

Nathan, a tribute

Lindsay Perigo (a.k.a. Linz) of SOLO in New Zealand, has told me that ‘due diligence’ requires that I read James S. Valliant’s 2005 book, *The Passion of Ayn Rand’s Critics*, a lengthy critical review of Barbara Branden’s 1986 biography, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. Valliant’s critique was largely based on previously unpublished segments of Ayn Rand’s private journals to which Leonard Peikoff, Rand’s legal heir and the journals’ owner, had given Valliant unprecedented access – with rather obvious intent. On the basis of Valliant’s book, Linz claims Nathaniel Branden was a fraud and a charlatan.

When Valliant’s book came out, I was sent a commentary about it which reported that the book read like a prosecuting attorney’s opening address to a jury, in other words, it presented only one side of the case.

Well, sorry Linz, but I do not intend to read Valliant’s book on Ayn Rand’s relationship with Nathaniel and Barbara Branden (although I might read his recent book on the Roman Empire’s invention of Christianity – when the price drops.) Personally, I do not care how much of Nathaniel Branden’s thinking was owed to Rand, or whatever else Valliant wrote, or quotes Rand as having written in her private diaries. Nathaniel acknowledged his debt to Rand fully, even fulsomely. And much more fully than Rand acknowledged the influence upon herself of Nietzsche, say; or that of Locke, Jefferson, et al, whose political philosophy bears a remarkable similarity to her own. She hardly gave them any credit at all, as far as I am aware – aside from praising the US constitution, their brainchild – but I’d be more than happy to be corrected. She said her only philosophical debt was to Aristotle. Leonard Peikoff did mention Locke in *The Ominous Parallels* (1982), a book written under Rand’s guiding hand and eye, but *T.O.P.* was some fifteen years in the making and, while good in parts was, after such a long wait (it had been announced many years before in *The Objectivist*) more disappointing than revelatory.

Besides, being neither an historian of Rand nor her biographer, I decided long ago that I did not want to read Rand’s private journals. With many of the principals still alive at that time, doing so felt too much like an invasion of privacy. Therefore, I certainly do not want to read someone else’s interpretation of them now, particularly when that interpretation was clearly intended to vilify, a vilification motivated – so I assumed when I first heard about it and still do now – by third party vindictiveness. My degree was in history, and I have been a hands-on, practical historian in the world of museums and historical exhibitions for much of my working life. In that capacity, I have come to distrust second hand opinions, especially when negative.

So, Linz, you can condemn me all you like for not reading Valliant. Nathaniel Branden owned up to the fact that he had deceived Rand and explained why. Rand never owned up to the fact that she had deceived the rest of us. Thus, while I am not a fan of the State’s adversarial approach to justice, which often enough fails to produce the fair and impartial conclusion justice demands, I would like to appear as a witness for the defence – of Nathaniel Branden.

There are at least two sides to most biographical narratives, and my own experience as a reader of Branden’s numerous books and participant in his ‘Intensives – and producer of one of them in Toronto, in February, 1979 – does not support charges of fraudulence and charlatantry. Rather the opposite.

I have already declared my love for Alyssa and have several times acknowledged my intellectual debt to her. I have also referred on Solo to the profoundly beneficial effect her thought had on my life. The same is true of Nathaniel Branden. I found his books very helpful indeed and his Intensives even more so.

The latter consisted of three and a half days of brilliantly clear and compelling introductions to developmental psychology; of gentle mental exercises, and of guided probing into one’s psyche – in pursuit of self-knowledge. Their purpose was to disentangle emotional knots and confusions begun in childhood and to remove mental blocks which were inhibiting the growth of self-esteem, and hence of happiness. Thousands of people benefited over the years from Nathaniel’s eloquent

presentations and innovative approaches, and literally millions more have benefited from his books – of which, according to Wikipedia, there are over four million in print.

A central element of Nathaniel Branden's 'biocentric' psychology is self-awareness; knowledge of one's own self, of the contents of one's own brain. To attain it, he devised a deceptively simple technique called sentence completion. People would sit in small circles of four or five and take turns giving completions to feeder statements, such as 'My mother was always ...' which the participants would complete, saying 'My mother was always sighing ... crying ... lying ... shouting,' or whatever came into the person's mind. It was essential not to think ahead about how to complete the sentence, or to judge one's completion before saying it, but to allow it to emerge spontaneously.

