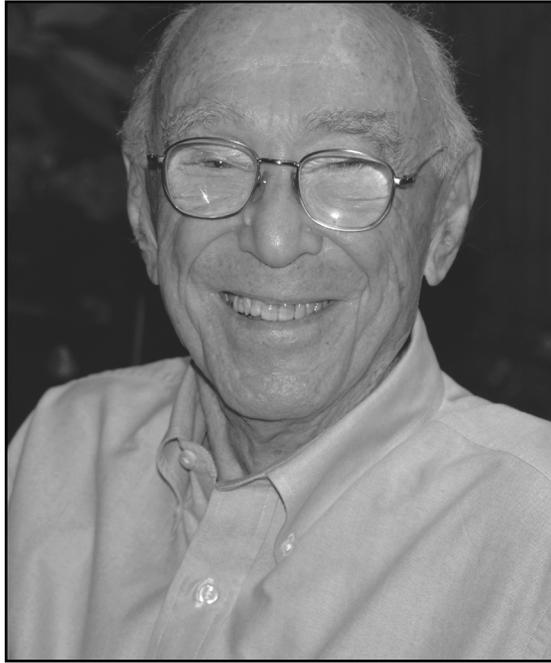

JEROME SEYMOUR BRUNER



COURTESY OF RANDALL FOX

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As a student of narrative, Jerome (Jerry) Seymour Bruner knew well that one can tell many stories about an individual person, event, and life. Indeed, at the start of his autobiography, Jerry Bruner wrote, “I can find little in [my childhood] that would lead anybody to predict that I would become an intellectual or an academic, even less a psychologist.”

And yet, it is appropriate—if not essential—to begin this memoir with the fact that Jerry Bruner was born blind. Only at age 2, after two successful cataract operations (Jerry spoke of “good luck and progress in ophthalmology”) could Jerry see. For the rest of his lengthy and event-filled life, he wore memorably thick corrective lenses. And when he was not peering directly at you—be you an audience of one or of one thousand—he would grasp his glasses firmly in his palm and punctuate his fluent speech with dramatic gestures.

As a younger child of an affluent Jewish family living in the suburbs of New York City, Jerry was active, playful, and fun-loving—not particularly intellectual or scholarly. His sister Alice wondered why he was always asking questions; Jerry later quipped that he was “trying out hypotheses.”

Freud said that the death of a father is the most important event in a man’s life. Whether or not cognizant of this psychoanalytic pronouncement, Bruner seldom referred to his mother; he devoted much more space in his autobiography and much more time in conversation to commemorating his father: “Everything changed, collapsed, after my father died when I was twelve, or so it seemed to me.” And indeed, as he passed through adolescence and into early adulthood, Bruner became a much more serious student, a budding scholar, a wide-ranging intellectual. He negotiated undergraduate life at Duke University rapidly, became a doctoral student in psychology at Harvard University, and received his Ph.D. in 1941, just before the outbreak of World War II in the United States. I believe that the early death of his father, a decade after the miraculous eye surgery, may have conferred on Bruner ambition, drive, and even a sense of destiny that he otherwise might have lacked.

Over the succeeding seven decades, Bruner traversed an intellectual landscape as wide as that of anyone in our time. Indeed, while other estimable scholars were writing articles or books in one field or subfield, Bruner swept across departments, even divisions, of entire universities and, extending beyond scholarship, devoted considerable energy to areas of practice as well. Fortunately, in addition to his own lively and trenchant autobiography, several collections of Bruner’s writings, as well as a number of biographies and festschrifts, document this characterization.

When Bruner entered the field of psychology in the late 1930s, it was dominated by the study of sensation (the gateway to perception) and behaviorism (an attempt to explain all actions of human beings and other animals on the basis of reward and punishment). While he paid his dues in these two traditions, Bruner was never comfortable with a reductionist stance toward human thought and behavior. Involved in the war effort, his early publications—in the areas of personality and social psychology—were focused on how opinions were formed and how they might be changed, through propaganda, persuasion, and argument. He burst into the headlines, both within psychology and in the popular press, with clever experimental studies carried out in the mid-1940s—studies that were soon dubbed “the new look in perception.”

