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# The Universe Grasper

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*I wanted to look through the open window,  
behind the window of the whole universe,  
and that very Universe to grasp.*

THESE WORDS were spoken by Vassily Vassilievich Nalimov to his wife and colleague, Jeanna, two days before he died in Moscow on 19 January 1997.

... Nestled in a four-legged woven basket on my desk at the university sits a quaint wooden egg, 9mm tall, painted in bright shades of red, yellow, green, and blue. It is a treasured memento. I lift the egg out of its resting place and look at it once again, slowly rotating it in my hand: onion-domed Russian churches and green trees pass by; above, a deep blue sky, below, a vivid red flower with a yellow sun for a center; an elliptical universe memorializing the marriage of heaven and earth. My mind drifts off to the symbolism of the egg: life, renewal, rebirth.

...I look up from work for a moment. On top of two file cabinets in my university office, reaching almost to the ceiling, are a dozen red, green, brown, and maroon stacks of Vassily's books translated into English awaiting shipment. On my desk at home lie two of Vassily's manuscripts I am editing for publication.

...On cold, blustery winter days in New England, my son, David, a Russian history and literature major in college, makes his way between classes protected by a gray and white woolen turtleneck sweater. It was given to him by Jeanna during a study visit to Russia. It belonged to Vassily.

...I sit down to write this paper—our paths cross again. Three years have passed since Vassily's departure, but we continue to meet. Why?

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I came to know Vassily only during the last decade of his life. Others have known him and been inspired by him for much longer. Still, we are deeply connected. Why? To me it is unfathomable...a mystery. But it would not have been a mystery to Vassily. His natural bent was to seek out new frontiers and connections, following his muse undaunted as the unknown beckoned to him. In his lifelong quest to grasp “that very universe”—the meaning and ground of existence—Vassily was a polymath who apprehended connections and wandered across borders with unbounded imagination and enthusiasm. One new territory Vassily discovered was the burgeoning field of transpersonal psychology.

The transpersonal psychology movement emerged in the United States in the late 1960s. It sought to open up and legitimize an area of human consciousness and experience largely neglected by modern Western psychology, calling for an exploration of “the farther reaches of human nature”—including spiritual, mystical, and transpersonal states of consciousness (Maslow, 1969). In Vassily’s words, transpersonal psychology “represents an attempt to study human consciousness beyond the boundaries of its discrete capsulization” (Nalimov, 1985, p. 70). One reviewer commented:

The relevance of Nalimov’s work transcends the boundaries of science. His view of the world encompasses and integrates the totality of the experience acquired by all of humanity. It transcends provincial, national, political, racial and religious chauvinism, and ideological clashes of competing systems based on ignorance of the holistic nature of reality. In the context of his vision, the only hope for humanity is the creation of an entirely new human culture through a radical transformation of consciousness. (Grof, 1982, p. 188)

Vassily’s transpersonal work appeared in the relevant major English-language journals: *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*; *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*; *ReVision*; and *The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*. The last journal was especially instrumental in making Vassily’s work known to an international audience by publishing some 22 contributions by or about him (see Bibliography; also website: <http://panigada.hypermart.net>). Vassily’s transpersonal publications in English also helped to inject the transpersonal movement with intellectual vigor, breadth, and vision.

Equally important to understanding Vassily’s transpersonal views, are four books published in English by ISI Press through the foresight of Eugene Garfield in the USA: *In the Labyrinths of Language: A Mathematician’s Journey* (1981); *Faces of Science* (1981); *Realms of the Unconscious: The Enchanted Frontier* (1982); and *Space, Time, and Life: The Probabilistic Pathways of Evolution* (1985). The publication of these visionary works helped to internationalize the transpersonal perspective and to expand it to other disciplines.

The specific contributions Vassily made to transpersonalism have been summarized well elsewhere (e.g., Kazyutinsky & Drogalina-Nalimov, 1997; Z. D. Nalimov, 1990; Nalimov, Drogalina-Nalimov, & Zuyev, 2000; Thompson, 1993). Vassily was also the earliest researcher I am aware of to make use of scientometrics to survey and characterize the field of transpersonal psychology (Nalimov & Drogalina, 1996). An early and prolific contributor to the transpersonal movement, by nature, reflection, and experience, Vassily would have embodied a transpersonal perspective had the formal transpersonal movement never arisen. Early in life he was already drawn to Mystical Anarchism, a spiritual movement in Russia whose ideals continued to inspire

him. Later on, the many years Vassily spent in the Gulag and in exile provided ample grounds to test his transpersonal mettle.

