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Foreword: Notes on a Friendship

Diane Jonte-Pace

Santa Clara University, djontepace@scu.edu

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Foreword: Notes on a Friendship

Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, reissued here more than 17 years after its initial publication, changed the framework for understanding the nature and function of ritual. Catherine M. Bell's profound insight was that ritual, long understood as thoughtless action stripped of context, is more interestingly understood as strategy: a culturally strategic way of acting in the world. Ritual is a form of social activity. This argument is meticulously established and beautifully presented in the chapters that follow. Unfolding like a commanding lecture, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* remains Catherine's greatest contribution to the study of religion.

This book, in many ways, constitutes one part of what Anthony Giddens would call the "front and back regions" of any scholarly life. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* presents the theories and observations that Catherine placed "front" and center for all to see. Explicit in her life but also embedded in this book, however, are other lessons. They linger in the "back region," so to speak, for someone to notice and point out.

These lessons are strikingly visible to me because, for thirty years Catherine Bell was a friend, a mentor, and an inspiration to me. I met her first at the University of Chicago in the late '70s when we were graduate students at the Divinity School. I was studying Freud, Rorschach, and religion; she was studying Chinese morality books. Hearing her present her research in Joseph Kitagawa's seminar, was an "aha experience" for me: "So that's how to do a seminar presentation!" I found myself taking notes on how she organized her material and presented her thesis. In 1985 Catherine joined the Religious Studies department at Santa Clara University where I had been teaching for a year, and that graduate school "aha experience" deepened into a close friendship. During our years as colleagues, I found myself continuing to take notes on Catherine's way of thinking, working, and living – her "practices" until her death in 2008.

Note 1: Don't be constrained by the present or the past.

Catherine had a remarkable ability to think beyond the frame of both current discourse and past practice. While many scholars recount the debates that have shaped their field and make a small contribution to move the discourse

forward, she transformed the way that scholars in our field think and write. She sketched out contemporary debates, traced historical lineages, and then took stunning conceptual leaps, rearranging pieces in entirely new, and thoroughly enlightening, ways. There's a fearlessness to her work. She speaks the truth, unconstrained by concerns about critical reactions – an important lesson for those whose schooling in tact and diplomacy can place limits on creative vision.

Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice illustrates well her fearless intellectual style and her sense of freedom from past constructions. The book received the award for the “Best First Book in the History of Religions” in 1994, and has redirected the thinking of the discipline. One cannot write on ritual today without citing her work. Her ability to perceive the current topography and see beyond the horizon inspires me still.

Note 2: Look for large patterns and ask big questions.

Catherine's practice of asking big questions and seeking large patterns is clearly visible in her work; it was evident in her course development and pedagogy as well. She structured every course around a compelling intellectual question that would both capture the interest of her students and tackle an unresolved problem in the discipline. Her students – all undergraduates – participated in creating scholarly trajectories, sorting through data, discerning patterns, and struggling to find answers. Whether teaching methodology in “Ways of Studying Religion,” area studies in “Asian Religions,” or advanced courses like “Magic, Science and Religion,” “Time and the Millennium,” or “Religion and Violence,” she challenged and inspired her students to ask real questions, to understand the significance of those questions for the contemporary world, and to perceive the larger patterns emerging from texts and practices.

Always attentive to the patterns in how students learn, it was Catherine who first brought me a copy of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive development: she had designed a series of assignments to guide students toward increasingly sophisticated thinking, challenging them to move from comparison to interpretation, and then to analysis and evaluation. She suggested that in the classroom “nothing stands alone” – every text must be carefully paired with another so that students can tease out contradictions and develop new syntheses. And she created guidelines on “how to read a book when you're not reading it for pleasure.” Her instructions started with self awareness and self inquiry: “What are your questions?” Next, she instructed, one must ask about the author as “Other”: “What is the author's intent?” Finally, she directed her students to inte-

grate self understanding and close reading of the text by “engaging in critical reflection and creative response.” Her guidelines worked: her students were truly touched by the books they read with her. They produced remarkable work in her courses, and they carried newly developed critical and creative abilities into other courses, into graduate programs, and into life beyond the academy.

Note 3: Transform the personal into the professional.

Catherine was a master at understanding how individual questions or problems could be addressed through structural changes. Her legacy in this regard is visible within a number of lasting structures at Santa Clara. Experiencing a need for greater community among women she created a still-thriving Women’s Faculty Group. Perceiving a need for mentoring of junior faculty she urged the creation of a now flourishing Faculty Development Program. Struggling within a hierarchical administrative structure, she led a movement to transform university governance and decision-making into a system that garnered a 1998 Ralph S. Brown Award for Shared Governance from the American Association of University Professors. She consistently used her own experience as a spark to ignite creative thinking and build community.

Catherine left behind an unfinished manuscript, *Believing and the Practice of Religion*, in which she wrote, “An investigation of a topic should begin with an exploration of why that topic warrants one’s interest in the first place. . . . An investigator should understand why the topic constitutes a ‘problem’ – at least for her.” She beautifully captures this shift from personal to professional: “Once I was a believer, thoughtfully and intimately committed, and then I was no longer one, with a different set of thoughts and emotions. While I was able to ‘explain’ my believing and my not-believing in the popular Freudian patois of the day, I wanted to assemble a fuller picture of what had happened and explore whether what was true for me might be useful for understanding others.”

And she proposed a new way of speaking about belief, a more self-conscious and critically reflexive analysis of the category of belief, aiming to change “where our confidence lies” when using the “language of belief.” Her goal: to create a conversation about “how we think of ourselves . . . and how we think about what we are doing with our inherited interpretive categories.” Catherine’s unfinished manuscript will be available to scholars through the archives of Santa Clara University’s library.

Note 4: Find pleasure in creativity.

Catherine's creativity transcended her academic and scholarly contributions. Her luminous spirit is vividly present in writings both playful and profound drafted for more limited audiences. At the turn of the millennium, she wrote a "Millennial Masque," a play in Shakespearean verse for a group of friends and colleagues to perform on New Year's Eve. She was to play "The Scholar"; I was to read the part of "Madame Butterfly" wearing a red silk kimono she had purchased in Japan. Her husband had the role of Cardinal Ex Corde; my husband was commissioned to be the musician for the performance. Other colleagues were assigned such roles as: "The Grim Reaper," "The Keeper of the Clocks," and the "Orphic Chorus."

The "Masque" was never performed. Tragically, Catherine spent the first night of the new millennium in the emergency room with the first symptoms of the multiple sclerosis that would shadow the last decade of her life. The "Millennial Masque" captures her spirit beautifully: it's literary, playful, and profound. It's about life, death, and love; beginnings and endings; and the desire for change. As if she anticipated her own life story, time and the millennium serve as metaphors for the presence of death in the midst of life:

*The time is upon us for a millennial shift
To mark the moment we offer this gift
If it be more beginning or end
I cannot presume to suggest or pretend
But whether welcomed or welcomed not
Tis a moment of time not soon forgot...
Time is what binds us and tears us apart
But for every ending we can attempt a new start.*

Writing in May 2009, just a year after her death, I am only too aware that these notes on a friendship fail to capture the luminous reality of Catherine's presence and practice. But I am immensely grateful to have had three decades – an extended "moment of time not soon forgot" – to take notes on the practice of a generous mentor, an inspiring colleague, and a dear friend. And I am honored to be a participant in the reissuing of this volume, an embodiment, in some sense, of Catherine's words: "for every ending we can attempt a new start."

Diane Jonte-Pace, Santa Clara University

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- No date. *Believing and the Practice of Religion*. Unpublished manuscript. Giddens, Anthony. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.