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Elliot Aronson

***Step Right Up . . .* The Minnesota Years: 1962-1965**

Step right up folks. Walk right in, sit in, get a seat, get a ball. Play poker for a nickel. Five cents. There are no bells to start you or stop you. You play your own individual game. You win your own individual prizes! And we're playing for the biggest, the best, the grandest prizes on the boardwalk (Aronson, 2007, p. xxx).

I'm delighted to write a remembrance for Elliot's Festschrift. During the years that I knew him best (1962-1965) and thereafter, Elliot was a marvel. Handsome, charming, witty, warm, and intelligent. He was also a rascal, a cunning trickster, mischievous, audacious, maddening, and infuriating. Needless to say, students loved him. So did we all.

"We" (during the years that I was there) was comprised of an impressive cast of characters. There was the faculty: Leon Festinger, Stanley Schachter, and Harold Kelly (who had departed by the time I got there but had left a significant mark on the department), Dana Bramel, Gardner Lindzey, Ben Willerman, and me. Our secretary: Judith Hilton. And the students: Darcy Oman Abrahams, Jim Bell, Ellen Berscheid, David Boye, Zita Marie Brown, Andrew Barclay, Joanna Floyd, Gene Gerard, S. J., David Landy, Darwyn Linder, Steve Margulis, James McMartin, Nick Nash, Perry

Prestholdt, Jenny Hoffman Rajput, Abe Ross, Cookie White Stephan, and G. William Walster. (Bill and I were married from 1962 to 1978.)

Let us begin with that day in spring, 1963, when I first arrived in Minneapolis/Saint Paul. I had just gotten my Ph.D. from Stanford, where I had worked with Leon Festinger.

Scene: A brilliant spring day—bright sunlight casts a pale glow on the streets, which are powdered with snow. Elliot, Vera, and the Aronson family enter stage left.

As I boarded the Greyhound Bus in Palo Alto, the weather had been gorgeous, as usual. *California Dreamin'*. I was wearing the 1960s *Dress for Success* uniform: a T-shirt, jeans, and flip-flops. But as the bus headed east, thick snow began to fall, clogging the highways. As I arrived in Minneapolis, I pressed my face against the dirty glass, straining to spot the Aronsons, who were supposed to be meeting me. I'd heard about them from Leon, of course, but we hadn't met. Then I spotted them: Elliot and Vera and their four children—Hal six; Neal, five; Julie, four; and Joshua, one and a half.

Elliot looked a bit like a Northwoods lumberjack, in his Paul Bunyan flannel shirt and Levi's. Vera, originally from Hungary, was lovely. Then as now, goodness spilled out of those large, limpid brown eyes. Her expression was shy, sweet, and tender. When Elliot spotted me, he shouted: "Welcome to Minnesota!" and came bounding into the bus. Then he introduced me to Vera and the whole gang. Nothing shy about the

Aronson kids. They were hellcats pure and simple: yelling, shoving, and larking around. For them, it was a picnic. The whole gang looked like something out of *Family Circle*.

My three years at Minnesota had begun.

I came to the job market during the “Sputnik era.” At the time America was in a race with the USSR and—fueled by misinformation and fear—huge amounts of money were being poured into education. Anyone could get a job. With typical brio, Leon told me: “I’m sure I can get you a great job at Harvard, Yale, or Bell Labs. Take your pick.” He soon discovered that it was not so easy as he had supposed. Chairs were frank in saying that a woman would not fit in at their universities. They assured Leon that they were *personally* in favor of hiring women, but alas their colleagues and graduate students would never accept such an appointment.

