

Freda Gould Rebelsky  
Boston University  
Psychology Department  
Boston, MA 02215

Symposium on Eminent Women in Psychology:  
Historical and Personal Perspectives  
American Psychological Association  
Los Angeles, CA.  
August, 1994

### Commitment and Caring

I am so glad to have the opportunity to say, in this prestigious forum, some things I've wanted others to hear. And I'm honored to have the chance to review my career with you.

I'd like to start, as I do all my classes and talks, with a few points.

Sylvia Ashton-Warner, in her book *Teacher*, said "For it is not so much the content of what one says as the way in which one says it. However important the thing you say, what's the good of it if it is not heard, or being heard, not felt?" I agree. I think we need to activate head and heart when we are learning.

I also think that Germany showed us that a culture can have great universities, advanced medicine, terrific literature, philosophy, art, and still, under a Hitler, do terrible things to people. Ideas alone are not enough: a moral base about the uses of ideas is essential.

Therefore, as I prepare each lecture, including today's, I ask myself, "In what ways does this time together help make for a better person, a better country, and a better world?" I also recognize that we have about 25 minutes together. How can I best use this time?

In my earliest memory I am on my father's shoulders at a rally at New York City's Union Square, and people are shouting "Save Ethiopia." It was 1935, and I was 4. Even earlier, when I was in utero, my mother was picketing, with other women, for a new neighborhood elementary school. We didn't save Ethiopia, but the school was built before I entered kindergarten. I learned at home that it is necessary to say what you think about essential issues and to join with others to make a stronger impact. I helped rid P.S.95 of a bigoted 6th grade teacher (she called us "Kikes"), and I successfully fought to sing some songs, other than Christian, for grade school graduation (we were a largely Jewish student group with Christian teachers.) It is no surprise that I have been the President of the Boston University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors for 12 years, unafraid of speaking up in the current repressive BU environment. I have repeatedly seen that my voice is louder, clearer, more forceful when I join with others. (I also feel safer when held by others' warmth and courage--as I try to hold my students, so that they, too, are courageous.)

I grew up in a left-wing family in a left-wing 'community, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union cooperative housing project, next to gigantic, available Van Cortlandt Park. We were very poor until World War II, when my father's inventive engineering skills paid off. When I was born my crib was a drawer, from a chest of drawers, lined with towels. During the depression, we got fresh milk, eggs, and chickens from my grandfather's New Jersey farm. I remember my mother's optimism, her ability to make birthday parties with original dolls of gumdrops, marshmallows, and toothpicks--In general, to make a

lively, comfortable life out of very little. I also remember her bright, creative, original, and spunky approach to life, even without a high school education.

In this close and very stable community, picnics were frequent, as were all sorts of fund-raising events, with lots of people, singing, dancing, making speeches. I continue my friendships with the other members of my Girl Scout troop, and hundreds of people showed up this year for a P.S.95 reunion.

My younger sister and I were raised to be interested in wide-ranging issues and to feel that our job was to help fix the world. In childhood that meant knitting scarves for soldiers and writing rousing poems, often published, about World War II issues (saving tin foil, etc.). In adulthood, I learned that we had been taught the Jewish Idea of Tikkun olam, that we are here on earth for a purpose, to help God complete the making of a just world, to hasten the kingdom of God through human effort. My sister taught retarded and physically handicapped children, different from my students, yet we were both award-winning teachers, so this must have been strongly supported. But neither of us remember any push towards any specific career. We were just supposed to be the best at whatever we chose.

Throughout my school years, I loved to learn, and I was always interested in a variety of things at once. For example, I worked for People's Songs (a folk-song group, with political interests), as a secretary while I was in high school, and I was the first teenage member of the Linnean Society (a bird-watching group) of the American Museum of Natural History. I also had lots of support, with teachers who liked my enthusiasms, and who were excellent models of people who liked what they were doing. I always was a speedy and effective test taker, learned very quickly, and I did well in all subjects.

My high school, Fieldston (of the Ethical Culture School system) and my college, University of Chicago, encouraged development in many directions. I got a fast 2 1/2 year B.A. and entered law school (University of Chicago) at 19, not knowing what else to apply to. I had been unaware of higher degrees in college, except for engineers, lawyers, and doctors.

