SONJA MARGULIES: TEACHER, EDITOR, POET

Miles A. Vich, M.A., D.H.L. (Hon)
_Palo Alto, California_

This *Journal,* from its beginnings in the late 1960’s to today, has attracted remarkable authors, editors and supporters. Perhaps one of its least known, and yet most influential editors was Sonja K. Margulies who died peacefully, at home, April 27, 2013 at age 82.

It was my good fortune, as one of the editors present at the first publication of the *Journal* in 1969, to help welcome Sonja to our efforts. Over the next 43 years
working together as editors and as colleagues in various projects and events we
developed a highly productive professional relationship. As a personal friend I
was also privileged to follow her evolution as a spiritual teacher, a scholar,
a survivor, and as a poet. This narrative, however, can be only a partial
recounting of her contributions, primarily because Sonja chose the path of ‘the
non-visible’, one whose work is not identified with a public persona. As a
consequence some of what follows is known only among a circle of friends,
colleagues and her family; some of it exists in the field’s literature and related
media, and some is from my own experience and records1.

In 1969 Sonja attended a Stanford University workshop led by James
Fadiman, also a staff editor for JTP, who recognized her intellectual and
organizational talents. He suggested she contact the Journal Editor, Anthony
(‘Tony’) Sutich in Palo Alto, and volunteer for editorial work.

Tony Sutich, who had a very remarkable life (Sutich, 1976a; 1976b; Vich, 1976),
was totally disabled as a teenager and lived his entire adult life on a gurney in his
home. Largely self-educated, yet politically and culturally sophisticated, he was
bursting with ideas and projects. In the face of enormous physical and financial
limitations he had managed to become a licensed psychologist with a full
practice, and had ambitious plans for the larger field of psychology.

Sonja met him and they formed an immediate collegial bond. Tony, Sonja, and
the small working editorial group prepared and published with little or no
funding, the first issue of JTP in 1969, thereby launching the field of
transpersonal psychology.

Sonja’s organizational skills were brought to light when she drafted the
group’s first Articles of Incorporation, and helped structure its new governing
board, to which she was elected. Simultaneously, and within a year, her
background (B.A. History) and deepening grasp of religious, philosophical
and historical issues led to intensive daily work sessions with Tony and other
editors. She reviewed and edited nearly every paper published in JTP from
1969 to 1975. These were the foundation years when it was necessary for
Tony, Sonja and the editors in general to steer the field toward high
professional and intellectual standards. This character of the early Journal
attracted many new authors such as Daniel Goleman, Ken Wilber, Frances
Vaughan, Stanislav Grof, and others who later made major contributions to
psychology.

In her first year at the Journal Sonja also began exploring contemporary
spiritual paths. The practices and writings of Zen Buddhism intrigued her most,
and she entered rigorous practice and study with the Japanese-trained Zen
teacher, Kobun Chino, Sensei, at the nearby Los Altos Zendo. This meditative
practice and her interest in transpersonal psychology proved to be complemen-
tary. Eventually she published 20 book reviews on these topics in JTP.

At the Journal office in Tony’s home Sonja met many authors and teachers,
including Abraham Maslow, who along with Tony Sutich founded transpersonal
psychology as a field. “Abe” was delighted to see that Sonja understood his developing transpersonal theory, and he discovered that she met the subject criteria for his study of transcending self-actualizers (Maslow, 1969). By 1972 Sonja was serving as Co-Editor of *JTP*, was Vice-President of the new Association for Transpersonal Psychology, and President of a research project, the Transpersonal Center.

As the wife of a leading astrodynamics scientist and mother of two children in school, she still found time to continue her volunteer services to the expanding field. She served on the board of the Transpersonal Institute, the governing board of *JTP* and ATP, and was elected its President, 1977 - 79. Thereafter she continued as an active Associate Editor to *JTP* until 2000.

At the time of her ordination in 1975 in the Soto Zen Buddhist tradition Sonja elected not to teach publicly, or found a Zendo, or advance her career through a public persona. She chose, instead, the ancient way: ‘Not appearing in the world.’ To work in the world without appearing in a public role can be a compassionate and generous path.

On rare occasions, however, she was persuaded to present talks to various groups. At one graduate school she spoke about discovering that “through your teacher you discover that everything can teach you.” At a major museum’s exhibit of Zen Painting and Calligraphy she provided the historical background of Zen for a visiting private group. At a theological graduate school she co-taught a course with a Jesuit priest. She also granted a personal interview for publication in *Meetings with Remarkable Women*, (Friedman, 2000) and appeared in a documentary film about transpersonal psychology (Page, 2006).

Speaking at another Zendo in contradistinction to chanting the centuries-old exclusively male Zen Buddhist lineage she chanted the names of all the women who had taught her. About this time she was also persuaded to publish (Margulies, 1979, p. 11), on the occasion of her 47th birthday,

**Birthday Poem**

Today the patriarchs,
not taken in by
historical situations
grew breasts
gave birth
and stayed home
to celebrate –
[forty-seven years
of undivided life.]

At the *Journal* and elsewhere Sonja encouraged the growth of various authors and contributors. She was particularly supportive of women writers, professionals, and religious. With many contacts in the Zen and psychology circuits she was often known as a private advocate for equality, compassion and integrity in personal and organizational relations. Over the years a number of both men and women
regarded her as a mentor, an advisor, and a unique teacher. Her teaching emphasized the centrality of living in the present and connecting to what is natural. She valued ‘ordinariness’ and being ‘nothing special’ in her teaching and professional life, and she had a recommendation for those identified with this field.

