theories and methodologies

Helen's Gifts

TIMOTHY CAMPBELL

I'M STRUGGLING NOW, TRYING TO WRITE, TO SAY ANYTHING, TO FOLLOW THE COMMAND "WRITE IT!" WHAT I REALLY NEED IS AN E-MAIL from Helen, telling me to sit down, to say what it is that I want to say and then to go about saying it. She would probably give me an ideogram, direct me to a page of Ernest Fennollosa's *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, then add how much she was looking forward to seeing the essay in print, on real paper, out there in the world. She would also, perhaps by way of closing, remind me that writing was a practice of making oneself vulnerable, and that wisdom wasn't going to come uninvited if you didn't let go of the need for some security.

Here goes.

I met Helen Tartar late. Of course I had heard of her—who hadn't?—and had seen her from afar at the MLA conventions. But I could never find the courage to speak to her. Here, I thought, was someone who had single-handedly brought to American shores the writers who changed the way I think and live. You know the names, the books, and the mind-blowing series with great titles like Crossing Aesthetics and Writing Science. Helen epitomized what I thought an editor should be: thoughtful, a terrific listener, and tough as nails. It was the tough-as-nails part that frightened me. That was unfortunate, since I missed a chance to get to know her sooner.

Fortunately, five years ago, after another wave of writers and thinkers, mostly from Italy, carried me to Fordham and to Helen, we began collaborating—first, not surprisingly given Helen's commitment to translation, bringing together works from the likes of Jean-Luc Nancy, Roberto Esposito, and Étienne Balibar. We followed that up more formally in creating the series Commonalities, a name she proposed after too many misses on my part. Our work together, cut short by her untimely death on 3 March 2014, remains one of the best experiences of my academic life; a gift not just to me but to all those who like their theory straight up, intimate, elegantly written, and clear.

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Can I write honestly about Helen? To do so means to speak directly about the doubts we all face in what often feels like the cramped world of academia. It means acknowledging how adept Helen was in recognizing the importance of opening spaces of generosity, exchange, and, horror of horrors, the spirit. Helen did all of these, but it's especially now, eight months after her death, that this side of her work and person comes into focus. Indeed I never met a more religious person in my life, if by *religion* we mean an ethical practice that is not organized around belief. My impression was always that Helen was fulfilling her life's vocation: nothing short of shepherding authors to their books, which, as she would often remind us, were also hers because they appeared on her list. As any look at her various lists will show and as Jacques Lezra beautifully observes in these pages, Helen crisscrossed boundaries and disciplines in ways that many of us found intoxicating. She would speak one moment of tai chi and in the next wonder about the differences between Derrida's and Esposito's readings of immunity, about Buddhism and loving-kindness; and in the next breath work out a connection to something she had mentioned to Bud, her husband, the previous day after reading a submission on Christ's body. Helen was fearless in a way that made you unafraid and confident. Little was off-limits to Helen, and so when Tom Lay, her longtime assistant at Fordham, wrote in the aftermath of her death about the abiding skepticism and wide intelligence that characterized her life and work, I could only nod. She practiced a form of Derrida's "white mythology" as a response to forms of violence, both mythic and otherwise.[1] Everything and everyone touch, but not just in some murky thought of interdependence. Helen lived as she thought, as she practiced. With passion, enormous energy, and subtlety—and with love.

Helen often mentioned how important Derrida's *The Gift of Death* was to her, long after she had read it, especially the first chapter. Our conversation on it was just beginning when she died. Of the many passages that I'm sure lingered for her and now linger for me, there is this: "How does one give oneself death in that other sense in terms of which *se donner la mort* is also to interpret death, to give oneself a representation of it, a figure, a signification or destination for it? How does one give it to oneself in the sense of simply, and more generally, relating to the possibility of death (on the basis of what care, concern, or apprehension)?" (10).

As a way of representing and caring for that gift, I want to close with a poem from Rūmī (another destination):

Through the Low Gate

Moses put a low gate in the Jerusalem wall,
so that even unconsciously
everyone would have to put down his pack
and lower his head, bowing at least that much,
as though to say,
I pray that I can put down what I carry.
. . . . . .
The gate was called *Babi-Saghir*,
the little door.

Consider the world-power you acknowledge
as a small gate you must go through
to pay homage to a dunghill,
and instead of doing that, recognize the holy ones,
who are sweet as sugarcane.

Don't grovel in front of political leaders.
Not your *highness*, say your *lowness*
to those empty weed-stems. Honor the sun we see by.

Don't play a cat-and-mouse game.
Join the lion and swift deer in their hunt for soul.

Let pot-lickers follow the big basin-licker.
I could continue and make some rulers and administrators
very angry. They know who I'm talking about.
(281)

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All of us have stories to tell of Helen's enormous generosity; of her helping us write first, middle, and last books; of her making us feel that we were the center of her attention (and we were). She also reminded us when we were paying homage to dunghills, always remembering to offer kind words that eased the pain of moving in often small worlds.

Helen was as sweet as sugarcane. Her wisdom and kindness are gifts that remain with those of us lucky enough to have known her.

Note

1. "And when we try to determine the dominant metaphor of a group which interests us because of its capacity to gather things together, then what else should we expect but the metaphor of domination augmented by that power of dissimulation which allows it to escape domination in its turn, what else but God or the Sun" (Derrida, "White Mythology" 64).

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