Never one to accept defeat, Leon telephoned Dean Edmund G. Williamson (the Dean of Students at the University of Minnesota) and his pal Elliot and they hatched a plot. Donald Zander, Chair of the Student Activities Bureau, was advertising for a Research Specialist, a job that started at \$7,700 a year. The specialist’s job was arranging freshman orientation dances. (Anyone who knows what a shy, non-party animal I am will find this mismatch hilarious!) The deal was that if I were offered the Student Activities position, the folks at the Laboratory for Research in Social Relations would secretly invite me to teach a social psychology course or two and to work with a few graduate students. In secret (an early version of “Don’t ask, don’t

tell”), Dean Williamson, Elliot, and I would aim to spin gold out of straw . . . or make lemonade out of lemons. And in fact, after a year, apparently not having offended anyone and having drunk a lot of lemonade, I was offered an official position in the psychology department.

Given those overtly racist and sexist times, Leon and Elliot were surprisingly egalitarian. They were comfortable in the company of intellectuals, fascinated by people’s personal lives and research ideas—be they from men or women. They debated everyone with equal ferocity. They also did their best to find jobs for all their students. Naturally, we were all products of our times, but to a surprising extent, Leon and Elliot managed to transcend the painful prejudices that limited women’s and ethnic minorities’ chances for an intellectual life in the early 1960s. To make it clear what a feat that was, let me paint a little picture of the times.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan (in 1955-1959), sexism was the name of the game. Women, for example, were forbidden to enter the Student Union through the front door; they had to sneak in around the back. The Dean of Women, Deborah Bacon (who served from 1950 to 1961), had worked at the New Jersey State Prison for Women, at Bellevue Hospital in New York, dealing with the criminally insane, and with the Army Nurse Corps during the last days of World War II before coming to UM. Dean Bacon kept detailed records on all Michigan women and made this information available to the FBI, future employers, and parents. The health service also filed reports on women’s visits. A few weeks into freshman year, the Dean

wrote to parents, evaluating the suitability of their daughters' dress, their popularity and deportment, and discussing whether or not their friends and associates were "appropriate."

Michigan enrolled very few blacks between 1950 and 1961—fewer than 150 black women over that entire span. In a 2002 interview for the university newsletter *Michigan Today*, Bacon described how unpleasant her early experiences with these few Black students had been. "A lot of them had a very curious double chip on their shoulder, which I think they still have—that particular type. They want to be themselves, and they want to be accepted like everybody else. Now how do you do both?" When asked about the Civil rights movements and the Michigan students who gathered to protest racial discrimination, she sniffed: "Oh, yes, they had fun. What possible good it would do to picket Woolworth's, I don't know. But at least it puts you on the corner of Main, you see. Yes, there was a great deal of posturing" (Walker, 2002).

Housemothers and cab drivers were instructed to notify Dean Bacon if they spotted any mixed-race couples so that this inflammatory information could go into Dean Bacon's files and parents could be notified. During my time there, Bacon expelled one dissenter: "a bright, smart, big city girl," with a "smart, big city mother." This freshman "was out dating three and four foreign graduate students in a car, usually from India or Persia. I'm sure she thought they were all princes, I don't know. She was outrageous about it,

and she meant to be outrageous about it.” The “wayward girl” had excellent grades; nonetheless, the Dean tossed her out.

The ugly prejudices of many at Michigan in the late 1950s found echoes at the University of Minnesota in the early 1960s. Women professors were not allowed to hang their coats in the faculty cloakroom in Coffman Memorial Union. They were not allowed to eat lunch in the Faculty Club. The Faculty Club was not just a men’s club, but a WASP men’s club. Instead, women were invited to dine in the Café, a large public cafeteria that served the lower orders. The food was mediocre and serve-yourself. The steam tables filled the room with damp and heat. We protested of course but we soon found that we’d underestimated the power of tradition (or the tradition of power).

And so, for a time, Ellen and I ate lunch together every day. We became colleagues and fast friends. She was (and is) sensitive, brilliant, courageous, and lots of fun (for a complete description of life at U of M during this era, see Berscheid, 1992).

Today, of course, the world has changed. Ellen is a Regent’s Professor at the University of Minnesota, a winner of the APA’s Distinguished Scientist Award, and a member of the American Academy of Sciences. She sits anywhere she jolly well pleases.

