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4 **LETTER FROM TAMPA:**
5
6 **BEGINNING AT THE END**
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9
10 **Arthur P. Bochner**

11
12 October 23, 2002
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14 Dear Laurel:
15

16 Another rainy day here today. A good day to write a letter to a friend. I used to
17 write a lot of letters, then along came e-mail and suddenly writing a letter felt
18 like a chore. I was never a great letter writer but I did relish the experience of
19 traveling to places in my mind that writing a letter would take me. I would enter a
20 psychological and intersubjective space that writing e-mails doesn't reach. E-mail
21 is fast but not deep; efficient but not patient; perpetual but lacking in atmosphere.
22 Too often, I dread logging on to my e-mail account. "Oh, no, another hundred
23 e-mails to answer," I think. What new burdens await me there? I rarely felt that
24 way about receiving a letter. When it was a personal letter, I knew the writer had
25 exerted a lot of thought and effort. I savored holding it in my hand, reading it
26 over and over again, contemplating how I would respond in kind. I still have a
27 drawer full of letters from my past, not just love letters, but letters from friends
28 and family as well. They have enduring meaning and value in my life. You're one
29 of the few people I know who still writes letters, Laurel. I admire that you haven't
30 forsaken the practice of writing letters. I think I want to write more letters again
31 because I like how I feel when I do. I like the person I become in the process.

32 I'm sitting at my desk, here in the loft, one of my sacred spaces, looking out
33 through the trees, across to the Hillsborough River. The frequent summer rains
34 raised the water levels higher than they've been in years, which means we won't
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1 be facing another winter of drought in Tampa. I wonder whether the city council
2 will lift the severe water restrictions, not that it would make much difference to
3 our neighbors who seem more concerned about watering their lawn than whether
4 their children will have water to drink.

5 The flowing water calms some of the anxiety I've been feeling about the NCA
6 convention. This will be the 33rd consecutive year that I've been on the program.
7 Hard to believe, isn't it? I've been to more NCA conventions than most of its
8 members have been to Thanksgiving dinners. I seem to get more ambivalent about
9 the convention every year. You'd think the conventions would get easier but they
10 haven't. Each year my approach/avoidance conflict intensifies.

11 I look forward to visiting with former students and colleagues. When we share
12 stories I feel awakened, renewed, reminded of what's kept me inspired through
13 all these years, and what keeps me going on – the sense of connection, of shared
14 values and commitments, of keeping a conversation going, of the whole process
15 of growing older together with kindred spirits. The stories bring back a lot of good
16 memories and warm feelings. I look upon the students as my adult children; they
17 treat me as an academic father in the best sense of that term. The connections feel
18 precious. I guess I still need this – still need to feel needed and cared about; to know
19 I've made a difference in other people's lives; to let other people know they've
20 made a difference in mine. I cherish this personal, emotional side of my annual
21 convention pilgrimage.

22 But there's a darker, impersonal side to conventions as well. I'm referring
23 to the professional, careerist side of academic life and the insidious politics of
24 academic disciplines. This is the part that stirs anxiety within me. I cringe when I
25 think about my own participation in "the profession." I don't like to be reminded
26 of how much I once was a part of the academic gamesmanship. Performing at
27 conventions appealed to my neurotic need to win arguments, to be regarded as
28 smart, to be a player in the mainstream disciplinary conversation, not to feel left
29 out, excluded, exiled. When I played by the rules I would close my eyes, turn
30 away, you know, not look at how the discipline disciplines. But if you're a part
31 of that world you're bound to be touched by it; and if you never say anything,
32 or try to change it, aren't you in collusion with it? So I began to ask what kind
33 of person I was becoming by participating in the sort of careerism to which I'm
34 referring. I see a connection here to some of the issues you've raised, Laurel,
35 about what writing does to and for the writer – the kind of person you become
36 in the process. I remember a conversation we had a while back during which you
37 told me that one of the main reasons you retired early was you didn't like the kind
38 of "stock parts" that you'd been given to play in the university, the kind of parts
39 women routinely are coerced to play. I know a lot of woman who feel the same
40 way about their roles. They also want the university to be more nurturing, more

1 feeling, more in touch with our hearts, a bit less with our minds. What good is
2 the life of the mind, they ask, if the university can't make a place for the heart
3 to dwell?

