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Lifetimes in Humanist Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Briant Lee and Alfred McClung Lee describe their family backgrounds, their dedication to humane values and their interest in alleviating social problems. The authors discuss the humanistic social science organizations they founded which were a reflection of their values.

Where do life-history recollections begin? With what should such a talk as this start?

We have professionally spent a lot of time studying life-history materials on people from many social levels and ethnic backgrounds. They always show us the extent to which people are products and parts of many on-going social processes. We cannot become acquainted with other people unless we know more about them than their daily routines and unusual social accomplishments. Where did they come from?

So we will not start our recollections at our important "blind" date in Oakmont, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1926. We recall how much fun it was getting acquainted in the evening quiet of the local cemetery! A year later, Betty had finished her sophomore year. Al had graduated. He was making barely enough money to support the two of us. We got married.

This paper was presented on June 9, 1990, at the Sociological Practice Association annual meeting in Providence, Rhode Island.

But where did we come from? At various times between 1608 and 1837, our ancestors managed to survive the fever-ridden ships from northern European countries and the difficulties of finding a home and earning a living in this country. We do not know the names of all the approximately 250 immigrants from whom we are descended. They were Irish, Welsh, Scottish, French, Swedish, English, Danish, German, and Swiss. Older genealogies also mention Italian, Spanish, and Iroquois roots. So we are mongrels, and our charming and thriving grandchildren and our first great-grandson are even more so—both genetically and ethnically.

Betty's Briants were French Huguenots who settled for a while in Belfast after having been driven out of France. Then they fled from famine conditions in Ireland in the 1740s to the American frontier. Morgan Briant became the first European to drive a wagon through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. His son, William, married Daniel Boone's sister, Mary. William was killed by Indians in the American Revolution. Betty's father's mother, Clara, was a Jones whose Quaker ancestors emigrated from Wales in the 1740s. Her mother's parents, Eudora Cornelia Crane and Frank Scott Riley, were also descended from early arrivers. The Rileys had been Dublin merchants. In this country they were farmers and then got involved in railroad management. The Cranes were among the founders of New Haven, Connecticut, and then of Elizabeth, New Jersey. They were Congregationalists or Baptists. As they moved west to West Virginia, they were chiefly merchants and were politically and commercially conservative.

Since all of Betty's grandparents had died before she was born, she knows little of their personal characteristics. In contrast with Al's situation, too, she had only occasional contact with relatives because shortly after their marriage in 1901 her parents moved to Pittsburgh, somewhat distant from their West Virginia home. In addition, both of Betty's father's brothers and his only sister, as well as her mother's only sibling, her brother, went to the West Coast to seek their fortunes, then a popular move.

So far as he knows, Al is not at all related to the Robert E. Lee family. His immigrant ancestor, Robert, lived in a farmhouse in Norwell, Nottinghamshire, until Oliver Cromwell's troops destroyed that royalist hotbed. This convinced the Lees that they should migrate. When they settled in Long Island at Hempstead, they were at first Episcopalians. They became Presbyterians, and this dissent from the Church of England forced them to move to Yorktown Heights well north of New York City and the environs controlled by the Anglican ecclesiastics. As Dissenters, the Lees willingly fought in what King George III called "the Presbyterian war." George Washington's army was at least two-fifths Irish Dissenters or Presbyterians. Shortly after the Revolution, Al's ancestors became and married Quakers.

About 1811, Caleb Lee walked from his parents' farm in Yorktown Heights to become an apprentice to a merchant tailor in Pittsburgh. He and his wife, who was also a birthright Quaker, were among the founders of the First Baptist Church of Pittsburgh. Their fifteen children included George who, much to his father's eventual disillusioned disgust with clergy and churches, became a Baptist minister. George, Al's grandfather, married the daughter of a Presbyterian clergyman and changed to preaching that faith. But George was also in politics and in business. He needed to be. He and his wife, Rebecca Gilchrist McClung Lee, had and raised ten children, all of whom they sent to teachers' training or other types of advanced schools.

Al's other grandfather was a devout atheist, highly critical of theology and of churches which he called "temples of ignorance and superstition." He was an attorney and politician. Al's parents decided to get married in an Episcopal church and to be members of that denomination in order to avoid church-family involvements with the Presbyterians.

Our four parents were born after the Civil War into modest and struggling middle-class families. They deeply involved themselves in church and in other community organizations. Betty's parents even organized a Baptist church in Sheraden, the Pittsburgh area in which they lived. This required effort and dedication over many years. Both mothers were trained as stenographers and served as often as they could in paid positions as secretaries. This helped them to carry out the family obsession with higher education for their children. They both agitated actively for better educational opportunities and for women's rights. The fathers were opposed to militarism, to war, and to imperialism, and they were active in their churches and in such ritualistic lodges as the Masons, Elks, and the Knights of Pythias. The fathers dedicated themselves to their professions, and tried to help with such efforts as the Boy Scouts.

William Wolfer Briant, Sr., Betty's father, started out as a telegrapher and a reporter of sports and racing events for newspapers, but then he developed into a personnel manager for the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation in Pittsburgh.

Alfred McClung Lee, Sr., graduated from the State Normal College at Indiana, Pennsylvania, taught public school for several years, and then decided that he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his McClung uncles and his older brother and become an attorney. He supported himself as a student in the University of Pittsburgh Law School by serving as a reporter for several of the city's daily newspapers.

In our capitalistic society, both of our fathers were torn between the social welfare commitments with which they were raised and the opportunistic and exploitative pressures of their employers or clients. This led Al Lee, Sr., through bankruptcy and many difficult and unprofitable legal proceedings in behalf of

victims of exploitation and suppression. He especially enjoyed serving as a scoutmaster. It led Bill Briant, Sr., eventually to being replaced in the steel plant's personnel work by a relative of the Laughlins with a more capitalistic approach to human problems. So Betty's father spent his last years as a farmer and as an agitator for socialism.

