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Introduction: V. V. Nalimov – Scientist, Teacher, Friend, Mentor, Prisoner, Rope-Dancer, Master of Meaning, Mystical Anarchist, High Priest, Apostle of Spontaneity, Transpersonalist

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I believe in the creative power of a free thought and never forget it, even in the face of calamity.

—Vassily Vassilievich Nalimov
(1910-1997)
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Dignity: to remain oneself, to hear one’s own voice—that is what life requires from us. And how can we not strive for preserving Dignity in the peripeteia of life, since we, humans, are given the opportunity to touch the Mystery of the Universe.

—V. V. Nalimov, Spontaneity of Consciousness (1989) (Quote trans., J. N. Compton)

Vassily Vassilievich Nalimov, one of the 20th Century’s great visionaries, died on 19 January 1997. A “Citizen of the Universe,” VVN was also the best known Russian transpersonalist outside his homeland. Both his life-story and mind embrace the widest variety of human experience, as possibly only Russia would have provided (at least on such a large scale of time, space, and number of people involved): from torture in forced labor camp to intuiting transpersonal truths. Consider the wealth of terms (some of the most colorful are in our title) that our authors use when speaking about VVN. “An exaggeration,” readers unfamiliar with VVN may think, but exaggerations of this scale do not emerge ex nihilo.

If VVN is to be called Apostle, he is, indeed, Peter (Petros, kepha—rock), certainly not Paul, building some organized following. His popularity in Russia in the 1970s—albeit limited mostly to intellectually omnivorous younger people and mystically inclined adults—was obvious, but certainly mostly misplaced, as the succeeding years have shown. “A poet in Russia is more than just a poet” was a popular slogan among the Russian intelligentsia always tending to think in global political terms. Indeed so it was, especially during the communist years, when any fresh air in thinking allowed to reach the intellectual circles or managing to reach them via some cracks in the ideological wall, was doomed to wide popularity. How different were these Teachers of Inner Freedom of these bygone years! (They were all perceived just this way, regardless of drastic differences or incompatibilities.) Today, though, is a time of discrimination and differentiation.

Those inclined to pop spirituality read all the easy books on astrology, healing, yoga, sundry prophecies foretelling every kind of imaginable or unimaginable disasters—invariably popular in Russia, which always seems to be involved in some catastrophic developments. They also attend the countless meetings with preachers of every kind, “extraterrestrials,” healers, black and white magicians. It is a much easier course for these people than grappling with VVN’s philosophical texts. Those involved in riddles of ethnology, mysteries of nation and race, looking for titanic geopolitical fights, not only have their own ideological idols but seem often openly hostile to VVN’s heritage; for them, it is too universal and unitive in its spirit.
They have come to bring new divisions of their own and revive the older ones, and have set their mind to do some very serious theoretical and practical work in this direction. VVN’s books are also of no great interest to the numerous officially most acceptable thinkers who strive to build a new orthodox and positive ideology instead of the Marxist (communist) doctrine, that seems to be, if not dead, then certainly crippled for some time (at least in the Northern part of Europe and Asia). VVN is even more alien to the flourishing groups of leftist and rightist extremists of the intellectual underground. Their reading lists do not seem to include anyone like him. One cannot even be sure about those who are addicted to pseudo-rational forms of spirituality.

One does not need a fine prism to see the current extensive rainbow of incompatible opinions. For so many people, VVN is now only one option overshadowed by many colorful alternative ways of looking towards tomorrow’s promise.

But what remains now and will remain in the future as VVN’s kin, is a small, certainly non-sectarian group of very interested people in different countries who are seeing the power and universal qualities of his thinking—a kind of small and scattered spiritual rock in the Petrian (one knows the overtones involved), not Paulian sense. One may even take a deep breath and say that for such seekers, and others of fearless intellect and a relentless pursuit of knowledge, art, and humanity, VVN’s legacy includes a rich collection of gateways to apprehending Realms of Higher Meaning: Science, Mathematics, Probability Theory, Aesthetics, Cultural Studies, Transpersonalism … One by one, the Master deftly unlocked these Mind Doors to Realms of Higher Meaning. We have only to open a single door to find ourselves on common ground, united on a universal plane.