4 When I'm at the convention now, I see how terribly conventional we are, I
5 guess that's why we call it a convention. Who would go to an unconvention? My
6 problem is I've always wanted to love my discipline. I know how terribly important
7 communication and language can be and how absorbed, how utterly obsessed I've
8 been all these years by the project of trying to understand and apply a relational
9 and social constructivist ideology in my work and in my life (Bochner, 2002). So
10 I'm grateful for what communication theory has given me. I do love that aspect of
11 the discipline – what it's taught me, how it's humbled me, what it's opened my eyes
12 and my heart to. But on the whole our disciplinary practices don't cohere with the
13 wisdom of the relational and interactional ideals to which I am attached. Instead,
14 I find we act more like a private club than an intellectual community. We teach
15 conformity; we resist change; we withhold rewards from those who don't play by
16 the rules. We clearly distinguish the insiders from the outsiders; who's in the club
17 from who is not. We talk like liberals and act like conservatives. We legislate,
18 discriminate, and retaliate.

19 When I come to these conventions, I feel exposed, as if a needle were piercing
20 a hot nerve. I get angry when I witness the air of superiority displayed by many
21 of the disciplinary conformists. I don't have a problem with science per se, but I
22 do find the smugness with which they push the rhetoric of objectivity and value-
23 neutrality distressing. They speak in what Ursula LeGuin (1986) called "the
24 father tongue." It's a voice that distances, creates a gap between us and them; it's
25 a tongue spoken from above, to be received not answered; it divides, separates,
26 alienates. Quite different is LeGuin's (1986) notion of the "mother tongue," which
27 invites response, collaboration, connection. The mother tongue doesn't seek to
28 divide, but to bind, to bridge, to build and affirm relationship. It's the kind of voice
29 I hear and share with my students and beloved colleagues – a personal voice,
30 a feeling voice, a loving voice. But in the convention sessions and even in the
31 hallways, what I usually hear is the "father's tongue" (LeGuin, 1986), the voice
32 of the know-it-all, the showman's voice – cocksure, down-putting, belittling, with
33 an angry, critical edge. This voice frightens me; it's a voice I know I'm all too
34 capable of speaking. It's my father's voice. I hid from my father, ran from him,
35 tried not to look back. When I'm at the convention, I feel as if I could become
36 that little boy again, terrified by the presence of the powerful father. I don't feel
37 at home there except in the company of my closest friends and students.

38 My desire to feel "at home" has been heightened this year by the death of
39 my partner Carolyn's mother and the recent anniversary of my mother's death.
40 Sometimes the two of us feel as if we have been painted onto a landscape of loss.

1 All our parents are dead. Three of my dearest students have died of cancer; another
2 of diabetes. One of my best friends is in remission; another has cancer in his
3 bones; a third was lost to cancer a few years ago. The loss of my mother left a huge
4 hole in my life; her death is etched on my body. I doubt the wound will ever heal
5 completely. The other day, I looked in the mirror, into my own eyes, and I saw my
6 mother's eyes looking back, the way they did those last twenty-one days when she
7 couldn't talk but spoke to me instead through her eyes. Whenever I moved or got
8 up to walk around, she would follow me across the room with her eyes; they were
9 always in contact with me.

10 The death of Carolyn's mother brought my grief back into consciousness.
11 We both miss our mothers. We miss having a mother. As a consequence, I feel
12 myself fighting the urge to give in to the painful truths of existence, resisting the
13 temptation to wallow in pain and suffering. At times like these I'm reminded of
14 Freud's claim that he cured the miseries of neurotics only to have them face the
15 normal miseries of life (Becker, 1973). These losses rob me of the illusions that
16 make life liveable. Yet I realize that if I can't look squarely in the face of death then
17 maybe I'm afraid to live too. Kierkegaard said that all one's education had to be
18 pointed toward facing up to one's own death and that a person couldn't really find
19 himself unless he admitted he was lost, confused, uncertain. Is it death that scares
20 me or is it life? I'm not sure how to answer that question, but I do know that I have
21 this longing for more life, for greater, more expansive meaning, for more exciting
22 experiences. What is life if not an opportunity to expand the self, to enlarge
23 one's meanings?

