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# A UNIQUE PRESENCE!

Elisabeth Henderson

*Doris - a woman with a wonderfully enabling disguise! She looks just like everyone's idea of the lovely mother and wife – which she of course is - warm, modest, twinkly and interested in people. The superficial onlooker may not, however, be immediately alerted to the plus of emotional and intellectual intelligence that lurks beneath the surface - to see straightaway underneath, to the big brain and wide understanding.*

My first meetings with Doris were when I worked on a group developmental consultancy to the Cultural Geography Research Group for her. This was a highly unusual venture in academic circles back in the 1990's. Doris wanted to address a development of the working relationships of her team by integrating the venerable members of the department (the oldies) and the younger PhDs (the newbies) to combine together as an academic community of excellence for students. In this, she successfully created an environment of peer support for academics with different objectives and aspirations in new levels of cooperation, using each other as resources yet remaining individual with their own ideas.

As part of this search for ways a team offers more to the students than a series of individuals, Doris attended a programme at The Recess College to study in person how people can block OR generate creativity in working together. Indeed she came as a trainee staff member - being a full professor at the time! - to explore how students look at or up to (the) boss, how they view (or project onto) the person in charge. Simultaneously she explored how a director/boss can work with how authority is perceived by others, not with resentment but with understanding and working cooperation. My sense is that this essential example of Doris' lifelong search for aware understanding was fundamentally based on her personal qualities of openness, willingness not to stand on her own status and of acquiring knowledge in this ego-less way - and

this is what has made her so effective and original. All this and much more contributed to her skill and dexterity in her many roles in and beyond the University of Berne.

My next contacts with Doris were when she invited me to Georgia, Japan and Israel on field trips and to conferences. One of the best bits of learning for me was actually the process of travelling with Doris to see how she picks up information. What I learnt from her is how strongly dedicated she is to grasping and understanding the point of view of the *other* – their aspirations, their hopes and interactions – weighing it up with her own understanding, yet not imposing a normative framework on them.

My fantasy of Doris as a maternal figure in disguise is not completely unjustified – just in this case transposed into another setting. All her career she has nudged and gently supported people in their careers, watching over them, helping them to progress. Her ultimate triumph is the way she has built groups of academics to work, interact and network together, who continue in her tradition of developing the next generation.

With love and best for the future.

#### **AUTHOR**

**Elisabeth Henderson** is an Organisation Development consultant at the cutting edge of major political and economic change projects in Poland, India, UK and The Netherlands. She founded The Recess College for Senior Executives and Professionals for key clients to work at clarity and maturity in leadership, organisational and personal change.