



**MEMORIES OF PHYLLIS PALGI  
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Phyllis was not the founder of the Dept of Behavioral Science, or as it is now more properly called, Dept of Medical Education, but she was for so many years the torchbearer of its vision and its fundamental project to make sure that doctors were not technocrat dispensers of medicine but above all a caring, decent *mensch*.

Phyllis came from a medical family in Capetown and speaking with doctors came naturally to her and in a way she was a virtual physician teaching doctors to remember to also be healers of souls.

We had met via the Israel Anthropological Association of which she had been President, as in so many things a pioneer and role model for generations of woman anthropologists and academics. There was something *sympatico* between us, a common language, a symbolic form and perhaps because of this she asked me to join the department in 1981 and to my deepest satisfaction and joy I have remained here ever since. Having found a home, which Phyllis welcomed me into. I was deeply unprepared, but with Phyllis, talking and teaching together, and above all learning from my students as she always did, I became more than good enough, I understood that without Phyllis, nothing would never have happened.

She was of the generation that saw the dream of Zionism come true and I envy her. She remained innocently proud of going with joy in her pockets to pay taxes to a Jewish State for the first time.

The Department is now well established with nearly 100 people associated with it and an alumni which is the who's who of Israel medicine and mental health and now with a new and dynamic chair, Professor Nati Laor. But it was not always so. Twice the University tried to shut us down and twice led by Phyllis gentle but firm and feisty we fought back and won showing that the task of educating medical students required unique skill and dedication that could not be found in Psychotherapy, Psychiatry or Sociology Depts.

I remember one of the deans of the medical school telling her, "Phyllis, I don't brag abroad about my Anatomy Dept. – everyone has that; I brag about your dept which is special." Now, although medical education, small group learning, early clinical exposure, family projects, simulation which are taught at every medical school in Israel, we are still the only one which has its own Dept. and more, one with a unique open-hearted ethos that is Phyllis' legacy.



Phyllis and I were not only colleagues. We were friends who had many friends in common, such as Robert Jay Lifton and many more. After she retired I would call or visit her in her home. Although my contact with you, her family was fleeting or nonexistent, I feel that I know you through her words, as she spoke with passion of your progresses and rises.

We often say as a cliché, this person changed my life. But in Phyllis' case I have never met so many people who uninvited said so. Let me just tell you my last experience only a few weeks which may stand for the rest. I met a candidate at my Jungian psychoanalytic institute recently. I mentioned that I was still teaching in Tel Aviv; and she coming vividly to life said, "Oh that's so important. When I was a second year medical student at Tel Aviv – she is now a senior child psychiatrist – we had this amazing teacher Phyllis Palgi and she asked us to write about this one question, "Why do you want to be a doctor?" It sent me into a terrible tizzy and crisis and self doubt and I did not know what to do so I went to speak with her and we spoke for an hour and half and it change my life. I knew my way forward." My mother in law who was head of a nursing school spoke with bright lit eyes of her lectures, how they opened up a new dimension to nursing, seeing the patients within their culture.

Phyllis and I were also co-authors. We both shared a deep interest in the many meanings of death. When she was asked to write for ultra-prestigious *Annual Reviews in Anthropology* on "Anthropology of Death", she asked me to join her. It was a collaboration in the best sense of the word. The finished product remains a testament to her scholarship and a landmark in the field. In some ways, I think I saw the best of Phyllis: A True Intellectual. Alert. Ironic. Laughing. Defying the doctors again and again. Having seen it all, but in a good way, like the wise old woman she became.

She remains an inspiration of vital involvement in very old age; passionately trying to get her message across: Culture counts for a lot. Caring counts for a lot. Understanding counts for a lot. The dichotomy between good doctors and nice doctor is profoundly false; that above all, people matter.

Phyllis showed me how we can maintain openness to life. In this spirit, I want to share in her honor, a poem by Lorca:



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If I die,

leave the balcony open.

The little boy is eating oranges.

(From my balcony I can see him.)

The reaper is harvesting the wheat.

(From my balcony I can hear him.)

If I die, leave the balcony open!

In sorrow, but with the balcony open

Henry Abramovitch

in the name of thousands of Phyllis' students  
and the members of the Department of Medical Education.

Her memory will surely be a blessing