

The Odd Couple

BY JACK LAYTON

The graduate student office: I was 21, she was 40-something. I was finding the first footing for my political understanding, she was unalterably surefooted about hers. I was shy, nervous, and overwhelmed at the mere concept of graduate school. She was confident, forceful, and determined to make her intellectual mark on the faculty and the world. My experience had consisted of high school and McGill student politics, hers had been a life of front-line political work and firsthand nursing.

This odd couple was assigned the same office as graduate TA's in the Political Science Masters Program.

It took all of about three seconds for Mary to completely break the ice as we laid out our desks in the windowless celebration of concrete which York University provides. Her warm Scottish voice and rich laugh were as though we had hoisted logs on the fire in a cold cottage (metaphorically—no such amenities were provided to TAs at York). She kept on hoisting those logs during our three years together as we completed our Ph.D. indenture together and made sure to provide an enduring warmth to our relationship.

She was the most important part of my academic life at York.

She never stopped challenging me. If I admitted that I did not understand her complex arguments, which very

often I did not, she never made me feel inadequate. Instead, she patiently worked through them, allowing me to think that some of them were even my own.

Mary always introduced me to new acquaintances with the story of how I protected her while on the Artistic Woodwork picket line in 1971. Mary had been pushed down by the press of the police line who were making way for the unfortunate "scabs" who were being bussed in past immigrant workers holding onto their principles through this historic strike. She fell, was winded and flat on her back in the path of oncoming police cars and buses only a few feet away. As Mary told the story, she turned and saw my construction boots planted firmly on either side of her head, making sure that no-one would run over her—or else that they would take both of us together! It is true there was no way anyone was going to harm my dear comrade Mary. By then, I think we loved each other.

My enduring image of Mary and Cath will always be the hagus being piped into their dining room, the happy warmth of the good scotch in our throats, and the lusty laugh that distinguished Mary in any gathering. Theirs was such a dear relationship that it formed a foundation of my understanding of the beauty of caring relations of all kinds.

I'll never forget when Mary told me that she was going to write a dissertation which showed that Marx' dialectic should be re-written as an analysis of the relations of reproduction, not merely production. This was a key step to cutting through the paradigm which had left women subjected to men's paradigms of power for too long. It was from her lips that I first heard the word "patriarchy," spoken with full rolling Scottish brogue. She matter-of-factly went on to announce that she was going to do that very re-writing herself. Here I was still trying to get a grip on dialectics and she was already engaged in their reconstruction. If I ever suggested she slow down, she'd say "I don't have time. You have lots of time, Jack, but I don't want to be retiring two days after I finish my thesis!" (It took me 14 years to finish my thesis—she rocketted through in record time, true to her word.)

I learned much from Mary O'Brien. I wish I could hear that rich laugh again.



Mary O'Brien, Cath McNaughton, Angela Miles

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