Soon after I had started the University of Chicago, my parents were having marital problems (they eventually divorced), and asked that I come back home to a New York school. Instead I stayed and got four jobs and a scholarship. The first year I remember eating lots of oatmeal, raisins, peanut butter, and skim milk powder (I'd been told they were nutritious), and eating a lot at the once-a-day meal which I waitressed in the dorms. I loved the University of Chicago, and the Hutchin's liberal arts program was my cup of tea, varied, thoughtful, and taught with great gusto. I kept attending extra classes and never did get to the Oriental Institute (where I had originally hoped to study Babylonian, Assyrian, etc., and find a Rosetta Stone, combining archeology and language--another view of human development).

First year in law school I got all A's, except for a C from the professor of Criminal Law who thought no woman should get a grade higher than a C. I really liked law school, especially Ed Levi's (later to become Attorney General) Elements of the Law.

After one year of law school, I still didn't know what I wanted to "be"--maybe a lawyer for children's rights or working on family legal issues. The only thing I knew I didn't want to be was a teacher--I couldn't see how anyone filled the time! I decided to take two summer courses, Vector Analysis

and Bruno Bettelheim's Dynamic Theories of Personality. I know I was vaguely thinking of applying to medical school, but I really don't know why I chose those courses.

In the second class, Bettelheim asked to borrow a course outline. I handed him mine (you know I was a first-row student). I had written Brutalheim all over the course outline. Bettelheim spent some class time on what criticism does to the criticizer, talked to me after the class about myself, and offered me a job as a counselor at his Orthogenic School, for very disturbed, autistic, schizophrenic, etc., children. I quit law school immediately.

I loved the difficult work of helping the children at the Orthogenic School and worked there for 3 1/2 years. The staff was wonderfully supportive, a real group, and Bettelheim made us all feel as if we were very special in helping kids who had not been helped by even very famous clinicians. I remember feeling, at the Orthogenic School, as if I was finally doing "enough." Before I had always felt--and have felt since--that I should be doing more to help fix the world. Some of my boys are now working, married with kids, and are functioning, healthy adults, despite the dismal predictions for them when they were young.

I entered the Human Development program at the University of Chicago while I was a counselor, again with no specific career plans. I did my Master's thesis interviewing people about aging, as part of a study Bernice Neugarten was conducting. I had all my data gathered, with no sign of finishing, when I met Bill Rebelsky, who later became my husband. Within three weeks of meeting him, I had finished my thesis. As I said, 25 years later at his, memorial service, "Bill somehow enabled people to move."

I left the Orthogenic School to get married, and I worked for several years, doing advertising research in Chicago and New York, with people like Sy Leiber, trained at the University of Michigan's survey research center. Advertising research was interesting, fast-paced and paid well. Then I did some research with Kuno Beller in New York, and with Dan Levinson in Boston, while trying to get back into graduate school.

I had just returned to graduate school in clinical psychology at New York University when Bill got a job with Polaroid in Cambridge. I said, "Well, I'll just go to Harvard." Harvard accepted me in the middle of the school year, but only after grueling interviews in which I was told my MA from Chicago was worthless, in which my work experience clearly didn't count, and in which I was asked what guarantee I'd give them that I wouldn't have children. Until then I had never been aware of sexism in any learning environment! I always had fine female teachers, and no one ever hinted that I wouldn't have a chance because I was a woman. But my exam scores were outstanding, M. Brewster Smith and Bernice Neugarten supported my entrance, and I had many years of excellent research experience. I was accepted.

I raced through Harvard/Radcliffe and got my Ph.D. in 2 1/2 years in 1961. Radcliffe would not allow any of their students to work full-time while at school full-time, and since I had always done that, I had a great deal of time on my hands. I had the financial support of an NIMH pre-doc and a teaching fellowship with Eric Lenneberg. So I quickly took my quals, language exams, and finished my thesis on sex-differences in the use of confession, using the Sears, Maccoby, and Levin children in a follow-up study of moral development. I published my first paper (from a course with Dave McClelland) on

Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain, I did my first real teaching as Eric Lenneberg's Teaching Fellow in a course on language (I covered language development in two lectures), and I presented my thesis at SRCD in 1961, and Urie Bronfenbrenner told me it was the best presentation of data he'd ever heard. I began to see that I could share ideas well on a podium.

