

## ***Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute***

***February 2023***

# ***Performing Gratitude***



by Lois Holzman

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This is the first Valentine I've sent since I placed my hand-made, heart-shaped bright red card on the desk of a boy named Ralph in second grade. I tend to stay away from commercial holidays, this one in particular\*, and my expressions of love and appreciation are more spontaneous and frequent than Hallmark's. But since you're reading this in February and it's kind of a love letter, a Valentine it is.

How could I not love the Taos Institute, having lived nearly all my life as a social constructionist (unaware for half of it)? How could I not appreciate having a far more elegant name for what I and my colleagues at the Rockefeller University's Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition called "the person-environment interface" back in the late 1970s? How could I not appreciate the years of work devoted to creating a space to incubate and nurture and grow and transform social construction-ism and -ists? How could I not deeply appreciate the welcoming of social therapeutics as a form of social constructionism and the willingness to occasionally become dance partners over the decades? And how can I not love the gentleness of Taos' language and how every phrase is an invitation?



A dance of difference. That's how Ken Gergen once characterized our relationship. By "our" I mean his and the Taos Institute's relationship with me, Fred Newman and the East Side Institute and its broader development community. So, while our critiques of psychology and education are remarkably similar and our practices are compatible, our roots, histories and locations are very different—making conversations and collaborations sites for creating meaning together.



Fred and I both left academia to create what we called, in the early days, independent *anti-institutions*. We began our work with rather dogmatic Marxist politics, transforming at the turn of this century into a postmodern Marxism more compatible with social constructionism. Our discovery of the power of performance comes from the theatre and Vygotsky's insights on child development as a socio-cultural-historical joint activity. As does our emphasis on the group, the ensemble, as the unit of development/qualitative transformation of people,

communities, and the world. As do our views on language and its relationship to meaning making and world changing.

It was through the Taos Institute that Fred and I learned about postmodernism — what a great contribution that was! And it was with Taos that we created the conditions to find and meet and work with activists and progressives for whom performance and play and the creative arts are generative, improvisational activities of reconstructive (as opposed to deconstructive) power — the spark from which the emerging global performance activism movement came into being. For me, the recent Taos gathering, “Unfolding Dialogues: Relational Resources for Global Good,” was reconstructive power at its best.



While perhaps the stridency is gone, slogans remain in the Institute’s repertoire of ways to make meaning. Here are some of my favorites: From years ago, “Don’t Mourn, Organize!” and “Don’t Explain!” And from current days, “All Power To The Developing!” and “We Perform, Therefore, We Become.”

As a new member of the Taos Institute Associate Council, I am eager to connect with each and every one of you and continue to perform the becoming of new relationships.

Happy Valentine’s Day!

Lois

*\*The commodification and commercialization of love known as Valentine’s Day began over two centuries ago in England, spread to other English-speaking countries throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and is now widely “observed” throughout the world.*