

A black and white portrait of Vera John-Steiner, a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark top, a necklace, and earrings. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a textured wall.

*Constructing a Community  
of Thought*

Letters on the  
Scholarship, Teaching,  
and Mentoring of  
Vera John-Steiner

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EDITED BY Robert Lake  
& M. Cathrene Connery

about which you write with such passion and authority. Your work has been central to the construction of knowledge regarding the essence of creativity and others have built upon it. I believe that as a scholar ahead of your time, your voice will continue to have powerful reverberation in the years ahead.

With affection and admiration,  
Nancy J. Uscher

DR. NANCY USCHER is a concert violist and President of Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. In addition to a distinguished career as an administrator at several arts-based institutions of higher education, she has served as a professor of music and women's studies.

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#### LETTER THIRTY-ONE

## And Perhaps Our Research Leads Us Back to a World We Lost

Eleni Bastéa

"Creativity lies in the capacity to see more sharply and with greater insight that which one already knows or that which is buried at the margin of one's awareness" (John-Steiner, 1997, pp. 51–52)

Dear Vera,

Recently, I watched the documentary *Race to Nowhere* (2009) about the excessive homework meted out to our young students (K–12) and its destructive emotional and physical effects. The film captured stories of struggle with pressure-cooker school systems. There were small victories, to be sure, of students and parents who

just about survived in one piece. Yet nowhere did we see children immersed in learning, discovery, and experimentation for the pure joy of it. In fact, joy was present only when students *escaped* into their worlds of creativity, be it music or art, sports and family activities, seeking to counterbalance school pressure. But creativity's primary mission is not therapy. Creativity, as your work reminds us all, is a way of life.

"In the life of the adolescent," you note, "the need to reach somebody by words, written words, is important, as the young person frequently feels too tentative for self-expression in the presence of those he or she respects and loves" (John-Steiner, 1997, p. 50). Instead of anticipating these words that come from our young people, we are silencing them under the weight of repetitive and prescriptive homework. In fact, I see disturbing similarities between the way information is rammed down our students' throats and medical drugs are overprescribed. Just as we are robbing our bodies of their natural ability to heal, we are drowning our young minds in a deluge of information and requirements, suppressing their ability to make their own discoveries.

Today, most formal educational environments avoid engaging with deep inspiration and creativity, as if teachers are afraid to address the spirit of learning and making. I fear that if we, teachers and academics, forget to celebrate the love of learning and creating, then we are willing them into obscurity. Eventually, we might all forget that learning, like playing, is innate and self-generative. And that creativity needs to be continuously nurtured in order to thrive.

But it doesn't have to be this way. I am encouraged by the explosion of opportunities for learning and sharing knowledge that surround us now through various internet groups. Consider the powerful energy that brings together knitters and dress-makers, potters and craft artists, poets and fiction writers on the web. As a "guerilla" creative person myself, doing sewing or pottery or creative writing in between my academic work—which I also consider a creative affair—I seek out these communities and draw daily inspiration from them. Participants in sewing forums ask each other questions, post photos of their work-in-progress, comment on patterns, share tips and praise, and continue looking for new challenges. Similarly, there are circles of potters who share short videos on process and techniques, insights and breakthroughs, advice on the art and the business of ceramics. Is that so different from the way a master builder used to train his crew? Our students might not be finding creative outlets in the academy right now, but they can seek them in the borderless world of the internet.

Last month, I signed up for two on-line sewing classes in part because of the young instructor's infectious enthusiasm for traditional couture techniques. What drives people with full and busy lives, people like myself, to enroll in virtual courses, when there is no "material" reward, like a grade or professional advancement? We join these communities for the love of learning, of a good challenge, or of fulfilling a

secret desire. We wish to connect again with a relative or friend, here or gone, who once inspired us to sew or weld or write poetry. We strive to create a whole that is larger than the sum of parts, to be part of a community again, to contribute and receive, to learn and to pass down information. There is comfort in watching a master craftsman turning a wood bowl or a grandmother explaining the bramble stitch in a short video. Traditionally, we would have learned these crafts from our own families. And some we did. Now, we can learn them also from someone else's family, be it in Brazil or Michigan. This is an exciting explosion of community learning that cuts across all fields, from crafts to TED talks, from writing circles to MIT Open Course Ware. This energy about learning, teaching, and creativity that we share on the web right now is bound to transform formal education in the near future as well. I believe that we are already in the process of "constructing 'we-ness'" in our world (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 204).

I came to your work on creativity and collaboration over ten years ago, when I joined the University of New Mexico as an architectural historian, because of my own interest in memory and the creative process. Many creative people, you write, "echoed Albert Einstein's belief that people come to art and science to create 'a simplified and lucid image of the world,' hoping in this way to attain some peace and serenity amid the cruelties of daily life" (John-Steiner, 1997, p. xiv).

In architecture, we often work with similar concepts that explore the power of words and of imagined, remembered, and imaginary places. For example, I have asked my students to consider the following: "Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the room" (Lao-Tzu, 1963, p. 67).

We seek words for spaces never seen before. We study the "empty spaces" between words and images. We work with ambiguity, as that, too, triggers our imagination to complete the picture. We create spaces that have never existed before, yet somewhere deep inside us, they were always there. In a roundabout way, I realize that we, in architecture, come back to your own findings: "Creativity lies in the capacity to see more sharply and with greater insight that which one already knows or that which is buried at the margin of one's awareness" (John-Steiner, 1997, pp. 51–52).

For the last couple of years, with my colleagues Ted Jojola (Community and Regional Planning, UNM) and Lynn Paxson (Architecture, Iowa State University), we have been studying contemporary Native American architecture. We are focusing on new buildings constructed for Indigenous communities by Indigenous architects. Although most of the buildings look similar to many others across North America, what sets some of them apart is the fact that they grew out of a collaborative process between the community and the architects. In those cases, there is a strong sense of ownership and pride for the new buildings and a connection between makers and

inhabitants. You write that "*humans come into being and mature in relations to others*" (emphasis in the original) (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 187). In our research we are finding that buildings, too, develop and mature best when they are conceived in relationship both to the people inhabiting them and to the larger physical world.

In closing, Vera, I would like to confess that I have also been reading your books as a biographer, searching for clues of your own childhood, your own experiences of the life of the mind. I would venture that some of your descriptions are partly autobiographical: "The intensity with which most creative individuals approach their work is frequently nourished by a highly supportive and stimulative environment in one's home, although at times, loneliness or conflict may contribute to the lure of the world of one's own making" (John-Steiner, 1997, p. 35). Is it possible to describe the dance with knowledge, the restless search for the life of the mind without first having experienced it personally? I see your work on creativity and collaboration in part as a tribute to your family and the culture that nurtured you, a world full of books, passion for learning, and for charting new paths in the company of other seekers. Even if parts of that culture have perished tragically, we are able to capture glimpses of it, vibrant and alive, as expressed through your own work. And that alone is a most worthy legacy.

Eleni

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