Anne Roe said, when no one in the Boston area would hire me after my Ph.D., that by the time I was 45 I'd be glad I wasn't "caught" by one interest, with a scale named after me, and there was a value in women's interest in several areas. I found she was correct, and I have argued, sometimes successfully, for tenuring women, whose work was excellent in several areas, whose work was "ovarian," not "seminal," who were not "leaders," but "developers."

I finally got a position as a research associate at M.I.T., on an aphasia project, co-directed by Davis Howes and Norman Geschwind. It was tedious work on word counts, but the V.A. patients were always verbally interesting. I worked with a group of bright women, and I learned lots from Davis and Norm. Then Roger Brown who was then at MIT heard about a job at Boston University, which Dan Berlyne was leaving. He told me to apply, supported my application, and I was the first female on a tenure line in the Psychology Department at Boston University.

The teaching load at Boston University was heavy, and the pay was 2/3 of what I'd made years before in advertising. But I had found my vocation. I developed over 15 courses, including Psychology and Issues of War and Peace (1967), Child Development and Public Policy (1968), and Psychology and the Natural World (1985), and created a developmental psychology program, which at one point had 10 faculty. I found the more time I spent with students, the more research I did. Students wanted to study with me and were glad to be helpful. My graduate students met weekly at my house to discuss research articles, and classes (even of over 400 students) were invited to my house for Sunday afternoon open houses. I wanted students to see my husband, child, dog, house--to know that there were connections between work and the rest of life.

I always knew I only used part of my "smarts," and I assumed everyone else was like that, too. So I tried very hard to involve students in their own learning, and to help them clarify their own ideas. My Ph.D.'s did work on very different topics of their own interest, and have become professors, researchers, chairs of departments, clinicians, lawyers, politicians, novelists, film makers, and lots else.

I have taught over 9,000 undergraduates and been first reader on 27 doctoral theses and served on the committees of 41 other students. I am proud to say that students say they learn intellectual and moral courage from me, they learn to be less prejudiced, and they learn to love ideas in my classes. I have helped students know how smart they are, and many psychologists (and people in other fields) credit me with their success. (Among my undergrads are Gerry Koocher, Gloria Levin, Barry Lester, Margie Lachman, and David Chiroboga.) Though I know this, I also want you to know that a part of me doesn't believe it.

I strongly believe in George Albee's idea of "giving psychology away," and, therefore, am on boards, lecture widely to community groups, and provide free service as a sounding board or consultant to school principals, senior centers, community action groups, etc. My ability to share psychology with the

world can be seen in my many community services, both within Boston University (where I speak frequently for dormitories, student organizations, and religious group about issues of college life or about social and community service), and in the larger Boston community (where, e.g., I have made a series of short films for public television interviewing people over 80 years old, to show audiences what older people are really like).

My husband, Bill, was always very supportive of my scholarly work. I'm not sure I would have gotten a Ph.D. or written my books without him. He enjoyed my activities. We were uncertain about having children. We waited until I was at Boston University, and then decided to have a child. Sam was born June 17, 1964. He was a 7 1/2 month preemie (I seem to always do things fast!), but grew quickly. (I was lucky that the person in charge of the preemie nursery was my former student, so I was able to put toys in the incubator and hold Sam as I fed him. He was discharged in two weeks.) He was always a real pleasure to Bill and me. He was easy and smart, lovable . and interesting--always very able to articulate his needs. For example, when I was coaxing him to wear galoshes in first grade, he said, "Do this, do that, do this, do that. Would you like a mother who talked to you like that?" When Bill got lung cancer (from smoking Lucky Strikes since he was 12) and died at 49, before Sam's 15th birthday, Sam said, "Of the many things that may inspire life, death is the most powerful."