According to this new look, human beings did not simply perceive and then, in an objective manner, report what they were seeing. Rather, perception (whether by sight or another sensory organ) was more appropriately and accurately described as a process of hypothesis formation and subsequent confirmation or disconfirmation. Put aphoristically, we don't know what we see, we see what we know. Dramatically, Bruner and colleagues showed that coins look bigger to impoverished children than to children from affluent families; that it took longer to make sense of anomalous arrays (like a black heart in a deck of cards) than predictable ones; that our guesses about what we perceive are strongly influenced by what we saw before and how likely the alternatives are.

Bruner's introduction of the “new look” forecast the course that he would follow for the rest of his career. Along with like-minded colleagues, he would create or sense a possible new direction for study; carry out a few pivotal studies; confer a label or phrase on what he had done; and then move on to another, perhaps entirely unpredictable, next challenge, next goal, next epistemological or practical world to conquer. For many, including myself, this was an admirable way to proceed; but for many others, this arc signaled an impatience, an unwillingness to dig deeper, a failure to deal with inconsistencies, or complexities. As Jerry himself confessed, drawing on a well-known personological distinction, he was definitely a “fox” who knew many little things, rather than a “hedgehog” who knew one big thing.

One can think of Jerry's scholarly career as having three broad themes, each spanning his entire life, but each occupying the forefront for roughly two to three decades. For the first period of scholarship—the 1940s through mid-1960s—Jerry was primarily an experimental psychologist. Following his aforementioned work in social psychology and perceptual psychology, Jerry embarked on the track for which he is

best known—opening up the field of cognitive psychology (which is now often collapsed with cognitive science).

Encouraged and influenced by physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the mentor to whom he most often and most admiringly referred, Jerry plunged directly into the mind—the territory explicitly proscribed by behaviorists and postponed indefinitely by the sensationalists. In their important work, *A Study of Thinking*, Bruner and colleagues Jacqueline Goodnow and George Austin described how humans go about solving problems—the hypotheses they generate, the solutions they consider, and the syntheses that they affect. To be sure, ordinary observers and scholars in other areas (e.g., game theorists, philosophers) had long assumed that this was how the human mind operated: but now the field was opened up to experimentalists of all stripes. And shortly thereafter, with his close Harvard colleague George A. Miller, Bruner launched “A Center for Cognitive Studies” in which the full range of scholarly disciplines (from philosophy and linguistics to anthropology and computer science) was brought to bear on how human beings use their minds to the fullest. Nearly every major contemporary actual or aspiring cognitivist passed through the Center, and it was also the chief breeding ground for future leaders of cognitive science.

At the Center, Bruner began his last sustained work in experimental psychology—an examination of the development of cognitive capacities in young children. Bruner proposed an influential sequence of “modes of mental representation” in early childhood—from enactive (action) through iconic (perceptual) to symbolic (arbitrary or conventional) ways of representing the world. He also studied the role of nurturing adults and of the broader cultural milieu in the growth of children’s language. Never one to duck an intellectual skirmish, Bruner’s views on representation signaled a battle with the analyses put forth by the noted Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (also a mentor of sorts), and his view of language were an open challenge to the relatively acultural and apsychological views on language put forth by Bruner’s sometime colleague Noam Chomsky. Also, and prophetically, Bruner expressed his displeasure with the “mainstream of psychology” in a blistering attack published in London’s *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS). Perhaps without quite realizing it, Bruner was in effect relinquishing his membership card in the many psychological societies in which he had once played a leading (and sometimes presidential) role.