24 I keep your poem, "While I Was Writing A Book," here on my desk (Richardson,
25 1997). I want to live more in tune with the ethical standards suggested by your
26 poem. "My son, the elder went crazy; my son, the younger went sad . . . my brother
27 didn't speak to me . . . I was busy." Your poem touches me where I live, because
28 my first wife had a psychotic episode while I was busy building my professional
29 reputation, and my second wife told me when we separated that she felt as if she'd
30 never be as important to me as my research projects. I feel the sadness and the truth
31 of your poem. When I read it, I become aware of all the things I miss, ignore, don't
32 comprehend, feel, or respond to when I lock myself away to work, walling myself
33 off from the world of direct experience. As I grow older I'm finding it more and
34 more difficult to do this. I can't write about things that aren't related to my life, how
35 I live, the person I want to be, my memories and my dreams. I've lost interest in
36 the questions all our younger colleagues seem so obsessed by – how can we know
37 this or know that? – you know, all the abstract, philosophical, methodological
38 questions that drive the academic buggy. I'm more interested in how to live than
39 I am in how to know. In my life, the practical, ethical, and relational questions
40 count more than the epistemological ones. I tell my students these may not be the

1 questions or projects that get you into the big leagues of the field, but they may
2 help you find peace of mind. After all, isn't the state of your soul more important
3 than the size of your vita?

4 Talking about one's soul, of course, is pretty much taboo in the halls of ivy,
5 though you've tried to change that. You talk openly in *Fields of Play* (1997)
6 about taking "a spiritual turn," engaging in "sanctifying practices," and creating
7 "sacred spaces." In many respects, I've followed your lead, trying in my own all
8 too fallible way to model passionate scholarship and create a safe environment
9 in which students can take risks and transgress boundaries. When Carolyn and I
10 established the Institute for Interpretive Human Studies at USF, we thought of it in
11 the terms you used, as "a sanctuary" for creative, transgressive, and life-affirming
12 scholarship in the midst of the profanity and craziness of the university.

13 In some respects, the qualitative program at USF has been plagued by its own
14 success. For the first time, we now seem to have enemies around the university.
15 Of course, we only hear second-hand reports, but the stories I've been told make
16 it clear that the *communitas* among our students and colleagues raises suspicion.
17 Other departments want to know why we seem so inspired, so collaborative, so
18 energetic and so resistant to the canonical narrative of institutional depression that
19 circulates through the university. A few weeks ago, our President and Provost met
20 with the whole department. When I mentioned that I had written about a concept
21 I called "institutional depression" and explained that it referred to a pattern of
22 anxiety, hopelessness, demoralization, isolation and disharmony that circulates
23 through university life, the President perked up and asked me to say more about
24 it. I took that as license to launch into one of my favorite speeches about how
25 we don't recognize this institutional form of depression because we take for
26 granted the rules that isolate us from each other while holding us hostage to the
27 satisfactions we presumably derive from the model of solitary productivity that
28 governs university life (Tompkins, 1997). When we feel the pangs of depression,
29 often we react with rage toward powerful others – the administration, the chair,
30 the legislature, other departments. We take ourselves off the hook by seeing our
31 own misery as only the result of what they do to us. Then, we don't have to look
32 at ourselves, at our own complicity in sustaining the patterns of relationship that
33 bind us to norms of isolation, absence, and unwillingness to metacommunicate
34 (Bochner, 1996). Its like Vivian Gornick (1996) says: "First you think, It must
35 be them, it can't be me. Then you think, No, it's not them, it *is* me. Getting to
36 the third thought, It's not them, it's not me, it's the two of us together – that takes
37 some diving." Well, when I was finished you should have seen the expression on
38 the President's face. She looked as if she'd seen a ghost. All she could say was,
39 "ah, well, um, we need to talk about this later." But of course, that's just the point,
40 isn't it? We don't talk about these things. We let them go and the infection festers.

