

Beginning at the End: In Honor of Arthur Bochner

Laurel Richardson

Ohio State University

From: Laurel Richardson

To: Art Bochner

Sent: Thursday, November 14, 2002 8:20 PM

Subject: yikes!

I just looked at the NCA program online, and YIKES---I've just realized that I am to speak on the panel honoring YOU!!! YIKES!! You've written a letter to me for my session, but alas that takes places AFTER your session. If only my session came first, I could answer that letter. Oh my...!!! HELP HELP HELP...Cheers, laurel

To: Laurel Richardson

From: Art Bochner

Sent: Thursday, November 14, 9:20

Subject: yikes

Hi Laurel,

...Answering back my letter sounds like a great idea, though your reply would come before my presentation that would be neatly reflexive, wouldn't it? ...Cheers, Art.

November 15, 2002

Dear Art,

Thanks for your quick response to my email, and, well, thanks in general for being who you are. What I value so about our relationship is that we are often thinking about the same issues. You invite conversation about them. You don't dictate or close down our dialogues.

What I like most about our conversations is that no priority-claims arise, no ownership of ideas. There's no competition; no need to claim first-authorship; no desire to play science games. Rather, there is the deep pleasure and satisfaction of finding a kindred spirit, an academic struggling to make life and work meaningful. You are a needle in the university haystack. (Hah-choo!) Are you sneezing, too? Hard not to develop hay fever, isn't it?

Allergies—real and metaphoric—propelled me out of my university department into another one, and now, eight years later, I am trying to really move on—to embrace the wider world. As you say, to live a life. And, I hear how deeply you are agonizing over what's next for you. What kind of life do you want to live; to create; to write about? I deeply empathize with your aversion to writing anything that does not resonate with your own life.

Your influence is everywhere in the social sciences. You've been the primary spokesperson for narrative. More, than that, really. You've demonstrated how narrative might work as both story and theory. You've not veered from that project. Your account of your father's death is a classic. Your dramatic work with Carolyn Ellis showed us all a new way to write our lives into our work. Your editorships, institutional programs, teaching, and research all speak of your life engagement with the lives of others.

Before I met you, I had heard that you were a most brilliant student, a master of the scientific method, a shoe-in for disciplinary success. So, perhaps your crowning glory is that you've modeled to others that you can leave careerism behind—follow your bliss—and no, all hell will not break out. Only life.

Now, my heart goes out to you, as you struggle with, “What’s next?” My struggle, too. This is what I love about our relationship, the overlapping of issues. (I bet I’m not the only one who feels that way; I bet that’s one of your major legacies—connecting in the present with so many other people’s deepest concerns—like the death, loss, and pain you write about.)

Of course, you are right to think of the university climate as one of “institutional depression,” and, I like that you hold faculty, administration, and the relationship between the two accountable. Once tenure is granted, you say, faculty lack the next story, the plot, a narrative in which to place the next 30 or so years of their academic life. All around the campus, “casualties, blank faces of colleagues” because, you say, “we have no standard by which to link the various fragments or chapters of our academic lives into a story that we can see coming to an end...” Resolution? You say, “We need a sense of ending that will allow us to act as we go along in a fashion that will make it likely that we can look back on what we did and pronounce it valuable, significant, meaningful.”

Okay. Let me tell you that I am almost in tears reading your words over again and letting them sink into my soul. Why do we keep working? Keep producing? “Enough Already!” Why can’t we walk away? Just walk away. We keep at it, you say, because we don’t have a story about our work-lives that satisfies, that makes sense of our lives. You want us to be able to write “the good ending.”

But I'm coming to a different conclusion than the one you propose, this idea of their being "a good ending." Instead of thinking about "endings," I've been thinking a lot about "processes." I think we need to transcend the university and our complicity in its undertakings; we need to contextualize our academic lives within larger worlds. We need to document our individual processes of becoming, allowing ourselves the freedom to write from our soule to other soules—old English for persons. In brief, we need to focus on becoming, rather than ending.

Dear Art—that is what you did in your letter to me. You wrote about your writing to me. You had no ending in mind, and, in consequence, you wrote freely, openly, discovering stuff about yourself, becoming more "Art" in the writing, and wondrously, you felt better. Are we surprised about that? No, of course not. For you have paved the way, there, too—championing the therapeutic effects of personal narrative.

Now, I'm trying to end this letter, and I can't find a good way to do so. So, I check your online horoscope. Why not? Here it is:

When faced with either a rush job or a painful process, take your time. Clearly there's a lesson that you need to be learning. Some day you'll look back on this time and it will be for all of the right reasons.

Cheers,

Laurel