

BEVERLY ANNE BROWN

Listening to a life. February 21, 1951 - October 27, 2005

Early days, growing up in Redding, California --

"We were off of any political map that was of any significance.... So, when my mother got involved in the John Birch Society, they held house meetings, they brought books and they brought discussions. So, it was people we knew talking about the world, talking about politics as if any of us who were sitting in that room made a difference on what might happen on any scale – local, national or global. Now, granted the information that they were bringing was skewed in a very extreme right wing. Did I know that? No, I didn't know that! What I knew was that they were bringing in books. So it was exciting to me. It was my first intellectual engagement. It was the only group that was interested in coming to our small town. The left wasn't coming to our town. There was no IWW or big union groups that were doing public education. These were regular folks who were hungry for knowledge... So, now I appreciate it. I scoffed at it when I became a young adult and more engaged with a broader set of ideas. But now I understand that it changed not only my life, but changed many people's lives too. To say that rural areas, that small towns are important and the minds there are important. And it also on reflection let me know not to give up or write off people, just because people are saying one thing right now. What has been their exposure? What is their commitment to that position? What is their chance to analyze other positions, to look at their own experience rather than just reflect an ideological line? Some people are going to continue to be ideologues, other people are going to be curious. I like that curiosity."

High school years –

"I had never read such books, and I started with Thoreau and I was in love with the reading and knowing that there was some intellectual world besides this economic and political one that I was hearing from the John Birch Society. And then I moved on to TS Eliot and Dostoyevsky and read everything I could get my hands on. Walden and Thoreau were really my first entry and it made sense because I spent all my extra time in the woods -- I wasn't a particularly social person. So, the rest of the folks I was hanging out with in high school were not engaged in these things and I have always been a kind of maverick around education. Which is "Oh, look, there's a tree that I'm interested in" and I'd go to the library to find out about it or go find some people to find out about it. So, I was doing the same things with these ideas and I was just so hungry to have other people who I could engage with, who loved to do that kind of thing."

At Reed College, Portland –

"So, as a freshman you walk in and you're expected to think on your feet in a group this second. It was more the kind of thing that was good for me, it was a challenge. I had trouble at first because the folks that were there understood the classic and historical references. I had no exposure to most of those. But that adrenaline rush of being with a group of people who are engaged in a set of ideas and coming both from their experience of reading books and the experience coming from their lives. I was hooked within a few weeks.... But socially I couldn't cope with Reed. I mean there are always family factors, but I was trying to come out. I was a young lesbian..... I was struggling with how I fit in with this whole thing in terms of class as well. It was very difficult to understand how different our worlds were. I would take someone home on you know a holiday or something. I remember one woman walking down main street Redding; folks had suspenders and boots and cowboy hats. She was from NY and she said, "Oh, my god, do people actually dress like this?" And I said, "well, yeah, this is where I live."

The early-mid 1970's in Portland –

“I was in Portland working blue-collar jobs and hanging out with my friends and it was the women’s movement and the lesbian movement was beginning and Portland was one of the hot centers of that. The basic idea was to work in groups and say ‘how are you doing?’ and back and forth and that can be misused but it can also be used in a very creative way....Portland generated huge numbers of collective houses, collective bookstores, health clinics, just amazing, it was a great time to be there. ... We discussed economics and the trajectory of women’s history. .. What was really emphasized through the women’s movement was your own experience and that was extremely important..... I was working down on Third & Alder at Pioneer Fruit. And I got to be very, very butch – dress all in blue, get up very early in the morning and toss 70-lb celery crates over my head. And listen to people and at night go to all these meetings when I had the chance. So I was engaged with a very blue collar community. And all these wonderful farmers. And that connected with my youth, which was around farming and ranching. So it was just this wonderful convergence of the turmoil of Portland and still being hooked up with agriculture and through the multinational links at AFSC I started understanding international agriculture better and then just being able to be with regular folks with whom I actually connected more. I always had uncomfortably one foot outside this egghead academia thing and the other foot just solidly from where I came from. Just hanging out with rancher and blue collar and pink collar folks and it’s just my culture, it’s very comfortable.”

Southern Oregon, in the late 1970's –

“So there we were sitting on our little ‘back to the land’ hippie piece of land under Dollar Mountain in Southern Oregon and there is this drilling going on. ... They were prospecting, trying to get a sense of just how valuable the minerals were up in the mountains. .. So, we started talking to people around town and saying ‘what do you know?’ ... We eventually found out Anglo-American of South Africa and United Technologies were in our presumably non-political backyard drilling for one of the most important military metals in the world.... A group of three or four of us spent hours and hours in the county courthouse putting together this whole thing. A lot of it was talking to people. At one point we had 200 in a room in Cave Junction, across the political spectrum, conservative ranchers up thru the environmentalists.”

Ithaca, NY, in the early-mid 1980's –

“I was really focusing on some of my long-term passions which were rural issues and agriculture. ...I had a whole social network of people who lived in the rural areas. It was my first real exposure to international folks and among the people who came through were the folks from the Highlander Center.... They paid attention to what people already knew in their lives and gave poor and working people a chance to analyze that through their own experience and this thing called popular education. I had never heard anyone put those kinds of words to it, put in a way that applied to an arena in which I was really interested.... I was offered the possibility of an internship down at Highlander for five or six months reorganizing their library.”