Sam got 3 degrees from the University of Chicago and is now married to Michelle, who is an M.D. He teaches computer science at Dartmouth College. He is already a dedicated and original teacher, who bakes cookies for students at exam time! He even quotes me in his classes. (he uses my farewell to students) and hopes he has inherited his father's love of life and people.

When Sam was little, we had easy childcare--first from Bill's parents, who lived with us, then for 2 1/2 years in Holland with a young woman, who watched him on the days I taught at the University of Utrecht, and while I was gathering data on mother/infant interaction to compare with my U.S. data. My students helped, playing house by staying for an occasional weekend while Bill and I took off. I organized my work so that I got home for Sam after school, when he requested that, only to find he went out with his friends after I gave him milk and cookies. "I just wanted to know you're home, mom," he said. I can't ever remember conflict between caring for Sam and my work. But I had a remarkably helpful husband, who enjoyed cleaning house and helping with meals. His parents had worked together at the family store, and their three children did all the meals, housework, etc. Bill knew the importance of sharing work and time. He turned down a vice-presidency of Polaroid, saying if he took it he wouldn't be able to be home for dinner at 6 p.m. with Sam and me.

Bill was an unusual man, very unconcerned with possessions. We didn't want two houses, when some people had none, and we used libraries for books. We weren't rich, but we gave away my income when he was alive. We felt we had more than enough, and we wanted to help people in the here and now. One of the things we started was a revolving no-interest loan fund for students, well-used over the years.

Our group of friends vacationed together, and children and dogs were part of our group activities. While Bill was dying, Sam said he was an only child in a large family.

Bill's death changed my whole life, including my professional life, in ways I couldn't have imagined. I stopped writing (I had written four books before he died, and edited a life-span development series), stopped attending conferences, and stopped my research grants. (In my first eight years at Boston University, I had had 8 research grants, plus a training grant, on topics such as policy issues related to children [with law school students], maternal control techniques in the development of conscience, the influence of language on perception, and, with others, the effect of malnutrition on squirrel monkey development). Bill had provided a lot of support for my scholarly work, and he was quiet "ballast" for my exuberance and energy.

I poured more of my time and energy into teaching, helping students and others, and into Sam. I began lecturing on teaching large classes, getting into graduate school, finding jobs, financial sources for graduate students, senioritis--all sorts of speeches given at over 60 colleges and universities. I also spent more time on my earlier interests, writing poetry, taking art classes, studying the natural world, making music. And I did increasing service to the community (e.g., co-founded the Massachusetts Children's Lobby, and chaired the Boards of Boston Lyric Opera and the Dance Collective), and to my Boston University community (e.g., as President of the Boston University chapter at the MUP, chair of the Faculty Council, and convenor of tenured women).

I also developed severe asthma, which has hospitalized me 30 times in the last 15 years, including a 6-week period at the National Asthma Center In Denver. Despite the asthma, and the multiple problems that cortisone treatment caused, I have only missed one class due to illness in all these years, and have learned to live with a chronic illness, which has been, on occasion, life threatening.

On my recent sabbaticals, I have been studying issues of productive aging and teaching issues. My Bunting Fellowship was on friendship patterns in the elderly, and my most recent sabbatical, as a Visiting Fellow at Harvard's Psychology Department, was on the teacher as a moral model. In an earlier sabbatical, I taught T. Berry Brazelton's Pediatric Fellows about normal child development and worked with Eli Newberger's child abuse unit at Boston's Children's Hospital.

There are many "firsts" for me. I was the first woman on a tenure line in the Psychology Department at Boston University. I was the first female chair of our Faculty Council, the first female president of the BUC-AAUP, the first recipient of a Boston University award for distinguished service to the University (given by the faculty), the first recipient of the BU Psychology Department's Professor award (given by the students), the first female psychologist to win the E. Harris Harbison Award for Gifted Teachers from the Danforth Foundation, the first winner (along with B. F. Skinner) of the Distinguished Teaching of Psychology Award of APA/APF, and one of three females on the first NIMH review committee with women members. I could go on. And, I should add, that despite all this, I have always felt like an outsider, a chronic outsider (as Jane Loevinger said). I have discovered that we all feel this way a great deal of the time.

