

# Harry Levin

*March 3, 1925 — May 30, 1993*

After taking only two and one-half years to earn a Ph.D. degree in psychology at the University of Michigan, Harry Levin became immediately involved in a landmark research project. In collaboration with Robert Sears and Eleanor Maccoby, he co-authored what is perhaps the best known single book in developmental psychology: *Patterns of Child Rearing*, a book that debunked both popular and scientific myths about the effects of different patterns of child rearing. This book is also remarkable for its graceful and thoughtful treatment of the relations between Freudian theory and classical learning theory.

Harry moved to Cornell in 1955. He became quickly involved in activities across several departments, eventually settling into the Department of Psychology, where he was the first William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Psychology. He developed and directed Project Literacy, a large scale project that led to a revolution of psychological and educational views of the nature of reading. One of the outcomes of this work was a marvelous collaboration with Eleanor Gibson that led to their highly influential book, *The Psychology of Reading*. This book had a major impact not only on academic researchers but also on parents and elementary school teachers and it still stands as the single most influential work on the subject. A related line of work culminated in Harry's book on the eye-voice span, that seemingly innocuous difference between what you are currently reading out loud and what you have visually encoded. Harry demonstrated that this span was deeply involved in understanding both the nature of all reading and in understanding many of the difficulties confronting slow readers.

Harry's later work focused on the social psychology of language. A highly creative and fascinating series of studies ensued showing how individuals adjust their style of speech in different social contexts, whether they be those of the lecture hall, the doctor's office, or the day care center. He uncovered an extraordinary range of ways in which these differences are manifested in speech, ranging from changes in syntactic structure to shifts towards an increased use of the latinate lexicon in more formal settings. He helped all of us see for the first time the dynamic and complex systems of subtle codes that are used in language in real social situations, codes that can have profound impacts on how we understand what others really mean.

Harry's research achievements only touch upon his extraordinary contributions to Cornell. As chair of the Department of Psychology he attracted and retained some of the most eminent faculty in that department's history, including several members of the National Academy of Sciences and one of the very few psychologists

to ever receive the National Science Medal. He successfully challenged the university's nepotism rule when he saw it working against the career developments of women doing research at Cornell. He instilled a new vigor and enthusiasm in the department that continues to grow and expand almost twenty years after his chairmanship.

As dean of the college, Harry drew heavily on his ability to embrace and take a genuine interest in all forms of understanding and scholarly achievement. He advocated unfailingly the centrality of the liberal arts and sciences to intellectual and creative life and to the university itself. He helped departments develop extraordinary faculties and worked hard to obtain resources to support an outstanding faculty and outstanding curricula. He also cared deeply about undergraduate education. While he knew that strong teaching and advising were products of inquisitive, intelligent, caring minds rather than clever schemes, he also knew that undergraduate education needs direct attention. He appointed a series of faculty committees to study and recommend to the faculty ways to improve general education, advising, and the quality of instruction. The Undergraduate Research Program, the College Scholar Program as it is now, and a firm commitment to T.A. training are all legacies of Harry's deanship.

Harry took great pride in his students. Indeed his students glowed with pleasure when they were around him as they gained enormous passion from his pride and nurturance. Harry was the sort of teacher who wanted to give his students a lifelong gift of learning and how to think, and he did so on countless occasions. They would respond with a passion and enthusiasm that we all dream of kindling in our own students. He was always trying to find ways to support students and help them succeed and they clearly understood and appreciated such an interest.

Harry's life was characterized by a deep joy of discovery, a great pleasure and enthusiasm in sharing his work with others, and profound integrity. For those reasons he was the ideal colleague. Dropping by Harry's office was invariably an opportunity to learn something new. He would almost always have a new book or article that he wanted to share and would have a special perspective he wanted to explore with any visitor. Harry was also always good in a crisis, when a tough decision needed to be made, or when action needed to be taken quickly. Whether that crisis was at a personal or college level, it was immensely reassuring to know that Harry was there to make sure it was resolved.

One cannot write or remember Harry without remembering his full enjoyment of the good things of life: music, science, language and languages, literature, art, food, and conversation. But most all, one remembers his interest in people—in their backgrounds, their perceptions and orderings of the world, and in their personal lives.

Much of Harry's own great dignity rose from his clear conviction that everyone else had great dignity as well and deserved to be treated as such.

Together with his wife of 47 years, Debby, Harry has made an enormous difference to all members of his department, the university as a whole and the broader community. Their three children, David, Lynn, and Rebecca, are glowing examples of their ability to create passion and values in others; and the process continues in their wonderful grandchildren.

*Lynne Abel, Bruce Halpern, Frank Keil*