

INTELLECTUAL THREADS IN THE FABRIC OF LIFE

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38

“Trajectory” may not be quite the right term for what I will describe here of my life and work. As I pondered my response to the request for this presentation and essay, I found myself thinking more in terms of my life as a “fabric” woven of many influences, contingencies, and some significant choices—with boundaries, of course, and in some sense a beginning and an ever approaching ending, but still a kind of growing whole, for better or worse. “Story” is another rubric that came to mind as I attempted to gather memories of social circumstances and my own developing attitudes, interests, concerns, relationships—though this would be a story without a clear plot, held together more by reflection than by action. Early on in my philosophical studies I had occasion to explore theories of human time, and I was attracted to the notion that “lived” time or “human temporality” is cumulative within us and importantly constitutive of what we become. Unlike popular concepts of space, human time is not one part outside the other. It is within us—like the time of a melody that cannot be understood by hearing only one or a few notes. But then, how to understand lived time, and to “tell of it” with transparency and without distortion? Unlike the ways we measure the “time” of trees, it is difficult for us to identify or even count the meaning of the rings of human time within us and between us.

Ironically, I ran out of time trying to figure out how to pursue such approaches to this “trajectory,” and I settled for doing two things: (1) provide a bit of a story about the familial, social, and educational circumstances and events of my life that predated my professional life at Yale; and (2) describe what it has meant for me to enter the field of ethics and to experience the multiple challenges of “doing ethics” here at Yale and beyond.

On the Way to Ethics

I was born and, so-to-speak, raised in the city of St. Cloud in central Minnesota. My parents were both college-educated, both graduates of the University of Minnesota. The late 1930s were, of course, still marked by the Great Depression. We were somewhat poor, because everyone—at least everyone around us—was poor. We were never destitute, however, since my father always had a job. He was a professor of history, economics, and political science at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota. His salary was meager, but it was enough for us at the time. My mother was rather unique among mothers of her age group at that time and place because she had a college education. She had majored in French literature, but her real interest was politics—local and national.

The family backgrounds of my parents differed markedly. My father was born on a small farm in southern Minnesota. His father died when he was only five years

old, leaving a widowed mother with four small boys to manage what was basically a subsistence-level farm. Three of the brothers remained on the farm into adulthood, but my father in effect left when he was twelve years old. Encouraged by teachers (and by his mother), he moved to live with family friends in a nearby town in order to attend a high school that offered more opportunity than the tiny schoolhouse he had been attending thus far. In the pursuit of education after high school, he never again actually lived and worked for any sustained period at his original home on the farm.

My mother's family lived in Minneapolis. Both of her parents had degrees in higher education: My grandmother graduated from what was then called a "normal" school—basically a two-year teachers' college; my grandfather moved up the ladder from mail room clerk at the Minneapolis Business College to become, finally, its president and co-owner. My maternal grandparents were definitely not poor, despite the fact that they suffered severe financial losses in the Crash of 1929. It was thus taken for granted that my mother, as well as her two brothers, would attend university.

My father supported himself through college and graduate school, ultimately earning a doctorate in education and social studies. After marriage, my mother occasionally did part-time work as a political organizer and clerical assistant. When my two sisters, my brother, and I, were in various stages of schooling, she completed a master's degree in guidance counseling and held a position as high school counselor for seventeen years.

My earliest memories of family dynamics include the animated discussions that characterized some of our evening meals, especially when they were focused on world events. I have vivid recollections, too, of the times my older sister and I were allowed to stay up late at night to listen to the conversations among the four couples in my parents' bridge-playing group. We found the interactions among these adults utterly fascinating, and we begged simply to sit on the sidelines, dangling our short legs from dining room chairs, listening avidly as political debates swirled, or local church politics were applauded or bemoaned, or a variety of social concerns brought out collective worries.