Penetrate deeply enough to the ground of some one thing and it is possible to arrive at the ground of everything. Vassily's chosen doorway to Everything was to pursue, relentlessly, the meaning of meaning. What he found at the core was a semantic vacuum of plentitude—the principle of Spontaneity and ground of human potential:

The World is dialectical, its unpacked meanings are ephemeral within it.

They are not substantial. They are born in spontaneity and into spontaneity are they gone, leaving an invisible trace behind.

Spontaneity is the Incomprehensible.

Spontaneity is what acts through Measure, not through Law.

Spontaneity is Freedom of the World.

Spontaneity is Love.

Spontaneity is Gnosis, revelation of meanings, their extraction from Non-existence.

Spontaneity is Man himself.

Spontaneity is Entity.

Spontaneity is the Potentiality of the World.

(Nalimov, 1985, pp. 96-97)

One and the same semantic vacuum encompassing limitless possibilities: at one end, manipulation, subjugation, oppression; at the other end, creativity, freedom, transcendence. Words used to kill, words used to emancipate.

In preparing these reflections, I leaf through the photographs I have of Vassily, seeking to stimulate my memory. One picture leaps out at me, speaks to me. You see it facing the title page of this essay.

The photograph was taken in 1989 at a railway station in Paris. Vassily, a universal man, was delighted to be able to travel outside Russia in the twilight of his life.

It's both a worldly and otherworldly portrait. The architecture of his face hints at a wealth of story lines. It looks to me like a weary and saddened face, but untrammelled—supported by a light from within. It's the face of a scholar certainly. A shock of white hair and thick eyeglass frames; a civilized and professional-looking man, wearing a tie...a bit loose, unconstricting. It's a kindly face behind the scholarly eyeglasses. The eyes are knowingly focused both here and on a faraway place. The mouth has a bit of a smile; amusement, too. Some time after writing down these impressions, I receive a copy of a memorial notice about Vassily published in *Scientometrics* a few years ago (Colleagues, Friends, 1997). It is accompanied by the very same photograph that I chose to describe above.

I continue to look at Vassily's picture and he seems to look back at me...

What does it *mean* to live?

What does it *mean* to die?

Once Vassily corporeally roamed the Earth, now his presence is...connectivity—manifest in photographs, books, journals, memorial issues, loved ones, students and colleagues, egg-shaped microcosms, warm turtleneck

sweaters...and what else? The master of the realm of words was also conversant with the wordless realm:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.  
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.  
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.  
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.  
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;  
this appears as darkness.  
Darkness within darkness.  
The gate to all mystery.  
(Feng & English, 1972, sect. 1)

Although we corresponded for several years, it was only in the summer of 1995 that I met Vassily and Jeanna in person at their flat in Moscow. I was welcomed one evening into a small combined living room and study, filled with books, artwork, photographs, and memorabilia. We conversed together for some hours, slowly making our way through a bottle of Georgian wine and Jeanna's pastries. My most vivid impression of that enchanted evening was the sheer warmth and radiance that emanated from my two gracious hosts—its palpable quality remains with me to this day. It was an altogether timeless evening. Before leaving, Vassily and Jeanna placed in my hands the painted egg and woven basket that grace my university desk. In March of 1997, two months after Vassily died, Jeanna wrote to me the following words that best express Vassily's extraordinary presence:

You know Vassily's most remarkable quality—his radiant nature. He had the star inside—the light from within.

It is no wonder that Vassily came to be one of the leading figures of the international transpersonal movement. He was naturally attuned to taking a cosmic eye view of the universe—such was the nature of his mind and inner vision from early on: where others saw fragmentation, he apprehended unity; where others saw discrete events, he perceived connectivity. Others had one specialty, Vassily had many; others were comforted by answers, Vassily rejoiced in raising new questions; others sought the meaning of this or that, Vassily sought the meaning of meaning; others tried to grasp some one thing, Vassily wanted to grasp everything—the whole universe.

To sum up the contents of an earlier journal issue commemorating Vassily (Soidla, Shapiro, & Gross, 1997), the editors entitled their introduction: "V. V. Nalimov—Scientist, Teacher, Friend, Mentor, Prisoner, Rope-Dancer, Master of Meaning, Mystical Anarchist, High Priest, Apostle of Spontaneity, Transpersonalist." To epitomize the boundless nature of Vassily's life and work, we could simply say:

*Vassily Vassilievich Nalimov—Universe Grasper.*

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