

Current Comments®

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In Appreciation of Vasily Vasilyevich Nalimov: Angela Thompson's Profile of a Remarkable Scholar and Courageous Individual

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It has been more than 10 years since we've devoted a *Current Contents*® (CC®) essay to Vasily Vasilyevich Nalimov, the widely respected Russian polymath and scholar.¹ When I met him at the first Moscow Book Fair in 1977, I knew of his reputation in statistics and information science. And after reading the unpublished manuscripts he gave me, I was impressed by the breadth and creativity of his insights on the organization and communication of knowledge. ISI Press®² brought his works wider recognition in the West by publishing a series of books whose titles reflected Nalimov's unique psychological, even mythological, perspective on scholarship—*In the Labyrinths of Language*,³ *Faces of Science*,⁴ and *Realms of the Unconscious: The Enchanted Frontier*.⁵ They have since been acquired by STS Press, University Park, Pennsylvania.

But while I paid tribute to Nalimov in 1982,¹ when the former Soviet Union still prevailed, it was possible only to honor Nalimov's intellectual stature, not his personal courage. In our many conversations, I learned of his family's painful history of imprisonment and exile. For example, his father, Vasily Petrovich, was a victim of Stalin's political persecutions and died in prison in 1939. Nalimov himself was also condemned and spent 18 years in prison camps and internal exile. These tragic personal experiences make Nalimov's scholarly achievements all the more remarkable. But it would have been imprudent, to say the least, even to mention all this at the time without possibly risking further retribution against Nalimov.

Fortunately, times have changed. Nalimov's saga can now be openly told—and indeed ought to be—to gain a fuller appreciation of his life's work. A recent article in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* by Angela M. Thompson, the Bigelow Foundation, Las Vegas, Nevada, represents an excellent start in writing the more complete story of his life.⁶ An abridged version of her paper is reprinted below.

Thompson succeeds in painting a poignant and touching portrait of Nalimov as a person and scholar. Based on interviews in Princeton and Moscow with Nalimov and his wife, Zhanna Drogalina, she adds valuable details on his personal and family history. In addition, she provides an excellent summary of his main philosophical points using illustrative quotes from his books. These have been discussed previously in CC^{1,2}, so the abridged reprint below focuses on the biographical portions of her article.

As Thompson notes, although Nalimov is still intellectually active, at the age of 82 and surviving under desperate economic conditions in the new Russia, he is not in good health. I join his many friends around the world in hoping that his spirit and courage remain strong so that we may continue to be enlightened by this extraordinary scholar—and inspired by such a remarkable individual.

My thanks to Al Welljams-Dorof for his help in the preparation of this essay.

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VASILY VASILYEVICH NALIMOV: Russian Visionary



ANGELA M. THOMPSON was born and educated in England. She holds degrees in psychology from the University of Wales in Cardiff and Manchester University and is currently studying toward her Ph.D. in psychology at Saybrook Institute. Her professional training and research experience have been in the fields of nursing and social work, developmental and physiological psychology, and human consciousness research. She recently relocated from Princeton University's Engineering Anomalies Research Laboratory to work in Las Vegas, Nevada, where she has taken up the position of research coordinator with the Bigelow Foundation. One of the objectives of the Bigelow Foundation is to facilitate the study and understanding of anomalous areas of human experience and alternative approaches to health care. Her special interests cover cognitive development in deprived

children, patterns in human-information processing, the aetiology and development of laterality, the "self as catalyst," international liaison, and contemporary women's spirituality.

Summary

This article introduces Vasily Nalimov, humanist, philosopher, and visionary, and Zhanna Drogalina Nalimov, co-worker and researcher, as individuals whose concepts regarding human consciousness are both provocative and exciting. Following his years in Soviet labor camps and labeled "an enemy of the people," Nalimov found that his ideas were better received in the West than in his own country. The author met the Nalimovs in 1991 when they visited Princeton University, and she was impressed not only by their vast knowledge and experience in the field of human consciousness research but also by the spiritual bond that exists between them. Later that year, she was honored to be invited to interview Nalimov in their Moscow home: that interview, plus Vasily's prodigious writings, showed her a man who sees far beyond his own time. Nalimov's concepts of meaning and consciousness, which will probably not be fully realized until well into the next century, encompass topics as varied as language, mathematics, and philosophy.

There is a Russian saying that, to be able to write, a person must have suffered. Vasily Vasilyevich Nalimov is such a person. His life story is one of high intensity and drama; he was interned for many years in Soviet labor camps, and he is an outstanding writer. Although the majority of his philosophical

and mathematical works are as yet fully understood by only a few, they contain a profundity and breadth that may be processed well into the 21st century.

