

A Brief History of the West Georgia Humanistic Psychology Program

"Development of a humanistic orientation at West Georgia was but one expression of fundamental social changes in America which had been gaining momentum for some time. Relative economic and technological success had not brought with it concomitant progress towards the personal or collective experience of fulfillment. The very attitudes which accompanied victory in the battle at the survival level were proving inadequate or inappropriate in discovering means for greater personal and social realization. Humanistic or "3rd Force" Psychology focused attention on assumptions and methods which promised to move beyond previously limiting conceptions of human potential without, however, denying to those conceptions their value within appropriate contexts. Not antagonistic towards the two dominant forces in psychology - Behaviorism and Psychoanalysis - representatives of the "3rd Force" Psychology rather saw themselves as naturally emerging from them."

- Mike Arons

The West Georgia humanistic psychology program began in 1967 with **Mike Arons**, who thought it up and made it happen. After receiving his undergraduate in traditional psychology at Wayne State University in 1961, he went to Paris, without money or French proficiency, to study existential phenomenology under Maurice Merleau-Ponty at Sorbonne. But Merleau-Ponty died just before Mike arrived, so Mike wound up with Paul Ricoeur as his mentor, and Piaget and Levi-Strauss as his foils. There he completed his doctorate on the subject of creativity research as expression of the implicit story of American psychology. He then returned to the United States for post-graduate study at Brandeis, with Abe Maslow, George Kelly, and Jim Klee.



Mike Arons

After a year establishing a humanistic program at the Prince of Wales College in Canada, Mike was asked by the psychology department at West Georgia to become its chair, and to initiate a humanistic emphasis. Those who invited him really had no idea what they were in for - they simply understood the need to make the teaching of psychology relevant to real life experience. They dreamt of a psychology education that spoke to students' lives. **Jim Thomas** (left), then one of the department's faculty, had read Carl Rogers, Abe Maslow, and Arthur Combs. Through them, he saw an approach to psychology that embodied his dream. His persuasion won over his colleagues, and he called upon Maslow to suggest a new department chair, and Maslow nominated Mike.



Jim Thomas

Upon his arrival, Mike effected a tremendous, immediate transformation. The curriculum was extensively revised, and standard courses were revised. New textbooks were written - such as Stewart and Thomas' *Introductory Experiential Psychology* - and novel, non-traditional sources were often utilized alongside or in place of traditional textbooks, including literary and philosophical texts, artwork, films, music, and experiential exercises. In addition, 30 new courses were added, many never previously available anywhere in the country, and a humanistically-oriented M.A. program established. It combined ancient Eastern and contemporary Western psychology. Courses such as *Holistic Psychology East & West*, *Phenomenology of Social Existence*, *Human Growth & Potential*, *Myths, Dreams, & Symbols*, *Values, Meaning, & the Individual*, *Will, Choice, & Belief*, *Phenomenology of Spatiality & Temporality*, and *Explorations into Creativity* provided a rich smorgasbord that quickly made West Georgia a mecca for students and faculty starving for a psychology that addressed their human experience.

In the early years of the West Georgia program, its flourishing was invigorated by a willingness - even an eagerness - to be attuned to the forward edge of cultural developments as the cultural revolution of the 1960's swept across America. From Bob Dylan's early lyric "the times they are a-changin'" through John Lennon's plaintive entreaty that "all you need is love" to Timothy Leary's Dionysian invitation to "turn on" and the Beatles' refrain to "let it be," the generation's prophets articulated a renaissance of the human spirit. Courses on sensitivity, alienation, the psychology of women, and Buddhist worldviews (to pick just four exemplary cases) were already in place at West Georgia by 1968, at a time when their cultural impact was just beginning to be felt, and long before mainstream psychology evinced any awareness or interest. The counterculture offered a trenchant critique of the 1950's banal and narrow-minded suburbanism. America's self-satisfied smugness concealed an anxiety-ridden, sexist, racist, homophobic, materialistic war machine, whose spiritual emptiness the counterculture relentlessly exposed. Rejecting the traditional 'psychology of adjustment' and its recommendation of "playing it safe" to win "the rat race," the counterculture opened a profound re-evaluation of human possibility, freed from conventional stereotypes.

Though inspirational to the West Georgia program, these cultural openings were not imbibed in a merely ad hoc or unreflected manner. The psychology program was receptive to them precisely as they illuminated the program's own foundational vision: that of wholism. Many of the faculty sought to critically evaluate the whole range of recent cultural-historical experience, and developed powerful critiques of the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's. In the main, however, our work and thinking was not motivated by political considerations, but by "the truth of the lived." The psychology program was receptive to cultural trends that liberated the farther reaches of human existence because they connected with the program's own deep appreciation of a holistic understanding of human existence.