One more related thought. Looking at the whole picture, one can wonder once more how naturally—after a short period of reckoning and hesitation—most of the above-mentioned “new humanitarians” of the New Russia realized that transpersonal—at least the transpersonal theory VVN was involved in—is not their kettle of yesterday’s fish. There are no noisy throngs celebrating and discussing VVN’s heritage as some national treasure, as happened several times with some superficial minds. As a result, the space around VVN’s teachings is by now one of the most quiet, pure, spiritually and mind-ecologically safe places in this country. (A metaphor it all is, a metaphor … and still … Can one ever forget that it is the Russia of this century where metaphysical concepts are not only taking but also eating flesh?)

If it is obvious that VVN’s legacy is not a hot intellectual item in Russia these days, then this is certainly true of transpersonal thinking in the world in general. Just as well. VVN’s ideas are of a sort that require some time for quiet ripening. One of the few approaches to human life that stresses the value of silence, of pause, of natural flow in the contemporary world of the universe, cannot expect—remaining true to itself—any noisy success.

* * *

In this special commemorative issue of the International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, the fourth issue of its series, Voices of Russian Transpersonalism, we are privileged to publish a variety of papers by colleagues who were inspired by VVN and close to him in one way or another. We also present some biographical and theoretical work of VVN heretofore unpublished in English. But for space limitations, much more could have been included about the life and work of this extraordinary being. Undoubtedly, the future will continue to yield nourishing crops from VVN’s rich legacy of mindfields. Some of VVN’s transpersonal work has appeared in earlier issues in the Voices of Russian Transpersonalism series, and a recent book, Everything Is According to the Way: Voices of Russian Transpersonalism (T. R. Soidla
S. I. Shapiro, Eds., 1997, Bolda-Lok Publishing, Brisbane, Australia), was dedicated to VVN and contained several contributions authored by him.

We begin this volume with three vignettes about VVN’s inspiration to colleagues. Eugene Garfield is the founder of the Institute for Scientific Information in the United States, under whose auspices four major works of VVN were published in English. In his memoir entitled “Professor V. V. Nalimov—Dear Friend and Mentor,” Garfield says that of the many scientists and scholars he has encountered, none touched him in the way VVN did. In “Vassily Nalimov—Modern Russian High Priest,” another American colleague, Rustum Roy, calls attention, especially, to VVN’s contributions to the role of chance in science and theology and macro-ecumenism. And, in “A Teacher,” Alexander Zakgeim provides a personal and poignant view of VVN as a very special kind of teacher.

In his contribution, “Dedicated to the Memory of V. V. Nalimov,” Yu. V. Granovsky offers a scholarly and compact overview of VVN’s life and a summary of his boundless way of thinking. The next essay is by V. V. Kazyutinsky and Jeanna Drogalina-Nalimov—“Apostle of Spontaneity.” Beginning with a very personal and touching note, the authors provide a clear, comprehensive, and authoritative overview of VVN’s impressive and distinctive theoretical legacy. They weave together the major themes of VVN’s voluminous works, illuminating the originality, depth, subtlety, and challenge that infuses the broad spectrum of VVN’s thought. We see clearly, here, why VVN ranks among the 20th Century’s great visionaries.

Next, we present some excerpts from VVN’s lengthy book of memoirs, A Rope-Dancer (A Wreckage). It is both a revealing autobiography and an historical document, giving personal testimony to Russia’s long reign of terror. One by one, VVN’s family, friends, and literary and intellectual heroes were felled. Miraculously, VVN himself was spared, but not from a series of incarcerations. Perhaps his remarkable endurance was helped by a keen ability to extract meaning from everything—even abject meaninglessness. Recently, he wrote: “The Twentieth Century, flooded with blood, forces us to stop and think over the way we are living.” VVN’s memoirs alternate between a chronology of horror and a chronology of hope. His shorter theoretical paper which follows, “The Self-Conscious Universe,” is a good example of the cosmic scope of VVN’s theoretical thinking devoted to the broadest view of human existence. Will we some day be able to create a comprehensive super-theory describing both consciousness and physical reality? VVN was optimistic.