There were many other types of feeder statements, each designed to tap into different aspects of a person's childhood development, character, or mentality. Another illustration: 'One of the reasons I don't do *x* is because ... I'm afraid to do it ... It might hurt my wife ... My father said I must never be pushy ... Our priest said ...' and so on. Deceptively simple, but highly effective.

Self-awareness is followed by self-acceptance. Having become aware of *who* one is it is vital to *accept* that self, whatever that self turned out to be: 'Okay, that's who, what, and where I am right now.' One could then set goals for future attainment. Self-awareness plus self-acceptance plus setting and achieving goals leads on to self-esteem, the sense that one is competent to live and worthy of living.

A second important element of Branden's psychology, elaborated during his Intensives, is 'the way out is through'. When someone finds him or her self in a painful situation it is crucially important not to try and *repress* bad feelings, but to experience them fully. One such instance is grief. The loss of someone dear is among the most distressing experiences of life. Many people feel they can't cope with the pain, or are afraid to express it openly for fear of seeming weak, so repress it. Yet it is only by feeling grief in its totality that one can win relief from the agony of it. As Nathaniel might have put it, the only cure for grief is grief itself.

A third vital element of biocentric psychology is Branden's analysis of anxiety, which he reduced to an internal conflict between two contradictory perceptions or beliefs: 'I *must*' and 'I *can't*.' It can be a fairly day-to-day issue: 'I *must* tell the boss he's got it wrong, but I *can't*, because he's a hot-tempered fellow and I'm afraid he'll fire me.' Or, it could be something deadly serious: 'I have a lump in my breast, I *must* go to the doctor, but I *can't*, because I'm scared stiff of what the doctor might tell me.' Obviously, these are very basic examples, yet they do point to the essence of a widespread human problem, one which can lead to dire consequences if not dealt with.

How much of all this Branden owed to Rand does not seem to me to matter very much. Rand did not like public speaking, Branden was brilliant at it. If his ideas were her ideas, it was he who translated them into practical, usable, psychological techniques and made them public; confidently and eloquently; with charm, wit, and stunning clarity, and with powerful effectiveness. Great innovators often need, and benefit from, great expositors of their ideas. Darwin had his Huxley, there are many other examples. Until they fell out, Rand had Branden. She said he was a genius. True, her judgement may have been influenced by love, just as it later became warped by animosity – 'hell hath no fury', her lawyer quoted.

All that said, personally, I think Branden's contributions to the field of psychology had far more to do with his own ability and energy. He was a very considerable innovator in his own right.

I went to four Intensives altogether. The second or third was about "contacting your higher self." It explored methods for extracting knowledge that you were unaware you possessed; and how to listen to, and to take seriously, ideas that just seemed to 'pop into your head'.

One such idea came to me when I was in England in 1982 (I had by then been living in Canada for nearly twenty years). I was driving back to where I was staying after a visit to my

parents when this silent voice in my head suddenly said ‘marry Rachel’ (whom I’d met two or three months earlier). I nearly crashed the car.

Naturally, I had to ask her first. She said, ‘I’ll have to think about that.’ We were in England. She thought I’d be heading back to Canada, I’d told her as much. Eventually, she said, ‘Okay, going to Canada is not ruled out, but if I have your children, they are going to be born in St Paul’s Hospital in Cheltenham, and nowhere else on earth’. [Her father was a doctor near there.] They duly were: Jessica, 1984, Patrick, 1986. And, 37 years later, I’m still in England and Rachel and I are approaching our ruby wedding anniversary. Our adorable five-year-old grandson, Charlie, is playing beside me as I write this sentence. So, today, I’d say to anybody, trust your higher self!

Okay, Linz, if Nathaniel Branden was a fraud and a charlatan, then I’m quite happy to be labelled a sucker.

Nathaniel was not an easy person to know. He could be abrupt. If he was angry, he showed it. Yet he could also be personally, as well as publicly charming. On the way to the airport the morning after the Toronto Intensive he was warmth itself, prompted by my English accent to muse about a dream he’d had to write plays for the London stage.

On the other hand, a couple of days later, Nathaniel was on the phone demanding to know why his fee hadn’t been paid. It soon was. I just hadn’t gotten around to it. I had been basking in the glow of having persuaded a large group of normally reserved Canadians to part with \$250 for a journey down an unknown road to an unknown destination, themselves.