In September 1959, at the behest of the National Science Foundation and the National Academy of Science (and in the wake of the unanticipated successful launch by the Soviet Union of the satellite Sputnik), Bruner convened a conference on education. Held in Woods

Hole, Massachusetts, the meeting brought together an outstanding array of scholars and practitioners encompassing a wide swathe of education. Bruner led the conference masterfully and then, the following year, published a summary of the proceedings titled *The Process of Education*. Sharply critical of mainstream approaches to learning (though expressed in a softer “convening voice”), Bruner put forth a far more progressive view of education (young people can and should be exposed to cutting-edge ideas across the disciplinary terrain) and a far more constructive (technically “constructivist”) view of human cognition (children can ask the right questions, put forth appropriate hypotheses, and continually revisit issues and concepts at ever-higher levels of sophistication). The slim book also contained the single sentence for which Bruner became best known (and which was most often a subject of debate): “We begin with the hypothesis that any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.”

The unexpected success of this volume (it was translated into dozens of languages and was for many years the best-selling book issued by the staid Harvard University Press) probably helped propel Jerry into a much more active and far more public involvement in education. And indeed in the 1960s he served on numerous panels and commissions and contributed substantively to the creation of Head Start, an unprecedented effort to level the playing field for young American children; also, unlike his professorial colleagues, he became actively involved in school reform. Bruner inspired and directed the creation of a powerful social studies curriculum for middle childhood called “Man: A Course of Study.” In an unprecedented way, American schoolchildren were exposed to cutting-edge ideas in linguistics, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and geography; 10-year-olds viewed films and grappled directly with controversial practices and belief systems from all over the world. The curriculum addressed three memorable questions: What is uniquely human about human beings? How did they get that way? How can they be made more so?

I had a personal connection to “Man: A Course of Study.” As a 21-year-old college graduate working in the Underwood School in Newton, Massachusetts, I joined an instructional research team, which observed classes each day and prepared critiques that were drawn on the next day. This baptism opened me up to many contemporary intellectual currents and introduced me to many outstanding scholars and practitioners; equally I was inspired by Bruner’s magnetic style of leading: he catalyzed a group of individuals of different ages, backgrounds, and scholarly interests to fashion a brilliant curricular achievement. My three older children were fortunate enough to have

this curriculum when they attended school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The architects and users of the curriculum were deeply saddened when the U.S. Congress, in its infinite wisdom, declared that the curriculum was insufficiently patriotic and cut off its funding. As Bruner lamented, “We never solved the Widener [Library] to Wichita problem.” The dramatic decade in Bruner-inspired American educational reform is well described in Peter Dow’s *Schoolhouse Politics*.

I believe that, certainly in the United States and perhaps beyond, Jerome Bruner is the most important thinker and writer about education in our time—equal in importance to John Dewey in an earlier epoch. Indeed, his influence may be greater than Dewey’s, because Bruner wrote far more vividly and he entered directly into the classroom—politics and all!—in a way that Dewey never did. At present, neither Dewey nor Bruner are much discussed among political figures involved in education. But we will only have truly effective education in the United States, and the rest of the world, if we attend carefully to, and attempt to implement, the wisdom contained in the writings and practices put forth by these two scholarly giants.

The 1970s marked a sharp break in Bruner’s life. He moved to Oxford—perhaps the only professor ever to sail across the ocean to take up his new position—to become the Watts Professor of Psychology; he left the battlefields of American education; and with his epochal piece in the *TLS*, he in effect abandoned traditional psychological study. When in 1980 he returned to the United States (again as a skipper), he soon moved to New York and embarked on new intellectual journeys.

Jerry Bruner had long been interested in the arts and humanities. He had dabbled in the arts himself, had many friends who were artists, and had written a book that was influential outside of psychological circles, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand*. That 1962 collection ranged across the arts and included discussions of creativity, myth, discovery, identity, and fate; there was far more mention of John Dewey and Sigmund Freud than of contributors to *Psychological Review*. Still, it was probably a surprise to Bruner, and certainly to his many friends and followers, that he became the head of the New York Institute for the Humanities. And in the period that followed, he hosted, hobnobbed, and debated with persons who were much more associated with C. P. Snow’s “second culture” than with membership in the National Academy of Sciences or the American Psychological Association.