A review by Professor Rustum Roy (1989) of the Materials Research Laboratory, Pennsylvania State University, of

seeking to convert the mind. In the tradition of the early natural philosophers and without dogmatism, he asks new questions, questions that are provocative and hence productive of debate and perhaps a little wisdom. (p. xii)

Nalimov's work was initially published by ISI Press® (Institute for Scientific Information®, 3501 Market Street, University City Science Center, Philadelphia, PA 19104) through his friend and benefactor Eugene Garfield. However, when ISI Press was about to dispose of their stock, an admirer of Nalimov's, Rustom Roy, felt so strongly that the works should be preserved that he bought up all of Nalimov's books and offered them under the publication name of STS Press (102 M.R.L., University Park, PA 16802). Nalimov's (1989a) recent work, *Spontaneity of Consciousness*, is to be published through the sponsorship of Roy and STS Press.

GENERATIONS

In the summer prior to the failed 1991 coup, sitting in his small book- and pic-

where he gained a medical degree, and then returned to his village, where he combined his skills as a healer in both modern and folk medicine. He worked as a "Feld doktor" (field doctor) to further support his studies to become an anthropologist and ethnographer. He returned to Moscow, and during his later studies at the university, he met and married Nalimov's mother, Nadezhda Ivanovna, despite initial opposition from her family.

Nadezhda Ivanovna was among the first group of women to graduate as physicians in Russia. At Nalimov's flat, I had the privilege of being shown the family album. Here were faded, sepia photographs of young Vasily looking intense and determined, the same look worn by his mother when she was photographed in her professional role as a physician. Here, too, are Nadezhda's contemporaries, bright young women in their 20s and 30s graduating as doctors and surgeons, women achieving equal status with their male counterparts. During World War I Nadezhda worked as a surgeon treating wounded soldiers, and in the album we see her with her patients—young men with

Nadezhda Ivanovna died of typhoid in 1918, when Vasily was 9 years of age. She had been mobilized to care for soldiers with the infection and succumbed herself. Nalimov's father, Vasily Petrovich, supported the family through his scientific activity and writing, providing enough income in the early years to employ a nurse and a cook, and then was remarried to Olga Fedorovna. Later he became a university professor. He died many years later, 1939, in a political prison.

Nalimov (1989b) claims "the winds of fate made me from my childhood contact tragedy," and his family certainly suffered a great deal. In addition to his mother's early death and his father's imprisonment, Nalimov's maternal grandfather suffered deprivation of his civil rights and expulsion from his home, presumably for political reasons, and his mother's sister and brother both committed suicide. Nalimov's sister, Nadezhda, became the wife of a British military officer during World War I, but, when the war was over, her husband

and exile at Kolyma. However, these 5 years became 18 years and he was finally released in 1954, after Stalin's death. Although officially free, his freedom was restricted to certain areas and, even though he was rehabilitated in 1960, Nalimov felt that the stigma remained: "But even now I feel behind me the shadow nicknamed 'people's enemy'" (1989b, p. 13).

He remembers those times (personal communication, March 14, 1992):

The situation was terrible there; in every aspect—forsaken in space and time—they had lost everything being trapped in a life over-saturated with hard work, cold and starvation. It was a torture prolonged in years.

He also writes (1989a):

Indeed, all that was but a severe and cruel pay for the attempt to acquire new meanings not on the personal level but for the entire people that were not prepared for the burden of the opening freedom. But the

in approaching the current global crisis. (p. 188)

In a 1990 letter to Anne A. Simkinson of *Common Boundary*, Nalimov outlined the ways in which the practices of Russian spiritual intellectuals are complementary to ideas in Western transpersonal psychology. They include (a) the rejection of reductionism in describing the nature of consciousness, (b) recognition of the transpersonal nature of personality, (c) awareness of meditation as a means of studying human consciousness and as a therapeutic tool, and (d) an interest in manifestations of altered states of consciousness. Nalimov's own background in probabilistically oriented mathematics, and their application to linguistic and psychological problems, differs

and the rational are two complementary principles of our consciousness. The source of their harmony is in their compatibility, non-divisibility, co-participation. (p. 22)

THE 21ST CENTURY

"Prediction, in general, is impossible" writes Nalimov, claiming that prediction is only possible in the physical sciences where all the factors are held constant. In psychology there are no constants, and structure is constantly changing. "Because there are no constants in human nature," Nalimov (1991b) adds, "it is impossible to predict what will happen—prediction carries a probabilistic factor":

One more decade and we enter the new century. We know that non-trivial scien-

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