The concluding contribution, by the Canadian scholar and Tibetologist Herbert Guenther, is one example of how VVN’s far-ranging thought finds companionship across so many disciplines. The author’s theme, “The Complexity of the Initial Condition,” is considered here with dynamic semantic fields expressing the flowing complexity of initial (seed) conditions of our psycho-physical cosmos. Guenther’s psychoepistemic study immerses us in enriching complexities of thousand-year-old Tibetan teachings still rich enough to illuminate the contemporary world. VVN, whose thought also honored the wisdom of the past, has his own thought honored here, on common ground with his eternal companions—distinct and inseparable.

In Russia, many people still feel that VVN continues to speak with new voices, making everyday reality alive. His semantic fields of meaning and value are still contracting and expanding.

During the days I [T.R.S.] was engaged with this paper, a letter from an old friend, an anecdote, a newspaper—all spoke to me with VVN’s voice. An anecdote
about two guys who smoked some "consciousness expanding drug" and then wind up having a conversation with the cops. Answers are slow but logical. But then the interrogators ask, "Kak Oka?" [How did you find the river Oka?] which elicits an answer: "Ku-ku-ku." A most adequate answer, do you see? You don't? Closer (maybe too close) to common sense, but essentially along the same lines: people of our country are often warned not to try to crack jokes, not to show one's sense of humor while abroad. The results of expanding the field of meanings can be unpredictable. It also brings to mind VVN's own example in the excerpts we present from his Rope-Dancer: A banner on an artillery school roof proclaims: Our aim (= target) is Communism. Or: the "Why do dogs bark?" speculations. Useless sounds from wolf puppies in search of meaning. The sound of a dog barking can take one into a most intimate semantic game with one's dog. My pen-pal friend whose dogs are communicating with her in human words (saying things like "Want to go out?") of course went a bit too far—but in the right direction! A Zen book lies on my table: Does a dog have Buddha-nature? Who is Buddha?—A shit-stick. Yes! Yes! Now one's semantic field is really beginning to expand ...

VVN's Bayesian logic was speaking to listeners along all the directions mentioned above in a quantitative way—and this took place in the 1970s when it sounded, if not consciousness-expanding, then certainly most heretical. And younger people love heretics, especially those of VVN's stature. By now it is just a part of one's memory—a reminder of his late presence.

We need hardly add that VVN's thinking is certainly of a much wider scope than our collection of essays might suggest. Indeed, his ideas are so broad they practically ensure that no standard scheme of popularity will befall them. Although VVN's popularity may never be very wide in intellectual circles, his presence in our thinking can have deep, lasting, important effects.

As if the giant multi-dimensional complex structure of his thinking has quietly entered our mind space to be slowly unpacked and reveal to us many more important things in the future. Slowly, slowly...

The most profound image of VVN that will remain with us is the quiet intensity of his thought. Due to many historical and geographical factors, while he was alive, VVN could actualize only part of his potential contribution to the thinking of this century. Nevertheless, it is surprising how much he managed to accomplish under very unsuitable and unfriendly conditions.

There is always some mystery behind the obvious. Problems turning to gifts, gifts into problems … better to leave this to those who managed to perform the Great Work of transmutation—turning negative knots, powers, and impurities into some eternal Gold. What we see clearly, what cannot be doubted about VVN, is that in a most unfriendly time and place, he worked hard, published many works, and was loved. An authentic and original scientist, thinker, transpersonalist ... a genuine human being, VVN is still with us—as this volume clearly bears out. Solid rock, the legacy of the Master of Meaning will endure.

NOTES

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