Embodying the worlds within which he was now traveling, Bruner issued two books that further expanded the purview of psychology and deepened the chasm between him and his more straight-laced colleagues. In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* and *Acts of Meaning*,

Bruner described human beings as capable of two quite different kinds of discourse—one more logical and rational, the other more narrative, discursive, and at times poetic. Bruner's sympathies were clearly drifting toward this imaginative, "left hand" way of knowing. Indeed Bruner explicitly rejected the notion that mental processes could be adequately explained by individual psychology (let alone by study of the brain); to grasp the human mind in its complexity, one had to understand the surrounding culture, the influence of others, relevant historical and contextual factors, the inevitable conversational and dialogue nature of experience. I once asked Bruner for whom he wrote, and, after pausing a moment, he said "For Cliff Geertz." This reference to a humanistically oriented anthropologist—famed for his depiction of "deep play"—captured the intellectual wandering that Bruner had undertaken in the decades since the co-founding of the Center for Cognitive Studies.

Bruner's final years were rich in many unexpected ways. He became a University Professor at New York University and—until age 97(!)—taught courses on "Culture and the Law," "Vengeance," "Lawyering Theory," and "Narrative and the Law." A steady stream of young lawyers, as well as students from a wide range of backgrounds, disciplines, and even New York area campuses, were exposed to the catholic tastes of this broad thinker, now a New Yorker living in Greenwich Village (living near Washington Square) and far more comfortable with his Jewish roots. With Anthony Amsterdam, he published a pathbreaking volume, *Minding the Law*, wherein the authors illustrated how cognitive, linguistic, and cultural processes affect the imposition and interpretation of legal procedures. In 1995, Bruner made his first trip to Reggio Emilia, a small city in northern Italy known for its remarkable schools for young children. Bruner not only became a careful student—in effect, a visiting teacher—at these schools. He also formed personal and professional friendships; spent a month there each summer and eventually was named an Honorary Citizen of the community; and fell in love with Eleanor Fox, a colleague at the Law School, who became his indispensable partner and friend for the last decade of his life.

In addition to having had a remarkable career, Bruner was also a remarkable person. He moved easily and comfortably in an amazingly wide circle of friends—the scientists at the Institute of Advanced Study; the political circle around Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson; the café society of French intellectuals that included Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir; teachers and students at the Underwood School in Newton, Massachusetts; the young children and the dedicated pedagogists, *atelieristas*, and lunchtime chefs at Reggio

Emilia. He belonged to a daunting variety of associations where he was almost always surrounded by those who wanted to hear him or converse with him. (He once quipped that in Cambridge, Massachusetts “talking is akin to breathing.”) He influenced scores of students over many years to assimilate his broad conception of psychology, of education—indeed of knowledge—and draw on it in their own work and their own lives.

Additionally, as a fluent and trenchant writer and a charismatic speaker and commentator, Bruner influenced countless readers—sometimes profoundly. In the late 1980s I found myself at a conference in Paris with educational scholars from all over the world, almost none of whom I knew. A group of perhaps a dozen of us went out to dinner and someone asked, “How did you get interested in education?” Astonishingly, half of the persons seated at the table said that a major influence had been their reading of *The Process of Education*.

At his 100th birthday celebration, surrounded by his family and a few close friends, Jerry spoke informally and then, upon request, he recited some verses from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” That poem contains the verse, “I grow old . . . I grow old . . .” Amazingly, Jerry Bruner never grew old. As I had written in another tribute, a decade before, “at ninety, he is still the youngest person in the class.” No one knows the secret of living vibrantly to a venerable age, but one part of Jerry Bruner’s secret is clear: as all who knew him well would attest, he “always looked ahead.”

Jerome Bruner belonged to many honorary societies and received scores of awards and honorary degrees. He died in New York City on June 5, 2016. His first two wives Katherine Frost and Blanche Marshall, from whom he was divorced, predeceased him, as did his third wife, Carol Feldman. He is survived by his children, Whitley Bruner and Jane Bruner Mullane, three grandchildren, and his partner Eleanor Fox.

Elected 1982

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