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Spotkania / dyskusje / polemiki

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Mother Mentor: A Tribute to Carolyn Ellis[1]



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It was 1993, early November.
Not yet an ethnographer,
but still, I remember
my other mentor,
Art Bochner,
said, “Meet my partner,
Carolyn.”

CDB Pizzeria,
eating my first fried green tomato[1]
(how prophetic),
I met her.

I had heard rumors.
“She’ll open your doors.”
“Be prepared to explore.”
“You should have known Art before:
contentious, even testy.
We call that period ‘B.C.’—
Before Carolyn.”

I beheld
her resplendent ensemble:
native print, vivid colors,
crowned at the ears
by gemstone and silver.

Her face, framed by soft curls,
was more supple and maternal
than I expected.

She took my hand in hers,
a touch that soothed and foreshadowed.
“I feel like I know you,”
said Carolyn.

I would learn later
that in her voice, she heard stigma,[2]

[1] Avnet, Kerner, Avnet (1991).
[2] Ellis (1998).

to me an enigma,
for I heard possibility,
vulnerability,
Investigating Subjectivity,[3]
a new vocabulary
of narrativity,
reflexivity,
autoethnography,
feminist methodology,
emotional sociology,[4]
and *Composing Ethnography*.[5]

Drawn by the magnetic force
of this voice
I enrolled
in a succession of her courses.

For Narratives of Illness,
we listened, bore witness
as stories
poured
forth
like blood:
rivulets of pain
signifying
life
and self-consciousness.

In Qualitative Methods, she taught us
to experience
the allegiance
of the personal and political,
the individual and cultural,
the affective and rational,
the therapeutic and intellectual.

As we surrendered
to her tenderness,
she rendered

[3] Ellis, Flaherty (1992).
[4] Ellis (1991a).
[5] Bochner, Ellis (1996).

the severed
intact,
blurred fiction and fact,
revealed kindness
as transgressive act.

A class called Emotions,
came with Lamott's *Operating Instructions*.[6]
This set in motion
systematic sociological introspection,[7]
the exploration
of Franck's *Separation*,[8]
and the never *Final Negotiations*.[9]

Disclosing our hunger,
exposing anger's heat, we searched
for closure
and the peace
of *Mercy Street*.[10]

But it wasn't all
so serious. In her world,
affliction is poetic, even humorous.

"Dr. Denzin," she'd greet,
"how I'd like you to meet," (not John and Jennifer,
Christine, and me) but "Heart Attack, Hodgkins,
and Bulimia Squared."
We learned to wear
the identities we most feared
from Carolyn.

In thick descriptions
of mothers,
brothers,
lovers
and Others,

[6] Lamott (1993).
[7] Ellis (1991b).
[8] Franck (1993).
[9] Ellis (1995).
[10] Sexton (1994).

loves beginning,
lives ending,
hearts breaking
and mending, her words testify that indeed,
"There are survivors."[11]

She has her critics
who sling their polemics:
"Soft, touchy feely."
"Promotes victimology."
"Who stole sociology?"

But beware those who wage
discursive war on this sage.
They emerge in her pages, crusty barnacles
for the next article
by Carolyn Ellis.

So many layers:
teacher,
nurturer,
caretaker,
lover of my second father,
garden sower,
dance master,
prolific writer,
fire walker,
gentle spirit,
tender of secrets,
mother mentor:
Carolyn Ellis.

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