A deep awareness of the personal relevance of this vision of psychological life flourished in this setting. Students and faculty understood that this was not a psychology of the impersonal Other, but a psychology speaking to - and transforming - one's own Being. And it did transform - much as Hesse's Magic Theater transformed the Steppenwolf by opening him to the myriad possibilities by which he was himself. Those it touched have gone on to become not only psychologists and professors, but also city commissioners, college presidents, U.S. congressmen, computer wizards, and millionaires, as well as poets,

magicians, mystics, theologians, and farmers. Essentially, they have gone on to become themselves. The West Georgia program provided the clearing (Heidegger's *anwesen* - a "coming-into-presence") within which one's own nascent self could emerge and thrive. This ambience of openness infused the students' inquiry as well as the faculty's. The capacity to design their own agenda, to take from West Georgia what they decided they needed, has been the program's most significant meaning for many alumni (as well as current students). None left patterned by any pre-existing mold, but more aware of themselves and what they came for. Faculty and students both remember this experience as a feeling of being "home at last" - surrounded by the reassurance of genuine collegiality. In this atmosphere, no factions emerged to split the department. The original Southerners who had simply wanted to humanize the education process certainly saw the Yankee additions as very different, and vice-versa. But each learned from and valued the others. One of the originals - Henry Moore - opened his house to students, as well as to a plethora of other travelers whose passing through enriched the program, including a wonderful, unscheduled concert by B. B. King.

The West Georgia program succeeded in constituting this clearing by attending most faithfully to the phenomenological *epoche*: the suspension of belief in the presupposed reality of the constancy hypothesis. The program aimed to be mind-blowing, its inclusion of the far-out a way of opening students to go beyond the presupposed, to the very ground of their existence. Nurtured by **Tom Sills'** facilitative deanship and by Mike's genius for fostering creativity by removing its obstacles, this atmosphere became a unique haven, the sheltering place within which one could ask *any* question, teach *any* course, explore *any* crevice of human existence. A fondly remembered class project, for example, involved students constructing a sensory deprivation tank for their use in studying disembodied experience as part of a course on consciousness. Another project involved the building of an orgone accumulator, after Wilhelm Reich's design.

From its inception, the program annually attracted more than a hundred top students from throughout the United States, as well as many other countries - and eventually over two hundred a year in the 1970's - forming a phenomenally eclectic group. Some were among the best by any standard, while others were those whom traditional graduate programs would have never given a chance. But admission has always been based on an intrinsic recognition between the applicants and the faculty that this was the sort of program they

were seeking. A recognition, that is, of a shared sense of being. They brought with them a remarkable assortment of talents. One had done statistical research that resulted in the rewriting of federal welfare laws. One was already a lawyer, another a bellydancer. One was an anti-apartheid activist from South Africa. One came with a graduate degree in economics, another in political science. For many students, coming to West Georgia meant a courageous change of direction from more traditional, seemingly safer ways to prepare for a career in psychology. For others, West Georgia was there just when they felt most in need of a change in their life's direction. Unbounded by concerns for safe choices, open to navigating the possibilities of what might be.

This integration did not mean everyone danced to the same tune. We have had outlaws, misfits, both authentic and reactionary rebels, hermits, and misanthropists under the same roof. The specialness was that all people and all viewpoints could co-exist here, as individuals, because no one person or viewpoint ever called the tune or even said we had to dance. What always came first was this wild respect for the individuality of others, and the view of this faculty as a community of individuals. We knew that the maintenance and respect of our individualities and freedom of space, this 'wildlife preserve,' had to come first, because without it all else fails. The genius of Mike Arons' chairmanship was that he provided that. He provided a special occasion where each individual could find a place. Once done, he let go, and deeply trusted that faculty and students alike would best grow and give their best if they simply had the unfettered space to do so. That ethos and form of 'leaderless leadership' was Mike's greatest gift.