Transpersonalists must be careful not to be categorized as people who are looking for a way to ‘transcend existence’. It is, of course, impossible to satisfactorily answer this kind of search. I think transpersonal leaders should stress the ‘natural’ not the ‘metaphysical’. You can have a body of theory, of course, (as is the custom of our time) but it should only exist to point to the natural (S. Margulies, personal communication, undated).

It is worth noting here that she is implying that ‘transpersonalists’ have some choice in how they see themselves and/or allow themselves to be seen. And her recommendation that theory should point to ‘the natural’ aligned her with the empirical emphasis of JTP (Sutich, 1969).

Sonja came to know the writings, attitudes, practices and careers of academics, clinicians, counselors, and other mental health professionals. She never regarded herself as a member of those professions although she often had much respect for them. She definitely did not see her work as psychological counseling or as therapy. She was, however, particularly concerned about disturbed individuals pursuing demanding spiritual paths and was critical and occasionally intervened when spiritual teachers or other professionals she knew abused students or clients. Almost always her response to these situations was private, rarely visible, and could be helpful or even corrective. One of her specific concerns was the pathologizing of the healthy spiritual/religious search. When she learned that work she had supported for publication in JTP (Lukoff, Zanger, & Lu, 1992; 1993; Lukoff, Lu, Turner, & Gackenbach, 1995) had led to a clarification in the diagnosis of Religious or Spiritual Problem in the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), she told me, “This is the kind of thing I have worked for. Perhaps we have helped!”

In the 1974–1976 years Tony Sutich was transferring his editorial responsibilities to others and working intensively on his doctoral dissertation (he had previously completed only 9th grade, as a teenager). His health, amazingly robust despite his complete disability, was beginning to deteriorate due to medication side effects. In the spring of 1976 at age 69 a physician advised him that his damaged heart was failing. His dissertation had been recently completed and accepted (Sutich, 1976a), and at my request his doctoral committee met with him at his home and awarded him the doctorate in psychology in an early evening ceremony. He was pleased, happy, and grateful. We all were.

Tony passed peacefully in the middle of that night and his wife called Sonja for help. Arriving soon thereafter, Sonja, her husband, and Kobun Chino sat at Tony’s side, chanting the long Parinirvana Sutra into the night (Margulies, 2013a). Tony’s distraught wife, now calmed, asked “What was that strange long chant?” Kobun answered, “Buddha’s words to his people when he died.” “Well,” she insisted, “what did Buddha say?” And Kobun answered, “I’m going away now. Please take good care of yourself.”
In subsequent years Sonja had to meet a host of serious unexpected challenges: The death of her husband at age 50; her and her daughter’s simultaneously recurring breast cancer and her daughter’s death, as well as the passing of her parents, her sister and sister-in-law, and Kobun, the Zen teacher who transmitted her. There were other extreme events she faced successfully because she met them with an open mind, with clarity, and the precise focus developed in intensive meditative practice.

In later years Sonja also had wonderful experiences. In 2003 the marriage of her son expanded her family and this joyous occasion began a decade of ease and comfort for her. In 2007 Sonja’s many contributions to the Journal and this field were publically recognized when she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in a ceremony at the graduate school, the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (now Sofia University).

In her last decade Sonja continued to follow her love of literature. She read much less psychology per se and maintained her reading of the English language versions of selected Chinese and Japanese Buddhist classics. She was fond of Basho’s haiku and Dogen’s teaching manuals and sampled freely among the teaching stories of the ancients and the moderns.

Thinking about her life over the decades it seems nearly impossible for me to adequately describe the subtlety and reach of her way of being in the world. In listening to others describe her I realize that we, her survivors, saw her in remarkably similar ways: As a direct, resilient, confident person and a compassionate exemplar of her chosen path. She was generous with her energy, time and resources and exercised a no-nonsense, ‘cutting-through’ method of teaching. She received the love and respect of family and friends, and also understood the suffering of the world and of so many individuals in her life. She perceived “the sacred within the secular” (Maslow, 1969). In the tradition she followed she knew ‘big-mind’ (Suzuki, 1970).

But these are my comments, and she can well speak for herself as she did in her first and final book, a collection of her poems, Local News (Margulies, 2013b) published a week before she passed. She had time to read from her new book to family and friends. Here I select some lines for us.

From a stanza of ‘Mind Moments’ (p. 117)

Partings and reunions
Joys and sorrows,
Tears and laughter,
Having had it all, I can’t complain,
As my hair grows white.

From the last stanza of ‘Ruins’ (p. 98)

Ruins are great teachers.
Ruins tell the tale of time
and death and change and of the need
to pay attention to each moment
while it lasts, for the present
is where our life is lived.

From ‘Zen Footprints’ (p. 127)

Unconcerned with ceremonial matters
the drifting raft
sans sails
still crosses over
to the other side

And in the last stanza of ‘Going On’ she concludes (p. 67)

Something there is that
is not born
and does not die.

NOTES

1 The author served in various capacities with the Journal Transpersonal Psychology, the Association for
Transpersonal Psychology, and the Transpersonal Institute from their inception until 2000.

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The Author

Miles A. Vich has served in various roles, 1962–1999, in the fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, including Editor of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology, as a founding Board member of the Transpersonal Institute, as Editor of the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology and Executive Director of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology. Since retiring in 2000 he has consulted on various projects, pursued a longstanding interest in art, and archived many transpersonal documents in the ITP (now Sofia University) Library, Palo Alto, California, and many humanistic era documents in the University of California, Davidson Library, Santa Barbara.