Both of our mothers, Adah May Riley Briant and Edna Hamor Lee, also were disturbing and independent activists who provided us with useful models. That was especially true after they had the right to vote in 1920. They refused to accept rationalizations for society being as it is. Far from being either socialists or communists, they did what they could to help people with problems in their communities. Even before they could vote, they organized women's clubs, church social welfare projects, and demonstrations before courts, legislative bodies, and school boards. Year after year they made useful differences in their communities' lives.

All four of our parents were committed to higher education. They deprived themselves in many ways to help us and our brothers—Betty's two and Al's one, for we had no sisters—to acquire advanced education. Betty's brothers thus accumulated an M.D. and a D.D.S. in addition to her Ph.D. in sociology and anthropology. Al's brother earned a Ph.D. in physics to add to his own Ph.D. in sociology and anthropology.

In view of our backgrounds, it is little wonder that we found our way to clinical or applied or humanist sociology. Friends who know our backgrounds can see how that discipline offered us the kind of methods and perspectives with which to try to pursue interests in which we have been involved since our teen years and in which our four parents found their chief interests and concerns. Our lives have been further enriched through our experiences in rearing our two sons, with all the attendant difficulties and joys.

In view of those backgrounds, and also in recognition of the desirability of having some degree of community life in our anonymous urban areas, we experimented a lot with possible church connections. We have finally come to belong to a Unitarian church and a Quaker meeting as frankly agnostic members of each. Fortunately, neither of those requires a commitment to a creed.

But then there are problems with what humanist sociology means to others and to us. What is humanism? What is sociology? We are not sectarian humanists, and we have doubts about the utility and accuracy of a great deal of the literature labeled sociological.

We feel that since our high school days, we have been stimulated to discover and to serve humane goals. Aided by family problems and public events, we have sought to search out and understand the nature of people's relations with one another and with the general social environment. In these efforts, we have

sometimes found that we were mistaken, misled, or confused, but we have constantly tried to discover our errors and blunders, those of others, and tried to moderate or correct them. In all this, we had no holy writ to guide us. We could just do what we and our friends and associates might do to sift what appeared to be the most dependable examples of human experience.

We are proud of the idealistic but non-sectarian nature of the two humanist social scientific organizations that we started. Both the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), since 1950, and the Association for Humanist Sociology (AHS), since 1975, have exhibited broad interdisciplinary concerns. They have both attracted many creative and constructive social scientists to their conventions and publications. The Sociological Practice Association (SPA), which we helped to found in 1978, supplements both SSSP and AHS. Some have tried to identify the AHS with a sectarian religious humanism, such as is represented by the American Humanist Association, but AHS presidents and editors have brought a stimulating range of viewpoints to their leadership in the organization.

The humanist sociologists with whom we like to associate come from a range of disciplinary and religious backgrounds. These include people who might be labeled Jews, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Protestants, Agnostics, Atheists, or whatever, but whose concerns are similarly dedicated to an open and hopeful search for humane problems, questions, answers, and strategies. They and we view with anxiety the mounting and discouraging human crises, but we all retain what optimism and drive we can toward finding helpful strategies. This makes our living, even in the ninth decades of our lives, challenging and worthwhile.

Since we chose sociology as our professional path, why did we become so dissatisfied with its principal organization, then called the American Sociological Society (ASS), later suitably renamed the American Sociological Association (ASA)? Actually, our discontent with the field began in graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh and then continued at Yale University. We were intrigued by the field and its possibilities, but too many of our professors and texts and those in control of the ASS had concerns we looked upon as diverting. They were concerned about sociology not appearing to be "scientific" enough, not sufficiently resembling physics or chemistry. They wanted to be super-objective, highly quantified in their facts. What findings they revealed, they wanted to be uncontestable. And they talked on and on at their meetings about what sociology might be and about the philosophy of sociology. They had long rejected social work as "band aid" and inconsequential, long voted down any resolution concerned with current political and social issues offered at an annual business meeting. In contrast, we wanted to perceive and to understand social realities as they happened, as they can be seen by participant observers, and to contribute therapeutically to social welfare. Cross cultural and social historical

research had long been making disturbing and useful contributions not well absorbed into sociology.

We were not at all alone in this dissatisfaction, and we proceeded to bring together as many as we could who wanted to refocus the discipline on studies of realities, actual social problems, and on procedures for trying to cope with them for broad social benefit. It was the sort of emphasis we had demonstrated in our pre-1950 books on propaganda, race riots, the mass media, and then our *Principles of Sociology* and *Social Problems in America*.

The Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP) was an organization for which the time was ripe. We are happy with the tremendous influence it has had on the literature of the field. As one would expect, however, the organizationally ambitious who came to occupy its official positions were not always as independently creative as many of us would have liked. "Establishment thinking" and commercially rewarding case-making are all too tempting to too many. For some, the presidency of the SSSP became little more than a possible stepping stone toward the presidency of the ASA! Fortunately, the independence of the organization and the needs it fulfills keep it from succumbing to the temptations that continue to define the ASA's policies and procedures.

Twenty-five years after we got the SSSP under way, we felt another pressing need for organizational experimentation. We did not want to change the SSSP, but we felt it needed to be supplemented by a society that would more clearly and frankly be dedicated to humane values and to efforts to alleviate social problems. With the ASA declining in membership, fortunately such other outfits as the Sociological Practice Association, the sociological liberation movement, the autonomous regional societies, the Association for Humanist Sociology, and the Society for the Study of Social Problems keep the discipline alive and well and exciting—even to those who are now so antique!