Growing up, I loved playing imaginative games with neighborhood friends. But I also loved going to school. Unlike most of my friends, I was delighted when summers came to an end and it was time to return either to elementary or secondary school. Many of my teachers were superb, and I was heavily involved in extra-curricular activities—sports, debate, drama, literature and language societies, student government, playing clarinet in the school orchestra and band. I did well in high school, but when I graduated, people were more inclined to recommend that I be a high school teacher or an actor than an academic—which I always thought said more about them than about me.

As life moves on, some things central to our lives at one point are left behind, and some continue to be part of us in an active way. When I graduated from high school, my family moved from Minnesota to Michigan. My father had taken a new position

at the University of Detroit, and I matriculated there primarily because as a child of a faculty member, half of my tuition was waived. In college I left behind active involvement in debate teams, music, and sports, but continued to love literature and to spend massive amounts of my time in drama and in student government. Nonetheless, other past activities—except perhaps sports—continued to be a part of me, of the interests and concerns I sustained and the relationships I developed, even of the way I thought (the logic I learned as a high school debater had—at least in part—shaped my mind forever). Eventually I majored in English literature and minored in philosophy and in theater.

Two particular things happened to me during my college years that formed my choices and my life ever after. The first grew out of my experience of working my way through school (even with a faculty-dependent discount, it was extremely difficult to manage costs). I had many jobs through the years, some of them fairly interesting, some of them terribly tedious. Yet in every case, sooner or later I found myself basically bored with all of them (learning thereby that I have a very low threshold for boredom). What was most difficult for me was the eight-hour a day (or whatever) framework—whether of part-time jobs during the school year or full-time jobs every holiday season and summer. As the hours of work went by, I found myself persistently watching the clock until the work period would be over, say at 5:00; and as soon as I left the workplace for the day, I thought: “But I have to go back there at 8:00 in the morning!” I felt an unexplainable but serious personal constraint. I have ever since believed that this was an extremely important factor in my choice to work in the academy. In higher education we (or at least I) have the illusion of being self-employed. Even though as an academic I probably worked twice as many hours every week than I would have in many other types of positions, I had the sense that I was in control of my own time. Of course, this was tied also to the fact that I was intrinsically interested in what I did in and from the academy.

The second markedly influential thing that happened to me in college occurred in my senior year when I was taking a particular course—a philosophy course in ethics. The course had nothing to do with issues of vocation or “life’s work,” yet somehow it made me question what I was doing with my life. As a senior, I had both personal and professional plans for the future that now seemed to me inadequate. For the first time, I called them all into question. To make a long story short (a long story of difficult discernment and decision-making), out of this questioning came eventually my decision to enter a religious community, the Sisters of Mercy. It took me almost three years to discern and then actually to do this; the process of extricating myself from previous commitments and plans was complicated and often, on my part, hesitant. In the meantime, I taught a year at a local high school, and I completed a master’s degree in philosophy.

My first three years in the community of the Sisters of Mercy were largely contemplative—or a combination of prayer and manual work. I learned things in those

years, however, that have forever shaped me and my basic insights. Nonetheless, I also had the opportunity, from the start, to teach philosophy courses to younger members of my own Order—usually one class a semester. When my early years of formation culminated in the making of a temporary commitment to this community for five more years, I began teaching in the Philosophy Department at Mercy College of Detroit. I taught a variety of courses, but my favorites were in moral philosophy or ethics. After five years of undergraduate teaching, and after making a permanent commitment as a member of the Sisters of Mercy, it was clear that I needed to study for a doctoral degree. I was somewhat conflicted at the time as to whether I should try to do this work in a philosophy department or a theology or religious studies department. I came to the conclusion that my interests were such that I could do some of what I wanted to do in a philosophy department, but I could do all that I wanted to do in a religious studies department. Naively, I applied to only two schools, one of which was Yale. Fortunately, I was admitted to both schools, and chose to come to Yale because its specialization in ethics in the Religious Studies Department would allow me to work almost equally in the Philosophy Department and in Religious Studies.

Thus ends my rendering of my personal narrative “on the way to ethics.” I turn now to consider what it has meant for me to enter the field of ethics at Yale University and to spend the rest of my professional life meeting the many challenges of “doing ethics” at Yale but also beyond.