I have always tried to notice women and people of color in audiences, boards, committees, etc., and to increase their participation. At BU, I helped in the hiring of Clara Mayo the year after I came, and Frances Grossman the next year. Almost half of the faculty in the psychology department are women, and we have the largest group of tenured women in the university. And I noticed in my files, as I reviewed for

this talk, dozens of letters to journals, complaining of the lack of women on the masthead. (Parenthetically, editors usually wrote back for my suggestions for editorial board, and my response was that they should ask each of their board members to name a woman to replace himself. Consciousness sometimes works, but it needs to be their's that is awakened. I have used the same procedure for opening many boards of trustees and boards of directors.) An example of this sort of everyday watchfulness was my letter to the American Scientist in 1986 in response to their Centennial Issue. I noted the lack of female and minority authors and awardees, and the fact that this was nowhere mentioned in relation to the development of science. I ended "The next century of scientific research will...continue to be affected by our narrow selection of scientists, and therefore, of scientific problems and methods." The editor titled my letter "Women in Sigma Xi"!!

I also found, in my review for this presentation, that I had helped in the founding of APA's Division 6, Comparative and Physiological Psychology, was a founding mother of the New England Psychological Association, initiated a New England group of Society for Research in Child Development, was among the founders of the International Society of Infant Studies, and the Association of Women in Psychology (Policy Council, 1971-75), and was chair or on the committee of a great many APA groups. I always was a good middle person, getting things started, and not staying around.

Many surprises were in my files; I had forgotten that I continually tried to organize others and harness group energy for good. One example is my letter, sent in 1981, to all SRCD and Division 7 members to help the Association of Christian Student Leaders to try to alleviate the mounting pressures in Atlanta, Georgia, when black children were being murdered. It contains some concrete suggestions and ended, "You see, you can help."

I learned a great deal working on this paper. I discovered that I wanted to credit chance or other people for my career. Jill Kerr Conway rightly said that women rarely have a sense of agency. I now realize I was more agentic than I thought. Roger Brown didn't get me my professorship at Boston University. He suggested me because I'd been telling everyone I was looking for a job, because he knew and liked my work, and because I had the potential to do the work. I was the one who persisted and repeatedly called and kept the search active.

Women's careers are often discontinuous and varied. I now realize that, through the variation, I was usually working to help make the world a better place, and the focus has, in the main, been on developmental issues. It takes time and reflection to find the pattern. But, as I've often said to students: Think of yourself as a sun, with rays in all directions. You have many multiple interests and abilities. Instead of worrying about them, realize that they are all you, they are all connected to a central core. So my multiple interests, in family, teaching, developmental psychology in many areas, peace, opera, nature, dance, activism, etc., are all related and represent myself.

The power of the situation to mold or produce behavior is also evident in my life story. I believe that a great deal of what we are depends on the circumstances surrounding us. Certainly my desire to work in and with groups of people stems from the early feelings of warmth and worth in such circumstances.

I'm giving many talks these days on productive aging. I comment that I think we reach adulthood at about age 25, and that on life-span prediction charts, I'm likely to live to 95 (God willing). Thus I might have 70 adult years. Half of 70 is 35. If I add that to 25, at 60 I had lived half my adult life. What will I do with the other half? I'm not sure--my interests in development are broad. It is worthwhile for younger people to realize they, too, are likely to have long, and probably complicated, lives.

When we teach, we are models for the young. How are we as people? How do we behave to learners? Teaching is always, as Paulo Friere suggested, a political activity. Whatever we say and do, is fraught with moral meaning. And it is, therefore, an enormous responsibility.

We are the lucky few. I analogize these days to the time of the Warsaw Ghetto. I, and all of you here today, are fed, educated, sleep in a bed in a room, likely to awake alive tomorrow, while most of the world's peoples are in the ghetto without these things. How can we keep aware of the ghetto? What can we do to save the people, to open the ghetto gates to a world of education, and food and health, and safety, and laughter, and hope? If we, the lucky few, don't make this effort, who will? Rabbi Hillel was right, when he said: "If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?" (Pirke Avot 1:14)