



Peter Lorimer Benson

May 2, 1946 – October 2, 2011

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. (Howard Zinn, 2004)

Throughout his life, Peter Benson worked and dreamed to spin the world in a different direction. A social scientist by vocation, Peter transformed complex scientific insights into a compelling, clear, and concrete vision of what each person could do to spin the world in the direction of justice and compassion. Though these commitments were most evident through his leadership of Search Institute, they had their roots in his childhood and early career.

Peter's Formative Years

Born in Duluth, Minnesota, to John and Dorothy Benson, Peter grew up watching his father, a Lutheran pastor, and mother, a homemaker, model social concern during the turbulent 1950s and 1960s. He recounted stories of his father giving calling cards to homeless people who came to the parsonage asking for help. With that card, they could go to a local restaurant for a meal, and the restaurant would bill the pastor. No one was ever turned down.

The Benson family moved every five years or so, following his father's assignments. After

Duluth, they lived in Salina, Kansas; Chicago; Joliet, Illinois; and Rockford, Illinois, where Peter graduated from high school. He attended

Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, where he earned a double major in psychology and religion, became active in campus antiwar protests, and was captain of the tennis team. Upon college graduation in 1968, Peter attended Yale University, where he earned an M.A. in psychology of religion (1970), studying under James E. Dittes, who became a lifelong mentor. During this time, he married his college sweetheart, Tunie Munson, a writer, educator, and social activist. After completing his Yale degree, Peter and Tunie moved to Denver where he studied under Bernard Spilka at the University of Denver. He earned another M.A. (1972) and a Ph.D. (1973) in

experimental social psychology, with a concentration in child development. His dissertation focused on the development of altruism, establishing a lifelong interest in how the inner life shapes behavior.

Selected Books

All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents (Jossey-Bass, 1997, 2006)

The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence (Sage, 2006)

Parent, Teacher, Mentor, Friend: How Every Adult Can Change Kids' Lives (Search Institute, 2010)

Religion on Capitol Hill: Myths & Realities (Harper & Row, 1982)

Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers (Jossey-Bass, 2008)

The Quicksilver Years: The Hopes and Fears of Young Adolescents (Harper & Row, 1987)

Vision: Awakening Your Potential to Create a Better World (Templeton Press, 2006)

What Kids Need to Succeed (Free Spirit, 1994, 1998, 2012)

From Academia to Search Institute

Peter began his career in academia. His first full-time position was at Eastern Michigan

University in Ypsilanti (1973–75), where his daughter, Liv, was born in 1974. The family moved the next year to Richmond, Indiana, where Peter joined the faculty of Earlham College. In 1977, he became the founding co-chair of the college's Program in Human Development and Social Relations, which

blended anthropology, biology, ethics, psychology, and sociology. Among other features, the program—which became the school's most popular major—required that no professor could solely lecture in her or his own discipline; rather, they were to model ongoing scholarship and a collaborative approach by teaching in other fields.

The next key transition occurred when, in 1978, Peter accepted the persistent invitation of Dr. Merton P. Strommen, founder of Search Institute, to move to Minnesota and join the independent nonprofit's research team. The



family settled in St. Louis Park, where son Kai was born in 1980. In 1989, they moved to

Minnetonka. At Search, Peter embarked on an unprecedented study, interviewing members of Congress about their religious beliefs and how they shaped members' voting records. He also began studying the values of young adolescents and their parents. In 1985, with Strommen's retirement, Peter became Search Institute's president.

At the time, Search Institute focused primarily on research in religious organizations

and prevention research. He guided the Institute's middle school curriculum *Human Sexuality: Values & Choices*, which led to Peter becoming known as Dr. Sex. During this time, Peter made landmark contributions to prevention, psychology of religion, and related fields. In fact, at the age of 43, he received the American Psychological

Association's William James Award for career achievement in the scientific study of religion. However, Peter had a broader vision. It was at

Selected Board Memberships

America's Promise Alliance,
Washington, D.C.

Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois

Institute for Youth Education &
Families, National League of Cities

John Templeton Foundation, Board of
Advisors

Violence Prevention Initiative, Mayor's
Office, City of Minneapolis

Search Institute that his three biggest ideas (he loved “big ideas”) came to fruition.

Big Idea #1: Developmental Assets

Sitting in a coffee shop with piles of statistical printouts and yellow writing pads in the late 1980s, Peter began weaving together what would become known as the Developmental Assets. (See: www.search-institute.org/assets.) A National Press Club release in 1990 of a report titled *The Troubled Journey: A Profile of American Youth* introduced his conceptual framework to the world.

In the years that followed, Peter traveled all across the United States, informing anyone who would listen about the assets and their role in helping kids succeed. Fueled by imagination, passion, and tenacity, and supported by an



expanding team at Search Institute, Peter saw his vision come to life in thousands of schools,



organizations, and communities. Dozens of national and international organizations such as the America’s Promise Alliance, the National Collaboration for Youth, the Salvation Army, World Vision International, the YMCA of the USA, and many others have incorporated Peter’s vision and strategies into their work. His impact on adolescent theory and research grew, and the asset approach became the most influential framework for understanding and strengthening



positive youth development in the world. The assets have been measured in more than 3 million young people around the world and

referenced in more than 17,000 peer-reviewed journal articles and other academic publications.