So, given the dismal times, it is not surprising that I have such affection for Leon, who had worked to get me as good a job as possible, and for Elliot, who agreed to help me find an academic position worthy of my

training, and who, along with my fellow graduate students in that exciting lab, always generously assumed that “woman academic” was not an oxymoron. No surprise that I’ve kept up with many of them all over the years via letters, GoogleScholar, and the Web. No surprise, also, that I’ve avidly followed Elliot’s accomplishments over the years.

In writing this memoir, I searched through my file of letters. I also wrote to all the faculty and students who were at the Laboratory for Research in Social Relations during that era. Even after 20 years, Elliot inspires passionate feelings. Some students spoke of Elliot as “The Man” and “The Master”—even though he was only 30-33 years old during the time described here! A few recalled him as tough and demanding. None, however, complained about the graduate education they received at the Lab for Research in Social Relations. (Both Elliot and Ellen have written their own fascinating reports on the academic life and the ambience of Laboratory for Research in Social Relations in those days [Aronson, 2007; Berscheid, 1992].) Let me tell you a few things about Elliot Aronson, whose life traveled from boardwalk barker to scholarly showman, spellbinding teacher, and magical wizard of Oz. *Step right up . . .*

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. . . a golden era at Minnesota... money was easy to get; subjects were easy to get; ... teaching loads were light; space was available; secretaries were literate, and on and on

—Dr. Stanley Schachter, Professor of Psychology, Columbia University.

In psychology Department politics, Elliot was a clever and indefatigable campaigner. He was extraordinarily talented at persuading the Powers That Be that the Lab merited space, support for a communication “monster,”¹ secretarial help, and money for RAs. Once, when asked to prepare a yearly progress report so the Chair could decide how big a raise he would be granted, Elliot regaled us with comic tales of shameless bargaining strategies. In a fit of humility, Elliot freely acknowledged that he was *not* the author of the theory that the Earth orbits the sun, that $E = mc^2$, or the discoverer of Natural Selection. He did, however, lay claim to other theories that had been mistakenly attributed to Plato and Newton, but I’m not sure this got him the raise he wanted. Elliot’s humor broke us up, even when it was masking deep sorrow. After the untimely death of his adored older brother, he began to joke about his family’s “shortlevity,” worrying that he was suffering from a bad back, congenital heart failure, dropsy, and elbow cancer.

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This past quarter, I had the honor of being in Elliot Aronson's last ever lecture class at Santa Cruz. It was amazing. His teaching and writing inspired me to re-evaluate my actions and myself as a person. Aronson's heart shows through in his writing—and even more in his lecturing. . . *The Social Animal* focuses on why, how, and when people formulate different ideas about society and the people contained in it. One definitely gains an understanding of himself and his interactions, views, ideals, prejudices, etc. after reading this critical analysis of human social behavior. Again, I feel honored to have been enlightened by Elliot Aronson.

¹ A complex communication system designed to allow students to feed instructions and stimuli into research cubicles. Alas, no one knew how to use the equipment since the UM engineers who built it neglected to provide an instruction manual. The hopelessness of the situation sparked a great deal of bittersweet laughter.

—A. M. Yee. Student at UC Santa Cruz

Scholars and students alike agree that Elliot is a brilliant writer. Generations of students have come of age reading *The Social Animal*. They waited for his next delightful book or scholarly paper the way moviegoers used to line up for the next Woody Allen movie.

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He is a wonderful mentor. His former students are now among the leading researchers in the field. His mentoring behavior extends even beyond his students.

—Dr. John Cacioppo, Professor of Psychology at the University of Chicago.

I would rather be provocative than right.