Ethics: Academic Discipline and Life-Choice

I began my doctoral work in ethics in the fall of 1967. I found Yale University and its Department of Religious Studies to provide a stimulating, profoundly challenging, and overall congenial context in which to do the work I wanted to pursue. James Gustafson was the primary faculty person with whom I worked, and he ultimately became the director of my dissertation. I profited a great deal by working also with faculty such as George Schroeder, David Little, Liston Pope, and others. I also learned a great deal from my peers—the ethics doctoral students whom I found to be wonderful co-learners. I was a few years older than most of these students, and also the only woman in the program, and probably the only nun in the whole of the graduate school, so my experience was somewhat different than that of others, though not remarkably so. The collegiality among us was gratifying, and the ethos of the program was one that nurtured as well as challenged the common and yet very diverse interests of students. Nonetheless, I and my fellow students initiated some institutional changes—including the shape of comprehensive examinations in the ethics program. We also tended to work in a more interdisciplinary way than previous students, hence coming to know and learn from faculty in medicine, law, and forestry.

In 1971 I was offered a position on the Divinity School faculty. I found the culture of the Divinity School to be quite different from the Graduate School, but it was also for me a good “fit.” I was challenged from the start because I was the first full-time woman on this faculty. However, since I had worked most of my professional life in a

field that up to then was largely dominated by men, I was used to this sort of context—except that I spent many years being the token woman on multiple committees; and as the numbers of women students began to grow exponentially, I had an extraordinary share of the burden of advising—both women and men, as it turned out.

I also found myself politically allied with efforts at improving the situation of women in the faculty and student body. This was in addition to the fact that the 1970s marked a time in which ethicists were challenged to share various urgent initiatives against the war, racism, sexism, and economic imbalance, and at one point against apartheid in South Africa.

Because the ethics faculty had lost key members just before I was appointed, Charles Powers (also a junior faculty member at the time) and I carried most of the program in ethics both in the Divinity School and in the doctoral program in Religious Studies. I recall teaching as many as four courses a semester, as well as being immediately immersed in advising doctoral dissertations. To some extent, I could not complain about this since I had always been a person of many interests and many concerns, and hence regularly overextended; and a lot of the work I took on was a matter of my own choice.

To try to compress my account of my experience through the years at Yale, I will address it under three headings: (1) central foci of my teaching, research, and writing; (2) interdisciplinarity and ecumenicity, as well as interfaith pursuits; (3) ethics and controversy.

Central foci: Ethics, in my view, is not an esoteric discipline. Generally speaking, everyone is faced with moral problems and decisions—or at least many people think they are. Hence, my early and late interest in ethical issues has been somewhat “existential.” That is, I am particularly interested in theoretical issues that might be called “metaethical” in that they concern some of the large questions of human life—for example, questions of freedom, justice, love, commitment, forgiveness, and obligation. Although much of my work in ethics as an undergraduate, and to some extent as a graduate student at Yale, had been focused on historical versions of philosophical, theological, and social ethics, I was first intrigued with the field of ethics by exploring contemporary questions of human freedom. My interest was not so much in whether there is such a thing as human freedom, but rather in what is involved when we at least think we are making free choices. My question was “What, finally, is it that we choose when we choose?” In other words, what is the *content* of free choice? Or better, what is the *object* of free choice? By that I mean not so much whether I choose coffee or tea, or this program or that, but why I choose this action or that. How do desire, motivation, love, cognitive awareness and judgment, and the objects of all of these, fit into the content or object of choice. I worked for many years on these questions, and I find myself returning to them in my current writings.

This interest evolved in several of my publications to include the question of criteria for right loving—or for what I have variously named “just love,” “compassionate

respect,” and “truthful love.” In my teaching of historical materials, also, I have often selected and traced themes of freedom, love, and justice, as well as particular issues of sexuality, economics, medical ethics, and ethics in relation to the environment.

