

# In Memoriam

## Bert Kaplan

The following obituary was submitted to Currents by the family of Bert Kaplan.

Bert Kaplan, professor emeritus of psychology at UCSC, died at his home today (Friday, July 21) of natural causes. He was 87. A member of UCSC's founding faculty, he lived in Santa Cruz since 1965 and influenced the intellectual development of the campus in its early years until his retirement in 1989.



Bert Kaplan

Born on New York's Lower East Side, Kaplan attended Brooklyn College, where he majored in psychology. At that time, the Psychology Department had a remarkable faculty that included Solomon Asch, Abraham Maslow, and other important figures in social, Gestalt, and humanistic psychology.

During World War II, Kaplan was stationed in Okinawa and treated soldiers afflicted with what was then called battle fatigue. The main method of treatment consisted of encouraging the soldiers to talk about their experience, and Kaplan remarked later that although psychologists now know much more about post-traumatic shock and other afflictions, for some reason the treatment seemed to work.

After serving in the Army, Kaplan was accepted into the graduate school at Harvard University's Department of Social Relations. In this interdisciplinary program that combined anthropology, sociology, and psychology, he studied with Clyde Kluckhohn, Henry Murray, and Talcott Parsons, and he did research in the study of personality, which was at the time one of the newest trends in the field.

Kaplan's own research into the cross-cultural study of personality raised the question of whether it made sense to think of personality independently of culture. His doctoral dissertation, "Personality Studies of Four Cultures," examined personality tests given to members of four different cultures in the Southwest, including the Navajo and the Hopi. His work brought him immediate prominence and success, and he was considered one of the most important of the postwar generation of social psychologists. He taught for 10 years at the University of Kansas and two years at Rice University.

In 1964, Newsweek magazine did an article on his research on mental illness among the Navajo that became a turning point in his career. The magazine gave the article the unfortunate title, "The Sick Indians," and its depictions offended some of the Navaho he had worked with.

The experience left him disillusioned, and his career began to take a different direction. Although he had published several successful books, including *Studying Personality Cross-Culturally* and *The Inner-World of Mental Illness: First-Person Accounts of What it was Like*, he basically stopped publishing. In the mid-1960s when he was approached by a major publisher to edit a book on the newly emerging subject of humanistic psychology, he turned it down.

But he did not stop learning. The new UC campus at Santa Cruz offered an opportunity to think about education differently, and along with the other faculty of Cowell College, Kaplan helped set the tone for an education that emphasized humanistic studies and an interdisciplinary approach to learning. He offered courses in psychology and the humanistic disciplines, psychology of religion, and the interpretation of personal documents. Students in his courses read Shakespeare, James Joyce, Plato, and St. Augustine and wrote journals. He once remarked that rather than trying to apply psychoanalysis to Shakespeare, as was popular at the time, we should realize that Shakespeare was himself the greatest psychologist and learn from him.

Kaplan pursued new things enthusiastically and found ways to incorporate them in his own approach to psychology. When he was 50, he took up tennis, and then fencing under UCSC's great fencing coach, Charles Selberg. He offered a course on the psychology of physical fitness. He explained that he was interested in psychology's "other principle." The dominant theory in psychology remains the pleasure principle--people seek pleasure and avoid pain. Kaplan was interested in why we desire things that do not in fact bring pleasure. The pursuit of this question led him to study Plato's discussions of desire and the complex psychology of physical fitness.

While at UCSC, Kaplan joined faculty members Norman O. Brown, Page Smith, Albert Hofstadter, Maurice Natanson, and others in founding a new type of graduate program, the history of consciousness program. Although the name of the program was considered by some to represent UCSC's "far-out" approach to education, the program was intended to bring together the humanities and social sciences in more sensible ways than did conventional disciplines. He once remarked that the best thing about UCSC was that it was not on the make. He was less interested in the trappings of academic reputation and hierarchy, and helped create a teaching and learning environment that tried to do things right. He represented UCSC at its best.

He is survived by his wife, Hermia, and daughter, Emily, both of Santa Cruz; his son, Josh, in Granger, Indiana; his sister Sheila Wolfsohn in Florida; and his granddaughter, Hannah, in Minneapolis. At his request, no services are planned. Contributions in his memory may be directed to the Hospice Caring Project of Santa Cruz County, 940 Disc Drive, Scotts Valley, CA; 95066.

## **In Memoriam**

August 28, 2006

A memorial service for psychology professor emeritus Bert Kaplan, who died July 21, will be take place at 2 p.m. on Saturday, September 9, at the Cowell College provost's house. It will feature remembrances by his family, colleagues, and students, and is open to the public.

Kaplan was a member of UCSC's founding faculty and taught from the university's first year in 1965 until his retirement in 1989.

Kaplan's wife, Hermia, is putting together a memory book about Bert Kaplan to share at the service. Those wishing to contribute recollections are encouraged to send them to the Kaplan Family, 777 Chestnut Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95060.

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son, Josh Kaplan.