Big Idea #2: Healthy Communities •

Healthy Youth

The second idea closely followed the first. Peter strongly believed that the people of a community had the power within themselves to build young people's assets. One of his favorite lines in speeches was, "If you breathe, you're on the team." Rather than using policy-oriented strategies that involved convincing power brokers to adopt new ideas, Peter sought to unleash the passions, wisdom, and commitments of "asset champions" to claim, shape, and advance the vision of asset-rich communities.

Constantly linking research and social change, he guided a growing national network of communities under the label of Healthy Communities • Healthy Youth while also editing an academic book series titled *The Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society*. Peter's ability to maintain scientific rigor, while also communicating clearly and passionately with laypeople, youth, and professionals made him a unique voice for children and youth. His own kids noted that, in certain settings, he attained near-celebrity status with both youth and adults, and they affectionately called him their "rock star Dad."



Big Idea #3: Sparks and Thriving

Soon after the turn of the millennium, Peter focused much of his energy on exploring what it means for young people to thrive. Through collaborative research with leading national scholars, he coined the term "sparks" to describe an individual's deepest passions and interests that give purpose, focus, joy, and energy and that are good and useful for the world. However, ever aware of the balance of inner strength and external supports, he emphasized authentic relationships as critical for discovering and nurturing sparks.

The research and strategies for nurturing sparks have just begun to gather momentum, but they have already captured

the imagination of many people, from schools and communities across the United States to the TEDxTC conference to youth organizers in the Middle East and, most significantly, the Dalai Lama, who interviewed Peter about sparks in 2009.

Though speaking with the Dalai Lama in front of an audience of thousands was a great honor, Peter was just as excited to talk with youth about their sparks. In August 2011, U.S. Representative

Keith Ellison invited Peter to talk about sparks with 30 north Minneapolis teens. Peter was thrilled by their enthusiasm and celebrated them as the latest and greatest “sparks champions.” In December 2011, he was to be honored by *KidSpirit* in New York City for his essay on sparks—the only article by an adult that the teen editors selected for recognition. That’s how Peter believed change happened: each person catches, then embodies, the vision.

Of course, Peter did not do this work alone. He consistently asked colleagues and partners to join him in bringing the big ideas to life. He invited scientists, writers, editors, managers, assistants, trainers, and others to

work *with* him, not *for* him, treating each

person’s perspectives as important contributions. He knew better than anyone that he accomplished what he did in part because of the team he assembled to work together in the challenging work of changing the world. As a result, staff and colleagues gave their all to the vision Peter shared

and made part of them.

The Power of the Human Spirit

Each person who knew Peter recounts a favorite trait or story. Many talk about the way

he connected with them personally every time they saw him. Others recall his competitive spirit on the tennis court. Many remember his insistence that visitors slide down the fire pole he installed at Search Institute to add a touch of playfulness to the workplace. Then there’s the time he asked a teen, not an adult,

about proper etiquette as he prepared to attend a White House dinner. The list could go on and on.



Peter lived life to its fullest, playing a round of golf a week before he passed away. He was the quinessential optimist. Yes, he encountered numerous obstacles and challenges. Some groups were not as receptive to his ideas as he thought they should be. It was often hard to get “air time” in a media environment obsessed with conflict, novelty, and sensationalism. And he wasn’t afraid to take on some of the most difficult issues of our time. (For example, he served on the board of the Center for Victims of Torture.) Yet he maintained his center and his unyielding belief in human capacity and human spirit.

Peter believed that social scientists need to be more than observers of what is. They have a responsibility, he said, to articulate what could be, then to work to close the gap between the real and ideal. That’s what Peter did throughout his life and work. For the millions of people whose life he touched, that gap became a little bit smaller.

And the world has spun in a new direction.

— Eugene C. Roehlkepartain,
Search Institute

Peter’s Impact and Reach by the Numbers

Peter loved counting things. In that spirit, here are some numbers about Peter’s influence:

Number of books, articles, and other publications Peter wrote	220+
Number of times Peter has been cited in a scholarly journal article	7,125
Number of U.S. communities that have used Peter’s work	600+
Number of countries that Peter’s work has reached	60+
Number of “hits” in a Google search for “Peter L. Benson”	401,000+
Number of students surveyed using Peter’s “assets survey”	3 million+
Amount of funding he raised while leading Search Institute	\$100 million+
Number of lives touched and transformed	Countless

Opportunities to Honor Peter's Legacy

Learn more about Peter's legacy and watch some of his videos:

www.search-institute.org/remembering-peter-benson

Share condolences with the family:

www.caringbridge.org/visit/benson

Make a financial contribution in lieu of flowers:

Search Institute

Attn: Peter Benson Sparks Fund

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