Jim Barrell

This openness did not preclude even traditional psychology, which was also taught on its own terms by some faculty, while it was being critiqued or revised by others. In some classes, the changes were more in how the material was taught rather than its essential content. The key to the specialness of the program lay in the diversity its openness fostered. Within such a large space, innovative approaches to psychological thought - too often constricted by the natural science bias in traditional psychology - found a home. Phenomenological, existential, hermeneutic, transpersonal, dialogical, experiential, perceptual, Jungian, Gestalt, parapsychological, Oriental, and body psychologies all were not merely welcomed, but integrated, each cross-fertilizing the others. Out of this variegated garden, new hybrids were being born. For instance, Jim Barrell (left) pioneered the development of an "experiential psychology" with theoretical, methodological, and applied dimensions. As exemplified in his book *A Science of Human Experience*, this approach offered a rigorous means of researching the necessary and sufficient conditions of human experience.



Bob Mazek

From this extraordinary gathering, a powerful sense of community emerged, a keen experience of existential ensemble. Within the classroom, faculty conversed with students rather than lectured at them. This was a group that spoke what was on their minds. The weekly faculty-student Colloquium became a focal point of this emerging ensemble. In addition to a panoply of stimulating guest presenters, it became the roundtable, around which the program's participants made sense together, typically with wholehearted gusto. Students forged intense relationships with one another, and with faculty. Encounters and learning happened not only within, but also beyond the classroom - at meals, at parties, during trips together to conferences. For example, **Bob Mazek's** (right) discussions on the phenomenology of the unconscious at students' houses over pizzas late into the night are still legend. There were gigantic celebrations, with hundreds of people, as well as small groups for Zen meditation or shamanic dancing. Over the years, many new faculty became involved, bringing with them various currents relevant to humanistic psychology, from such centers as Duquesne, Brandeis, Florida, and California. Department members sought new faculty who would respect and flourish in our unique atmosphere of openness - those with a 'good heart.' We sought those whose own creativity, individuality, and willingness to probe deeply could enable students to grasp this range of human potential. **Anne Richards**, who had previously worked with Sidney Jourard, Maslow, and Combs, typified this richness. **Jim Klee** visited on sabbatical and decided to stay for good. Tiparat Schumrum brought the psychology of women and gender relations, but more. She has taken those beginnings into a keen sense of family and marital therapy. Also, coming from Thailand, she strengthened the Oriental perspective of the program. **Don Rice** brought his experience of studying madness with R. D. Laing, and dreaming with Stan Krippner. But he also brought - with his expansive Afro hair style - an empowering courage to express the meaning of being Black in a racist culture. **Chris Aanstoos** brought his interest in the philosophical and methodological foundations of psychology. Bill Roll brought a

worldwide reputation as a parapsychologist. But he also brought his many years experience in a Zen monastery. With this Danish background, Dutch education, and English accent, he exemplified the encompassing versatility of the program. Even those who came with traditional expertise quickly blossomed into new areas. **Don Medeiros**, for example, came with skills in neuropsychology and assessment, but developed experientially based approaches to health and sports psychology. **Rich Alapack's** experience with Kierkegaard, Lacan, and Levinas added great depth to the program. Also, his phenomenology of adolescence ignited profound remembrances by his students. **Robin Powers** brought not only her devotion to transpersonal psychology, but also a special emphasis on women's spirituality. **Raymond Moody** brought the field that he pioneered - the near-death experience - along with a dazzling repertoire that unfolded in courses on madness, humor, murder, and scrying. **Karen Malone** joined the faculty in 1990, bringing her passions for cultural psychology and postmodern theory. **Kaisa Puhakka** also joined that year, with interests in Eastern and transpersonal psychology and phenomenology.

During the 1990's, more of the current faculty joined - **Tobin Hart, Jim Dillon, Eric Dodson, Daniel Helminiak, Elena Mustakova-Possardt**. After earning his Master's through the West Georgia program, **Larry Schor** went on to Auburn to receive a doctoral degree, and returned here to teach, bringing his doctoral advisor **Mark Kunkel** with him. Mike Arons retired in 2000, and Don Rice took on the role of department chair. That year, **Jeff Reber** and **Lisa Osbeck** joined, with **Alan Pope** coming in the following year. Each has helped carry the spirit of the holistic orientation at West Georgia forward as new developments unfold into the 21st Century.

More than any quantitative criteria, however, the crucial hallmark that distinguishes our department is its spirit. We genuinely enjoy each other's vitality. We celebrate together. We learn from each other, and collaborate on publications and symposia. This spirit has enabled us to edit many journals, to establish forums such as the Human Science Research Institute and ChildSpirit, and to arrange a number of international conferences usually held only at major universities in large cities.

It is this welcoming of diverse potentialities that gives the program its kinetic zing and, most importantly, the unfettered freedom to wholeheartedly pursue one's deepest intuitions about truth *as lived*.

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