1 There aren't enough people like you, Laurel, who tell it like it is. Indeed,
2 our publications *are* boring; our scholarship *is* dry and inaccessible; most of us
3 *don't* read half of the articles in the journals to which we subscribe (Richardson,
4 1994). How many journals sit on our shelves unopened, protected by the original
5 cellophane wrappings in which they were packaged? By the time most of us
6 are 40, we've lost our excitement for scholarship and our passion for teaching.
7 You can look around the table of any department and see the casualties of the
8 alienated workforce up close, etched on the blank faces of colleagues who caved
9 in, gave up, stopped caring. We turn the other cheek, keep quiet, pretend the
10 hollow faces aren't staring at us, but that doesn't make the problem go away
11 (Bochner, 1997).

12 The life of the mind omits too much of what's important in life. When the life
13 of the intellectual becomes a monolithic world view, the pervasive persona by
14 which one engages in and with the world, it ceases to be fulfilling for most of
15 us. Where is emotionality in the life of the mind? Where is subjectivity? What
16 about one's body? One's moral and ethical commitments? One's immersion in
17 nature? Spirituality? Love? Tenderness? Instead of focusing on what I can *know*,
18 shouldn't I worry about what I can *be*?

19 Ontological security is not a problem to be overcome but an experience to be
20 lived with. Breaking the cycle of institutional depression means ending the silence
21 of our suffering. This is where narrative enters. We need to understand and tell the
22 stories that we are living through, the stories in which we want to live, the plots and
23 values to which we can be attached meaningfully (Bochner, 2001). This means
24 mustering the courage to live our lives with an *ending* in mind. In the university
25 the hegemonic ending is tenure. You get tenure, then what? End of story, end of
26 passion, end of life of the mind. But wait a second, we're not yet 40, many of us,
27 when we are granted tenure and now we have 25 years or so to live without a goal
28 in mind. As Mark Freeman (1997) so poignantly observes in reference to *The*
29 *Death of Ivan Ilych*, he had lived his life without an ending in mind and without an
30 ending there can be no story, only unconnected events, moments and experiences,
31 an aimless life of following social conventions and meeting expectations, without
32 significant purpose or meaning. Without some organizing center of meaning,
33 Ivan Ilych's life was devoid of narrative integrity; it was inauthentic; absent of
34 plot. As Freeman (1997) concludes, without a sense of an ending, a person loses
35 the capacity to understand life as a whole and to grasp what would constitute a
36 life well-lived.

37 I'm convinced that the absence of narrative is a main source of the institutional
38 depression within which so many of us are embedded. Our life in the university
39 is constituted not by narrative but by chronicity, by the academic calendar, by the
40 ranks, by hierarchies, by fragmented events, by ritual practices, but without plot,
without an end in mind, without story. Not only are we encouraged to segregate

1 our life at the university from our life at home, our personal life, but we are given
2 no standard by which to link the various fragments or chapters of our academic
3 lives into a story that we can see coming to an end. Of course, we cannot demand
4 that the university give us a plot. Who is the university anyway? Aren't we the
5 university? What does it mean to appropriately complete a lifetime of teaching
6 and research? We need a sense of ending that will allow us to act as we go along
7 in a fashion that will make it likely that we can look back on what we did and
8 pronounce it valuable, significant, meaningful.

9 The sun just poked its head through the clouds. Now the sunshine streams into
10 the loft. The light warms and comforts me. I feel as if I've awakened from a dream.
11 Must have been a good dream. I feel a lot better than when I started. I had no idea
12 where all this was going, what I was feeling or where my thoughts would take me.
13 I had you in mind, of course, Laurel, but I didn't have a plan. I allowed myself to
14 take a trip without a clear destination in mind. Since I didn't have a set itinerary, I
15 went down some back roads, off the beaten track. You were on my mind the whole
16 way. In fact, I felt as if you were with me on my trip. You inspired my imagination,
17 gave me the companionship of a good listener, and freed me to communicate
18 more honestly.

19 Well, I better go now. I need to start working on my presentation for the program
20 in your honor at NCA. I've decided to write something about the importance of
21 endings, of having an ending in mind, and of the consequences of not having an
22 ending in mind. That's what I want to do, if only I can figure out how to end it.

23
24 Love,

25 Art Bochner
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