Highlander Center, New Market, Tennessee, 1986-87

“It was fascinating both in terms of history and the foundations of popular education, which was making sense of what I’d already been through and was struggling with. It gave a method for how to work with communities and also that there is a function for people like me – my personality and my skills are not well adapted for being an organizer. I’m much more enthralled by adult education.... So here was a way that adult

education is building the critical analytical skills of folks based on this thing called peer-based popular education. So, it was this wonderful juncture in which a fairly small organization could do an awful lot..... So, curiously what happened for me, the chemistry was that I could be both people. And that was really the moment when I felt like I was on a trajectory of what I could do. I did not have to segregate my lesbian self from this part of myself that was really passionate about rural areas and working with people in general. Up until that time I had felt like it had to be a choice... But then I realized not only could I be, but I had a right to be and I get to be who I am and that was very freeing. So, Highlander worked on me. I had the same kind of experience that many people have around this popular education process. That I went from feeling like, well you can only do this or you can only do this. Well, damn I can do the whole damn thing and why not? And it just gives you more power and more ability to work in the world. So, by then I was hooked. Popular education at that point -- I felt like I can go home now. I can go home and I can do this.”

Back home in Southern Oregon, 1987 –

“So, I came home with high hopes, but I had also learned that you just don’t jump in. You must have grounding in your community. So, I came back to the same collective that I had left, Woman Share. Got a job at the local community college and started being within several networks where I could work, other social networks and community meeting networks. And that’s really when *In Timber Country* came through because I knew that you just don’t walk in and start up something like Highlander. So it occurred to me to do a set of interviews, open-ended interviews with people, poor and working people in the area. ... [Generally in the public] there was no understanding of labor things, or people’s right to speak, or what people would be risking if they spoke out against those timber companies in small towns... I was working at the community college and doing interviews for *In Timber Country* to get a portrait of the community, as it was going through change from a rural community to an ex-urban community.”

Working on In Timber Country, 1989-94, published in 1995 –

“So a lot of these folks were strangers to me, a few people I knew some, but only a couple people who I see even sporadically anymore. What surprised me and what I shouldn’t have been surprised about is that for people who have not seen themselves as players in history, when someone pays attention to them and says, ‘This is important and here’s why it is part of a bigger dialogue,’ they didn’t care who I was at that point. ... I was in a pizza parlor. I’d barely come in the door, these guys had seated themselves at the end of the table and I was ripping my tape recorder stuff out because they just started talking to me both at the same time. And they didn’t stop talking for three hours. ... I was not manipulating the situation and really tried to put down exactly what was in the interviews. My rules were: I must be scrupulously honest to their own logic and so it didn’t matter if I agreed, disagreed or whatever else..... You put together a set of interviews with people who have an extraordinary amount of knowledge. This really is the basis for popular education: as we live our lives people end up with a substantial amount of knowledge through their experience. I’ve had feedback and some of the people would clutch the book and say ‘No one has ever written about my people. This is my people.’”

Finishing the book and moving on to creating the Jefferson Center, 1995-

“The book did change things a lot. I realized that it was no longer as white an area as I thought it was. I always knew there was a Latino population around here, but over and over again people mentioned the Southeast Asian mushroom harvesters and the Latino forest workers that were in the woods.... We’d not only try to start the Jefferson Center, but say ‘what would be the kind of issue that would be important to investigate across various lines of culture and class?’ ... We wanted to make it possible for people who had an interest to sit down with folks like themselves, a peer group like themselves in the sense that they had a common problem. Not like themselves in the sense that some people may speak Spanish and some people speak Laotian and other people may speak English. But if all of them are dealing with this issue of natural resources and working in the woods and how this affected their family and community lives, that’s a common theme. So, there it was – a niche for the Jefferson Center to enter into a conversation that was timely... and there was really a big portion of the population that did not have any voice.”

On some of the work Bev most enjoyed, from the late 1990’s on –

“Asking people to share their experiences. At the height of the activity we had in the Jefferson Center during the forest worker movement, the best things were those gatherings where people talked about their own lives. We also spent a lot of time just talking to people around kitchen tables. ... So, say you were working with a group in central California from the Cambodian community, and after we’d try to bring a couple folks from the Latino community. So that people could share experiences.... The whole point was to create this cross analysis, understanding and informing each other of what the systems were.”

“We introduced simultaneous translation, not just with voice-to-voice but cheap radio sets. So, you had a situation where people were talking about their work lives, they were talking about their lives and their histories as cultures and you had people speaking in their own languages. Things were articulate with simultaneous interpretation. It was electric, absolutely electric. It changed the whole chemistry... Working people, poor people being articulate about their lives, about Oaxaca having all the trees cut and there being no water, about the Khmer Rouge selling all the forest in northern Cambodia to gain money to support the genocide -- all these things just coming up over and over again. One of the most moving moments was a whole bunch of veterans of the American War or Vietnam War, depending on what side you were on, all standing at a map of Southeast Asia. You had Native American, Laotian, Cambodian and Anglo folks, guys all about the same age with their fingers up saying ‘this is where I was.’ In these meetings there was a sense that people were able to possibly move things. Poor and working people have not been invited, have not had the chance generally in their lives to sit down and analyze, not only their experience, but to analyze where some of their conclusions would take them.”

“It’s listening in a very certain kind of way that opens up your ability to ask strategic why and how questions, to elicit that learning and that analytical process from other people without banging immediately into those ideological stops, the brick walls ... so that we can get to the point of building.. trying to build a foundation for a horizontal democracy.”

From a taped interview with Bev, by Anne Fischel, Peter Kardas, Lin Nelson, July 2004