—Elliot Aronson

Elliot was a distinguished teacher. In 1963, three of us—Elliot, Ellen Berscheid, and I—occasionally team-taught in Elliot’s huge Introductory Social Psychology class. We often asked his advice when dealing with difficult students. One student that needed “dealing with” was Alvin Gundersheimer. During a tough lecture on, say, research methodology, Alvin would stand up, hem and haw, and haltingly ask a question so baffling that Ellen and I were often rendered speechless. Once—when I started smiling at Alvin’s peculiar ways, Ellen gave me THAT LOOK. She was always kind. “You’ve got to quit that,” she said. “You’re going to hurt Alvin’s feelings.” She was right. And she had some wise advice. “When tempted to

giggle, think of what Elliot would do. Imitate his *gravitas*.” No senior professor is going to dissolve in a fit of giggles when faced with a wayward student

So comes Wednesday. Ellen and I were lecturing on the James-Lange theory of emotion and Schachter’s and Singer’s recent, path breaking research, which had been conducted in our Minnesota labs. Tough stuff for undergraduates. Alvin waved his hand. He said haltingly: “I have a question.”

“What is it?” I asked. I was already apprehensive.

He paused, laboring over its formulation. “Uh,” he said. “Uh, . . .” Then came a question on the order of: “Do you think Jack Kerouac (of *On the Road* fame) is good looking?”

“Yes,” I said, hiding a smile. “Now . . .” Back to the lecture.

Alvin raised his hand again. “I have another question,” he said.

“Yes?”

Alvin asked: “If Neal Cassady were still alive, do you think he would be bald?”

I nodded, biting my lip. I told myself: “Don’t laugh. Don’t laugh.”

Then Alvin did it. Before sitting down, he started to arrange his private parts. He poked, strained, and twisted. Finally, he reached into his pants and poked his genitals into place.

I tried not to smile. Lips primly pursed together, a grin trembled at the corners of my mouth. Ellen gave me a warning look.

Desperate, I searched for Elliot in the crowd. I needed a quick dose of *gravitas*. I finally spotted him. Elliot was standing at the back of the classroom. He looked at me and started to grin. I grinned back. He bit his lip; I bit mine. Finally, he put his face in his hands and his deep infectious laugh boomed out.

That did it. People tried to be polite. They really did.

But it was too much.

One student giggled. Another put his fist in his mouth, his whole body rocking. Students chuckled. Guffawed. Wheezed. Howled. Gales of laughter rumbled through the audience. The hall quaked with hilarity. Nothing could turn back the tsunami. The bell rang. We lucked out. Alvin, whose attention had been glued to a crossword puzzle during all this mirth, stood up, stretched lazily, and cheerfully sauntered out of the room.

Somehow, neither Ellen nor I ever got the giggles in class again. It must have been Elliot's *gravitas*.

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In the laboratory, Aronson became known for the elegance and simplicity of his experiments.

—Jennifer McNulty, Reporter, *USSC Currents*.

His elegant and seminal experiments have fundamentally changed the way we look at everyday life.

—The Association for Psychological Science.

Among academic theorists and researchers, he's unique in his willingness to step out of the basic laboratory and into the applied realm, as well.

—Dr. Robert Cialdini, Professor of Psychology, Arizona State University.

In the 1960s, a great deal of research was going on in the Lab for Research in Social Relations; you couldn't help but get swept up into its excitement. Elliot and his group were primarily interested in social influence, dissonance theory, group processes, and their practical applications. Ellen and I were interested in social justice, interpersonal attraction, passionate love, and sexual desire. Dana was a social activist. He led protests to bring an end to the Vietnam War, marched in support of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, and supported a host of other good causes. He also wrote wonderful theoretical papers on popular views of American workers.

Here are some fond memories from two of our graduate students: Andy Barclay, who went on to teach at Michigan State University, and Bob Baron, who now teaches at the University of Iowa.

What I remember most about Elliot was his wonderful skill at turning some hypothesis into an experimental manipulation. . . he was a master of the craft. . . [Others came after] but they lacked that sarcastic Aronson knife-edge.