Although my own primary interests have always been with large theoretical questions (ones that rise out of and have direct impact on human experience), I learned early on that ethicists often do not get to set their own agendas. By this I mean that if one is concerned about questions asked by students, struggled with by societies, shared or contested within churches, then one finds oneself drawn into multiple ethical issues one would not have expected to be involved with at all. These are, however, issues important to human survival and flourishing, to the structuring of human relationships, and they are in our era issues socially shaped in a pluralistic, often divided, world.

On one occasion I was asked to speak about the current field of ethics in general, and within that, about my own work. Since I was not allotted much time to respond to this question, I decided simply to describe what I had been worried about and working on within a single semester (as part of or in addition to teaching my classes). I found myself talking about deliberating with members of the American Society of Reproductive Medicine regarding gender selection of children, human cloning, post-mortem sperm retrieval; and about my work with Leeway here in New Haven on domestic and social violence. As a founding and long time member of the Bioethics Committee at Yale-New Haven Hospital, I described some of our work on policies in the cardiac intensive care unit; allocation of scarce resources; informed consent and its ramifications for families; medical organizational issues, especially reforms in systems of health care delivery. I also described my own and others’ work on ethical issues surrounding the various phases of human embryo research, stem cell derivation, water scarcity and other environmental questions—the multiple interdisciplinary issues addressed within Yale’s Bioethics Center. I mentioned some of the diverse groups I was working with on issues of death and dying, same-sex marriage, forgiveness and reconciliation, and global poverty. In addition I told of the projects in sub-Saharan Africa where I work with African women responding to HIV and AIDS. The list, especially if I had gleaned it not from one semester but from more than forty years as a scholar, teacher, and “practicing” ethicist, surprised even me. In the end, it does constitute something of a trajectory perhaps, wherein one thing often led to another; or it could be described, too, as at least a part of the whole cloth, the fabric of my life and work.

Before leaving the multiple foci of my interests and work in ethics, I should perhaps say a word about the feminist perspective that has characterized much of what I have thought, written, and done. I was not born a feminist, but I became one very quickly in the 1970s. This particular phase of feminism was hardly included in my studies as a doctoral student. But the challenges raised by women—scholars, activists, students, ordinary women in every walk of life—could not be ignored by women in the field of ethics. Women’s questions became my questions first when someone asked

them of me. Feminism is a movement, but it is also a perspective, one that everyone should share (insofar as it is basically opposed to discrimination against women—and the ideas, beliefs, institutions, attitudes and structures that undergird this discrimination). It is a perspective from which almost every ethical issue, theoretical and practical, needs to be addressed. Insofar as I have focused on women's experiences and concerns, it is because the present and future of women (as of children and men) are intrinsically important. When some are relegated to the margins of human community, and there is reason to believe that all should somehow be at the center, then it is important to the whole human community that we attend to the margins. For me, concern for the well-being of women is within a larger framework of concern for the well-being of all. Of great importance to me, also, is the fact that once women began to raise issues in theology, ethics, and in the practice of the churches, synagogues, and mosques, nearly every central religious doctrine needed to be critiqued and reconstructed—including beliefs about God, the human person, creation, and the world.

Multiple Disciplines, Multiple Faiths:

The second heading, under which I said I would consider my experience as an ethicist at Yale and beyond, is that of interdisciplinarity, ecumenicity, and interfaith dialogue. Ethics as I have known it and worked within it is today essentially interdisciplinary. One example is visible in the foundation of Yale's Interdisciplinary Bioethics Center. Previous to this, Yale University had years of experience with faculty from almost every part of the University doing research or teaching on various issues in medical ethics, ethics and science, environmental ethics, ethics and law. When we came together to foster the sharing of each other's work, addressing questions that no one discipline could resolve by itself, we recognized the tradition of "permeable boundaries" at Yale—that is, past instances of working across departmental and disciplinary borders. The Bioethics Center now has participants from every professional school and every relevant department. Its mission was and is to advance the field of bioethics, to enhance curricular offerings for undergraduates in particular, and to assist the University in its own mission of addressing urgent issues in the wider society.

