Dear Lev

Letters of Appreciation and Inquiry

Collected by Lois Holzman

East Side Institute, New York, NY USA

The letters to Vygotsky you are about to read were written at the end of a 4-week seminar I led in the spring of 2024, called "The Problem of the Environment: Vygotsky's Relevance to our World" sponsored by the East Side Institute. Study materials included some of Vygotsky's writings (including his "The Problem of the Environment," published in 1934), selected chapters of the 2020 volume, *Revisiting Vygotsky for Social Change* (edited by Adolfo Tanzi Neto, Fernanda Liberali and Manolis Dafermos), and an article or two of mine.

The 24 members of the seminar were a diverse group. Some knew Vygotsky well, others not at all. They were researchers, scholars, community organizers and activists, teachers and psychologists, all passionate about social change. Most were from all over the US, with others coming from Brazil, India and Lebanon. We had been having great conversations mostly in our live Zoom meetings, but also in the seminar's Google Group and Jamboard.

For the last class, I planned to share one my favorite quotes from Vygotsky about revolution and history and searched for it in my computer documents. What came up at the top of the search list was a short piece I had written way back in 2012 for a book, *We Saved the Best for You: Letters of Hope, Imagination and Wisdom for 21st Century Educators* (edited by Trisha M. Kress and Robert Lake). I wrote my little essay as a letter from Vygotsky. That gave me the idea to ask the class to write letters—not from Lev, but to him.

I gave them 10 minutes to write. Then we read all the letters out loud.

I loved the letters. We loved them. We loved the exercise. We want you to try it and love it. too Share with students and invite them to write their own letters to Lev. Email them to me (lholzman@eaastsideindtitute.org). I'll add them to this document and send it back to you for you to share and pass along to colleague to do the same.

We want our words (and how we got there) to inspire you to make this pamphlet a living document. *Let's grow it and send across the planet!*

If you want to read my letter from Vygotsky, it's at the end.

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Dear Lev

Dear Lev:

I am only recently getting to know you. You have many ideas that I have so far discovered and others that I have yet to visit, in time.

You talk a lot about ZPDs and their positive impacts. However, I wonder...
do you only look at ZPDs in a positive sense (in the sense of positive development) or could there be negative ZPDs (or ZPDs that lead to negative development)? Or is there a different term that you use for negative development? What are your thoughts on prisons for example? Are they ZPDs too?

More recently, in our online world, is Chat GPT for example a ZPD? Can humans be in a ZPD with non-human AI chatbots? Or is learning only a human activity? Or perhaps you consider development only to be for humans... but what about machine learning which leads us to see development in their capacities and capabilities?

I wish you could help us make sense of the world we currently live in. I wish your writings weren't banned or burned. Only YOU know what wealth of knowledge was there and lost.

Christelle, Byblos, Lebanon

#1
Dear Lev,
Is human experience more important than science? This wasn't a question for you. You integrated them along the lines of modern quantum theory, in which the viewpoint of the observer changes everything. You anticipated modern holographic theory by, if I remember correctly, talking about the universe being present in a drop of water, or something similar. The experience and perception of an individual, for me, will always be more significant than a composite finding among randomly assembled "subjects," usually according to a preconceived agenda.

#2
Dear Lev,
Perhaps you knew that true history IS revolution. We have been handed versions of the past based on lies and false constructions, including the elimination of any knowledge about the earlier cultures whose magnificent structures were declared to be "modern" and then destroyed. The Tartaria discussion even goes way beyond this to the alleged juxtaposition of entire historical periods. To study true history is to be a revolutionary.

NS, Pennsylvania, USA

Dear Vygotsky,
You have already elucidated how capitalism shapes the social, historical, and cultural lives of people in your work on the alteration of social man. You developed tools for society to overcome these contradictions, such as social injustices of all kinds.

However, it seems that the world hasn't fully understood your ideas—myself included. Yet, I firmly believe that through collective tools and play, we can create space for social change.

At this point in my life, I want to live fully and, alongside others, to build a just world. I aim to navigate the contradictions and dramatic life events, viewing them as essential components of the dialectic process of development.

Sincerely, Vivi, Brazil

Thank you very much for all your work, which is significant for the world you live in, regardless of the ground you walk on. It is powerful and transformative. I can't imagine if you had lived longer how many contributions and provocations you would have caused us.
Reading it allows my scientific thinking to go out into the realm of fantasy, and I can't think about things in a realistic way until the end.

LP, Brazil

Hello dear Vigotski,

Dear Lev,
Well, we're still talking about you… and your ideas… and there is a lady in Montauk, New York, who is evidently writing letters on your behalf (the one I heard was pretty good). That is kind of cool…. after the crush of Stalin's fist. And we sure as hell are going to need to build some new tools (and results) to create our way out of this mess (circa 2024). Thank you for your hand on our shoulder.

