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In Memory of Tanya Reinhart

Noam Chomsky

March 18, 2007

It is painful, and hard, to write about the loss of an old and cherished friend. Tanya Reinhart was just that.

Tanya was a brilliant and creative scientist. I can express my own evaluation of her work most concisely by recalling that years ago, when I was thinking about the future of my own department after my retirement, I tried to arrange to offer Tanya the invitation to be my eventual replacement, plans that did not work out, much to my regret, mostly for bureaucratic reasons.

I will not try to review her remarkable contributions to virtually every major area of linguistic studies. Included among them are original and highly influential investigations of syntactic structure and operations, referential dependence, principles of lexical semantics and their implications for syntactic organization, unified approaches to cross-linguistic semantic interpretation of complex structures that appear superficially to vary widely, the theory of stress and intonation, efficient parsing systems, the interaction of internal computations with thought and sensorimotor systems, optimal design as a core principle of language, and much else. Her academic work extended well beyond, to literary theory, mass media and propaganda, and other core elements of intellectual culture.

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But Tanya's outstanding professional work was only one part of her life, and of our long and intimate friendship. She was one of the most courageous and honorable defenders of human rights whom I have ever been privileged to meet. As all honest people should, she focused her attention and energy on the actions of her own state and society, for which she shared responsibility – including the responsibility, which she never shirked, to expose crimes of state and to defend the victims of repression, violence, and conquest. Her numerous articles and books drew away the veil that concealed criminal and outrageous actions, and shone a searing light on the reality that was obscured, all of immense value to those who sought to understand and to react in a decent way. Her activism was not limited to words, important as these were. She was on the front line of direct resistance to intolerable actions, an organizer and a participant, a stance that one cannot respect too highly. She will be remembered not only as a resolute and honorable defender of the rights of Palestinians, but also as one of those who have struggled to defend the moral integrity of her own Israeli society, and its hope for decent survival.

Tanya's passing is a terrible loss, not only to her family and those fortunate enough to come to know her personally, and to those she defended and protected with such dedication and courage, but to everyone concerned with freedom, justice, and an honorable peace.