My own work (in addition to being co-director of the Bioethics Center for about nine years) has involved interdisciplinary research, writing, and teaching—the latter with faculty not only in the Medical School, but in the Law School, the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and with faculty in departments of biological sciences. I have learned how difficult interdisciplinary work can be, but also how essential. As I have often said to students in the beginning of such classes: "Everyone here knows something the others do not know. Working together in this way therefore involves both humility and courage."

As a member of the Divinity School Faculty as well as the Graduate School Department of Religious Studies, the ethics in which I have engaged—insofar as it is religious ethics—has been at least to some extent both ecumenical and interfaith. Many of the courses I taught had to take this diversity into account—whether in a seminar

on Islamic and Christian ethics; or a course in the history of theological ethics as represented by classic figures like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin; or a course in the relation between morality and spirituality. This was not always so. But during my tenure at Yale, since the early 1970s, it has invariably been so, at least to some degree. As many ethicists have found, herein lies the challenge of relating to “the other” not as stranger but friend. Here, too, lie the possibilities of understanding one’s own tradition precisely by learning about the traditions of others. Ecumenical and interfaith study need not yield a simplistic relativism but a profound respect for both commonality and difference.

Ethics and controversy: Finally, I said I would comment on the experience of controversy as it emerges in various strands of ethics today. There is obviously profound and often vitriolic conflict in our society regarding issues of, for example, abortion and gay marriage, or provision of goods and services by too much or too little government. Ethnic conflicts, “culture wars,” and political battles are themselves sometimes matter for ethical appraisal, as are the specific ethical issues that are the lightning rods for so much turmoil. The churches, too, are at times torn apart by current controversies—no longer over doctrines of the Virgin Birth or even Christology, but over ethical issues. Conflicts rage not only between and among religious traditions today but within them. Insofar as an ethicist gets involved in any of these conflicts and controversies (not all ethicists do get involved), the challenge is not only to shed some light on the adjudication of disagreements, but to assist at least in small ways in the mitigation of hostility and potential violence. The fact that even “holy” questions can make for “unholy” division among us is not unlike what happens in struggles over ethical questions as well. There are no quick solutions to profound disagreements, especially in contexts where fear, triumphalism, or disrespect reign. Neither antinomianism nor absolutism helps us to live better together.

One of the things I have learned through engagement in seriously contested issues is that the source and the basis of some of our most intractable ethical controversies lie in fundamentally different individual and shared experiences of moral obligation. Insofar as this is the case, our greatest hope is in mutual respect, tolerance, and acknowledgment of limits. What cannot be resolved by common ethical values and reasoning may sometimes nonetheless be accepted.

In conclusion, I return to what I have already suggested is the core concept in my own ethical explorations, and what shapes my interpretation of most ethical issues. It is what I call “just love.” Everything I address, it seems—especially when it is of a theoretical nature—has involved an attempt to understand the meanings of love, and to measure their actualization in accord with justice. I have a concern, of course, that such ethical language, reflection, and analysis not be pollyannish; that it not lead anyone to think that love is the answer to all ethical questions. In ethics, rather, love is the problem, not the solution—and not only in the sense of actually managing to love at all, but in the sense of understanding and at least wanting to love with loves

that are just, good, and true. We all know from our experience that we can have wise loves and foolish, creative loves and destructive, good loves and bad. Nonetheless, I have become convinced that the ultimate story of our lives will be the story of what and how we have loved. Ethics cannot provide this. Yet it can offer tools for analysis, strategies for insight, and guidelines for practices—whether professional or personal, individual or social, institutional or familial. Like many other disciplines, the search for tools, strategies, or guidelines in ethics, begins most often in an exploration of human experience. This no doubt explains why I have never found the field of ethics to be boring. It may also explain why an “intellectual trajectory,” nourished and shaped by ethics as a discipline, constitutes a challenge—for better or for worse—to the whole of one’s life.