—Dr. Andrew Barclay, Michigan State University.

You asked for a funny or memorable story. Here is mine. I was first meeting the Great Man and as a young eager beaver I wanted him

to note my bushy bushy tail. So I queried The Elliot as to the marginal significance of the key finding in Aronson and Mills, which as I recall rests on a p value just a bit larger than .06. So I sucked up my courage and I asked about the .06. He didn't seem too perturbed by my question. "So you actually read that entire paper. All of it? Even the results section...hmmmm. Most impressive. I, myself, often just browse the discussion sections of the articles I read". I was not to be shaken off the trail however. " But... but what about the .06 p value. I mean we are talking about more than a just classic finding. It's a foundation finding. A paradigm shifting finding. And $p = .06!$ " "Well," shrugged Elliot " I just never worshipped at that particular shrine."

And that of course is the punch line. With Elliot's chops, I am sure glad that he didn't sweat whether he had successfully met some arbitrary statistical convention. Was the prediction inventive? Did it make psychological sense? Was it integrative? Relevant? Those are far more worthy "shrines" to worship at. And I am sure glad that is where he bent his knee. When you are seeing around the corners that most of us don't even know are there, you should be free to run ahead of the pack.

—Dr. Robert Baron, Professor of Psychology,
University of Iowa

I'd rather spend ten minutes with Aronson than an hour with anyone else.

Dr. Lee Ross, Professor of Psychology, Stanford University

Elliot was a lot of fun. The Lab (mostly men) often possessed a kind of gleeful Hardy Boys atmosphere.

- In the 1960s, we folks began asking famous social psychologists to contribute a small oil painting to decorate the walls of the Lab. At first Elliot demurred: he couldn't draw ears, he said. In the end, though, he agreed, and produced a painting of a nun in complete wimple—that solved the problem about drawing ears. (Elliot later told me that he and Vera still jokingly refer to “Elliot's Blue Nun period,” because it was his *only* period.)

- One winter, when it was 20° below zero outside, Elliot and Bill decided to build a sailboat (from a kit) in our living room. They laid down sheets of plastic and proceeded, filling our house with the fumes of the epoxy polymers they used in construction. The sailboat turned out to be a gorgeous piece of workmanship. Unlike the Laurel and Hardy silent movies, where men build a boat and can't get it out of the house, Elliot and Bill had no trouble. They just had to remove a door and window frame on the front of the house. Nonetheless, we all enjoyed the subsequent sailing excursions (in said sailboat), along with picnics and trips to racing tracks in rural Minnesota in the dead of winter.

Elliot has been stunningly successful. He has been named one of the 100 most eminent psychologists of the 20th century. (APA monitor July/August 2002). And received an unprecedented array of awards:

- American Association for the Advancement of Science: Award for Distinguished Research in Social Psychology (1970).
- American Psychological Association: National Media Award for *The Social Animal* (1973).
- American Psychological Association. Distinguished Teaching Award (1980).
- American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Elected to membership. (1992).
- American Psychological Association. Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award (1999).
- The Association for Psychological Science. William James Fellow Award for a lifetime of intellectual contributions to the science of psychology (2007-2007).

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Certainly Elliot is no Saint. He's too charismatic for that. He's too much fun. Too full of devilment. Forces of nature generate passionate, vehement feelings—both worshipful and critical. To listen to some of his fans, you'd think he possessed the brilliance, goodness, and courage of a Harry Potter, Albus Dumbledore, and Mad-Eye Moody all rolled into one. To talk to his critics (way fewer in number) you'd be tempted to think he was as wicked and manipulative as Lucius Malfoy, Dolores Umbridge, and Rita

Skeeter. . . But the truth, I think, is that like his (and my mentor) Leon Festinger, Elliot is a force of nature, one who rarely evokes bland feelings.

Count me among his many admirers and friends, who delight in his wit and appreciate his wide-ranging contributions to social psychology, both theoretical and applied.

So step right up . . .

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