Warm regards, Chris, USA

Dear Lev,

I owe you a debt of gratitude for extending a way of being in the world that is social-historical and creative beyond my early childhood. I relish being and becoming; learning and developing; knowledge and not knowing; philosophy and seeing.

Coming to find my brain is not my mind but changes with my mind as the neurons are stimulated to fire anew.

Take comfort in your influence upon the world in 2024.

Caren, New York City, USA

Dear Lev,

First of all, thank you for having the courage, vision and imagination to join with others to what I'm sure seemed to many as unimaginable – to create a new society/culture that at once transcended what was even as it was shaped by all that had come before.

As I look out at our world in 2024, I am thinking about the quote that appears in the reading Lois Holzman gave us (you and she have a long history together and we have benefitted) – that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is the end of capitalism. Which raises for me what it means to imagine – is it possible? Does it get us from here to there? What are the conditions necessary for imagination to exist? Social-cultural-historical imagination and does it necessarily move us forward – or is forward the only way to go?

This is apropos of nothing, but I'm always drawn in by the beauty and calmness of the pictures I've seen of you – it is an accepting face, not so much the face of an expert consumed with the need for others to adore/follow him/her. And that's what I yearn for – environments in which ignorance is a welcome as expertise because in ignorance, there can be the seeds of possibility – of sending us in new directions, eager for the journey, less so by the destination.

Mary, Brooklyn, New York, USA

Dear Lev,

Can you spell for us socio-cultural-historical in one word? Does it need to be? Can we understand hyphens without discerning each notion as though they have no relation to the rest. Vygotsky - monism with many views. I am glad we are alive and well past 37 to continue the questions and future of psychology you posed. Little did you know there will be people from all over the world who have found your lost manuscripts and are using it to transform our understand of human life, humor, poetry, emotional development, memory loss, social transformation and more. Thanks.

Murray, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Dear Vygotsky,

I ask you now,
When was the last time…
Did you do something for the first time?
Here's a story of mine
I will write it in form of rhyme.

I played at my first recital, you see,
In a room full of children, all filled with glee.
They played what they learned,
With cheer and joy

Their timid little beings
In a room full of support
In each note they played
I got lost
past - future - present

Among the kids, I felt so new,
A first-time feeling, fresh and true.
Their laughter, their spirit, their bravery
Filled the room with energy
It made my heart shine
Full of possibility

So Vygotsky, I wonder….
When was the last time you possibly did something for the first time
For in that room, with young hearts so bold,
I saw the magic of unknowability
Through all the stories
Once untold.

Danna, San Diego, California & Brazil

Dear Lev:

Part 1

May I call you Lev?

As we are speaking now out of time - and by that I mean, disconnected from time, not at the end of either yours or mine - I'd like to ask your thoughts related to the ZPD in a timeless, spaceless continuum rather than a linear unfolding.

I like to think that human "being" brings us into such a timeless, spaceless place of joining with an infinite number of perspectives, from any place or time. Being lifted out of our quotidian perspective to something like a Divine Comedy.

Or, what we might call "Lev-ity."

How do you feel about that?

Part 2

Apropos of whether the ZPD can only be a forward motion, this review from the New York Times today, of a book by a hermit:

So what has he learned, in a lifetime alone? His opinions about his life decisions remain firm: "I've spent the majority of my life living outside the conventions of mainstream society, and I'll tell you what I think is weird, and it ain't the hermit. It's how entire generations of people have been conned into believing that there is only one way to live, and that's on-grid, in deepening debt, working on products you'll probably never use, to line the pockets of people you'll never meet, just so you might be able to get enough money together to buy a load of crap you don't need, or, if you're lucky, have a holiday that takes you to a place, like where I live, for a week of the happiness I feel every day."

Kermit, Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA

Dear Dr. Vygotsky,

You have become my boyfriend, my partner, my teacher. You sit with me in classrooms, on the ground in online (!!! what???) communities. You are with me each day with my grandchildren - 6 month-old twins and 6 year-old - girls, their parents, grandparents – changing the lives of their community.

I met two revolutionaries about 40 years ago. That's where I met you. Lois Holzman and Fred Newman.

Humans seem to be continuously trying to take over other humans. How is our way out?

You have paved the way for our way out: Holzman/Newman/Vygotsky
Lois Holzman shared this: It's in the creating of the environment… the environment which also creates the development that is the transformation of the very culture that is holding us back from doing that.

Let's dance with this...

Gwen, Brooklyn, New York, USA

Hi Lev,

I'm in a wonderful study group that is being led by one of your closest friends, Lois Holzman. She's been telling us about the passionate love affair that she has had with you for over 40 years. How lucky you both are to have each other.

I was in a conversation the other day with a group of people, at an East Side Institute event—some of whom have known each other for a long time, some who had just met the ESI. One lovely woman from Allentown, PA said that she had found "her people." I was touched by her comment, feeling like I understood what she was saying. But I also thought about you and felt concern.