Nathaniel gave unstintingly of his time, at his own expense, to promote the Toronto Intensive, traipsing with me around ten or more radio and TV stations. During one of our car trips together he advised me freely about a relationship I had been hurt by. His diagnosis was correct.

Again on the other hand, he complained once during an Intensive about people treating him as unapproachable. Shortly afterwards, I got into the hotel elevator to go up to my room. Nathaniel was already in there, standing in a back corner. He was the only other occupant. But if ever eyes said ‘leave me alone’ they were Nathaniel’s at that moment. So I did.

Yet again, when he was booked to do an Intensive just after his wife Patrecia had died in a freak accident, he fulfilled the commitment, though a woman who was there and watched him, not knowing the cause of it obviously, told me his intense distress was so plain to see that she felt like weeping for whatever it was herself.

Call him whatever you want, Linz, but in my opinion Nathaniel Branden was a brilliant theoretical and *practical* psychologist who did a prodigious amount of truly valuable psychotherapeutic work, both in writing and in face-to-face encounters. Sure, he owed a lot to Rand, he said so openly. But he put what he had learned from her to the best possible use.

A great deal of modern psychotherapy depends on the use of medication, much of it highly toxic and potentially hazardous. Nathaniel Branden showed that it is possible to achieve truly beneficial results without recourse to any drugs at all. Thus, to me, Nathaniel was, and will always remain, a hero.

And I think the best thing that ever happened to him was breaking free from Ayn Rand. She was a genius, and a goddess to many, including myself, but she could also be a bit of a tyrant.

Herefordshire, August 2020

(One hundred and three people attended the Toronto Intensive, which was held downtown in the ballroom of the Park Plaza Hotel. Twenty-five participants had already signed up when I took over the production from someone else. Not everyone paid \$250. Several, e.g. some couples, beat me down to \$175 each. When the event finished, some forty of the attendees requested information about a second Intensive.

Unfortunately, I herniated a lumbar disc shortly afterwards and the second Toronto Intensive was cancelled. Some months later, I moved back to Vancouver, British Columbia, whence I had travelled to research and create the still extant Redpath Sugar Museum.

I don't think there was another Canadian Intensive, but I do not know that. As already explained, I met my future wife while taking a break in England and never returned to live in Canada.

I incorporated Nathaniel's insight about grief into a poem I wrote for a lady who had just lost her husband of fifty years and was having difficulty coping with the loss. When I asked her if she'd like to read the poem she declined. It is included below. Some friends I have sent it to found it helpful. I hope others might too.)

Loss

The wind was strong last night,
Strong enough to wake me.
I reached out for comfort
To feel his warmth beside me
But the sheet was cold
His place was empty
He was not there.

In the morning, all was calm and bright
Bright with the light of early spring;
Snowdrops nodded in the gentle breeze
But I felt nothing, I was rigid, a statue made of wood.
I seemed to have lost the capacity to feel
Not even my despair
There was only the daily pain of knowing
He was not there.

So little sets it off, the pain:
A book, a view, a snatch of song
His favourite chair,
But, throughout it all,
He is not there.

A footfall at the door.
It is my grandchild, standing quietly,
An elfin girl, hardly higher than my hip,
Her hair an almost gold, hanging to her waist;
Clear blue eyes, back and shoulders straight,
Hands held loosely by her sides, relaxed,
So pretty that looking at her hurts.

"Where have you gone to, Granny?"
She watches me with a solemn, serious gaze:
"Please come back."

And all of a sudden the pain erupted
Into a vile regurgitation, as if I had swallowed
Some poisonous sac of bile.
I could not stop the sobs.
She led me to the sofa, set me down,
Then sat beside me, after a while reaching out

To lay her soft, warm hand on mine.
I cried his name, she understood and nodded
But said nothing, merely staying
Quiet beside me as witness to my grief.
He was not there.

She knew, you see,
With all the wisdom of her eight short years,
That, when sadness strikes,
The only thing to do
Is simply to be sad,
And to cry the pain away.

I learned from her that day, a child,
Separated by the life which lay between us,
That the only cure for grief is grief itself;
That only by grieving can we win release
From the impossible pain of loss.
In crying my heart out with a little girl
I came to accept that the pain might never cease;
But, with her little hand on mine,
I learned to face
That unwanted, unsought loneliness
In peace.

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