
Commentary II

Humanity in public health

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In his very first response to a question in this interview, Sol Levine uses a phrase that – more than any other words I can think of – describes himself: “a sense of buoyancy...” Sol was, above all else, a bouyant man, in a sense that transcended mere optimism and expressed a continual sense of delight. In settings as diverse as a formal lecture, a seminar with graduate students, a discussion with other foundation executives, or a field trip through difficult terrain in Africa, he seemed delighted not only with the play of ideas but also with his sense of being connected with all the other participants, in a common enterprise. Sol was more than a sociologist; he was, in the deepest sense of the word, an intensely social human being.

I first met him some 40 years ago at the Harvard School of Public Health, early in my own professional career and early in my own efforts to find some common ground in epidemiologic, social science, and clinical medical approaches to the health of populations. He had already begun his work on stress and health and on the development of quality-of-life indicators in medical care. Looking back now, as he does in this interview, it seems unnecessarily limiting to describe him only as a medical sociologist. His work opened the way to what are now major themes in multidisciplinary research: the social determinants of health, the effects of inequality, and the human costs of conflict.

It would be a mistake, too, to paint a sentimental portrait of him as some sort of unvaryingly affable exponent of good

will. Sol could be mischievous; he could be angry – though mostly at ideas that he found inhumane, rarely at individuals, and never for long. As his interview suggests, he found great pleasure in drawing upon multiple sources, from multiple disciplines, to support some unifying theme.

That was his second greatest pleasure (aside from love of his family). In his interview, Sol speaks often of happiness. The most intensely happy moment I can recall with Sol occurred on an academic trip through Africa (exploring connections between health and economic development). With his long-time colleague Dr. Norman Scotch, we stopped enroute in Athens where, at dinner, a waiter inadvertently poured hot soup in my lap. Two weeks later, in the vast dining hall of a Victorian-era hotel in Uganda, a waiter poured water in my lap. Sol observed that I could not expect soup every time, and we began to laugh with the helpless, protracted intensity of the overly fatigued. Soon the diners at nearby tables began to laugh, simply because we were laughing; then the African waiters dropped all pretense of service and joined in exuberantly, and within minutes the whole assemblage – Africans, westerners, retired British colonial types, mercenaries – roared with mindless laughter. What did Sol see – and love – in this? An expression, in all our diversity, of our common humanity. That is, I think, precisely what he is describing in this interview, and what motivated all of his professional interests and contributions.

H. Jack Geiger