This may feel like a leap—but what is a socio-cultural-historical understanding of saying such a thing ("her people")? How did we get to a place where we have "our people", and that doesn't include all people? It makes me very sad.

You began such an important search for a methodology that could support a new human being/as revolutionary. We're all still working on that. We had a good conversation/ZPD that played with it. No one was right, or wrong. We found a way to perform a loving conversation together.

I wish I had more time to write more but the time for our exercise is up.

Love, Cathy, Setauket, New York, USA

Dear Lev:

We desperately need human, developmental voices to PUSH BACK on the rush to develop Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models. The glorification of the individual has reached an insane level. No one in AI even mentions the word SOCIAL. Both corporate and government sponsored research have re-cast the human and call this "new human" *intelligent*. They made AI models in the image of a human speaker. Modern science has produced an algorithmic behemoth with a Scarlet Johannsen voice.

Where do we humans go to develop side-by-side WITH our machines? How do we build with our machine HELPERS? How do we use our tool-and-result algorithmic sidekicks to help us develop.
Oh Lev! Algorithms are dressed up in WORDS. AI's words look like language but hang like CLOTHES OFF A RACK—maybe no longer a thinking/speaking unity.

We now talk back to machines. What is talking? Where is thinking/speaking? Good grief: how can language activity stay human?????

Hyelp! Hyelp! Hyelp!

Jan W., Manhattan, New York, USA

Dear Lev,

Congratulations.

From everything I've heard and experienced in the International Class and Lois' other classes about you, I think you're doing quite well. I've followed the philosophical direction of Dr. Fred Newman and Dr. Lois Holzman for decades and feel like I've gotten to know you recently more intimately. That you had to sneak your manuscripts out of the hospital through your family when Stalin was cracking down was hard to hear. Thank you for your passion. "Tool-and-result" has become a theme song for me along with "growing/not knowing."

I hope you experienced creating your philosophical works with the enthusiasm of play.

There's still questions but now I see them as life-long explorations and I'm looking forward to it. I think you would say that's good.

Did you play much as a child?

Yours truly, Alice, New York, New York, USA

Dear Vigotski,

It's incredible how you bring together people so far apart, across geographies, but so united by the desire for a new society and new forms of human interaction.

It is even more incredible to know that some of these approaches occur on Sundays.

Some argue that the relevance and timeliness of your ideas is due to the constant crisis of capitalism, which creates more and more spaces that dehumanize and undermine the potential for human development.

We are still trying to understand your very dialectical mind, in a polarized world, scientifically and socially.

I hope we can understand and practice before the world ends.

There is resistance and hope. Your words teach us a little in this direction.

AP, Brasil USP

On Behalf of Vygotsky

Lois Holzman

In *We Saved the Best for You: Letters of Hope, Imagination and Wisdom for 21st Century Educators*
Eds. Trisha M. Kress & Robert Lake, 2012.

I don't remember exactly when I made the following statement, which was repeated in print long after my death:

> To the naive mind, revolution and history seem incompatible. It believes that historical development continues as long as it follows a straight line. When a change comes, a break in the historical fabric, a leap--then this naive mind sees only catastrophe, a fall, a rupture; for the naive mind history ends until back again straight and narrow. The scientific mind, on the contrary, views revolution as the locomotive of history forging ahead at full speed; it regards the revolutionary epoch as a tangible, living embodiment of history. A revolution solves only those tasks which have been raised by history; this proposition holds true equally for revolution in general and for aspects of social and cultural life. (Quoted in Levitin, 1982, inside front cover)

During my short life of 38 years, the locomotive of history was traveling at full speed. The Bolsheviks seized power in 1917 and there was so much to do to support the Revolution and to transform the culture, support people to develop and learn, and create a truly Marxist psychology. Although I didn't know how to do it (it wasn't knowable; it was only creatable) I

knew it would require a new conception of science, of method, and of human beings. I did what I could, with my dedicated colleagues. And then I died.

Looking at where we've come in 2012, I see how naïve I was. Yes, I was aware, in the last decade of my life, how politics and ideology contaminated science and education in my country. But I never dreamed that in capitalist America schooling would become utterly and completely politicized. That creating new understandings and new kinds of practices of learning and development—some of them done in my name—would have so little impact on how schools function.

It seems I was correct about revolution solving those tasks raised by history. But I was mistaken in putting my faith in science. I didn't foresee what science would become—a religious worshipping of the ahistorical and acultural particular. I applaud those of you who affirm the philosophical and political power of the ontological socialness of human beings. Who insist that the creativity and joy of the learning-development dialectical unity of early childhood is a human right at any and all ages. And who recognize that this historical task cannot be solved by science "alone," because it is a cultural and political task. I wish you the best.

Most sincerely,

Lev