — his two favorite works.) From there, he said, it was sheer adventure: his love of books and learning never ceased. Indeed, years after the event, he and I often recalled with childlike glee how we had once discovered a quaint, seldom-visited used bookstore in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; there, we discovered in an unlit attic a mountain of books, into which we climbed in search of literary gems.

After traveling across country with his wife and small child in a Volkswagen Beetle in 1970, he settled for a decade at Harrisburg Area Community College in Pennsylvania. At Harrisburg, Haskell was an inspiration and mentor for several first-generation working-class white and minority students. I first met Rob when I joined the faculty; I was newly returned from study in Canada, and we embarked on a friendship that was to span nearly 40 years. As both his closest friend and colleague, I was the observer and frequent beneficiary of the spirit and wit of a rare human being. Decency was his hallmark. He was a person who, in Becker's terms, faced the contradictions of life without resorting to fanaticism; and whose compassion for humans inhered in a recognition of the heroic in each of us as we face with hope the inevitability of death.

This attitude infused his scholarship with a compassion that was evident in his relations with people as well as the great minds contained in books. Generosity and humor, along with a demand for solid thought and application, marked his tenure as a teacher. He never placated sloppy thinking or shoddy work from his students, yet he remained always respectful and encouraging.

Rob was a scholar whose work crossed many boundaries. Trained in sociology, rhetoric, and psychology, he wrote with a disciplined commitment to empirical theory building. Fascinated with unconscious language and thought, he constructed a method for understanding the hidden logic behind much of ordinary communication. Working with ideas from linguistics, logic, and mathematics, he delineated a way of looking at ordinary communication that revealed both structural and semantic order and significance. A co-founder of the Institute for Cognitive Science at the University of New England, he was especially pivotal in bringing to the students and professors of his institution some of the world's foremost thinkers, including Thomas Szasz and Molefi Asante.

Rob was an eager student-scholar: he loved learning new things and he was generous in his acknowledgement of the insights and accomplishments of others. This largeness of vision underlay the scope of his work and the energy he put into various fields, including small group dynamics, the transfer of learning, student-faculty evaluation, dream processes, analogic reasoning, and unconscious cognitive processes. He wrote more than 60 scholarly papers on student evaluations, analogic reasoning, rhetoric, and the cognitive psychology of dreams. He was the author of seven books, including *Deep Listening: Hidden Meanings in Everyday Conversation* and *Between the Lines: Unconscious Meaning in Everyday Conversation*. Perhaps his most challenging work, and my personal favorite, was the 1993 semi-autobiographical *Adult-Child Research and Experience: Personal and Professional Legacies of a Dysfunctional Co-Dependent Family* [Developments in Clinical Psychology]. In this study, he deftly combined his personal narrative as an adult child of an alcoholic with the cumulative research on the personality of children growing up in alcoholism-related dysfunctional families.

Haskell also served on several journal editorial review boards and was an Associate Editor of *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*. Consistent with his deep respect and affection for the founder and Editor of the Journal, Ray Russ, he edited several special issues of this journal and provided leadership in the advocacy of greater interchange among diverse fields. His ability to assume a leadership role in these projects derived from his own established prominence as a leading scholar.

Though his great passion and achievement was empirical theory building, his compassion for the concrete struggles of daily life led to work beyond the boundaries. Never one to be a joiner of causes, he nonetheless championed them. In 1979, as he was removing his wife and daughter from Harrisburg and the fallout from Three Mile Island, he took time to write several important essays on the dangers and challenges of nuclear energy and fallout. Similarly, his essays on the integrity, or lack thereof, of student-teacher evaluations, now some decades old, remain among the most cited. In these, and other examples of academic advocacy, we have a model of the committed scholar who retained integrity over despair and remained engaged with his fellow travelers until the end. We shall continue to miss and remember him.

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