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Summer 2010

Hermeneutic Adventures in Home Teaching: Mary and Richard Rorty

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott_abbott/58/

Hermeneutic Adventures in Home-Teaching: Mary and Richard Rorty

by Scott Abbott

When philosopher Alastair MacIntyre came striding into my Vanderbilt University office brandishing the *New York Times* in October of 1985, I knew something was up. Congratulations, he said, your church has just entered its Renaissance Period. I was used to seeing him walk into Furman Hall on Ash Wednesdays with a streak of ash on his forehead, and we had talked about Mormonism, but I had no clue what he was talking about. He showed me the front page of the paper. It was the Mark Hofmann bombings, murders to cover up Hofmann's forgeries. It only took you 150 years, Alastair noted. It took us a millennium and a half.

I've told this story a dozen times, maybe two dozen. For just the right audience, Mormons who know that Alastair is one of the world's foremost ethicists, it works beautifully. I never hesitate to tell it, although I'm always a little uneasy knowing that I'm name-dropping. If name-dropping is all that's involved in telling stories about "philosophers I have known," then this will be a short essay. But if I can convince myself that there's more to it than that, that stories about intersections between philosophers and the religious tradition I grew up in might be interesting to others (in ways my story about sitting behind Marie Osmond in the Nashville Third Ward while she chewed off her fingernails and deposited them in her husband's coat pocket is not), then perhaps there's a purpose to writing about my role as home teacher to America's most famous pragmatic

philosopher after John Dewey. Well, not technically a home teacher to Richard Rorty, but rather to his wife Mary Varney Rorty, a philosopher in her own right.

About thirty years ago, in a middle-school cafeteria in Hightstown, not far from Princeton University where I was studying German literature, I watched a grey-haired man hold his baby in a circle of priesthood holders while the Bishop of the Princeton Ward gave the child a name and blessing. That's Richard Rorty, someone said. The name didn't mean a thing to me at the time. It did soon enough.

Mary grew grown up Mormon in Idaho, and had acquired a Ph.D. in ancient philosophy. Richard had grown up the orchid loving son of Trotskiite parents. True to his pragmatic philosophy (or was he simply deferring to Mary?), Richard figured it might be good for their new son (or was it their daughter?) to grow up within some tradition, and perhaps Mormonism was as good as any other.

When the Bishop of the Princeton Ward asked me to be the Rortys' home teacher, I hesitated. Do they want a home teacher? The Bishop assured me they did. I told him I would ask Mary, and if she agreed, I would do it. She agreed, although I noticed her eyebrows raising when she said yes. I sealed the agreement by promising I wouldn't be intrusive, and that I would report monthly visits on the basis of whatever contact we happened to have. Mary's eyebrows relaxed.

And so I became their home teacher. Over the course of a year or two, I visited them at their home three or four times, usually bringing my son Joseph as

my companion. When we rang the doorbell, there was always a scurry inside. We could hear Richard shouting “the home teachers! the home teachers!” while rushing up the stairs to the second floor. When Mary opened the door, she was always laughing at Richard’s antics, theater performed for the children.

Our other visits, not exactly *home* teaching but duly reported to the Bishop, were memorable to me. The only one that occasioned tension of any sort was the morning I delivered Joseph to his class at the elementary school and found Mary there too, talking with some other parents. When she saw me, she slid her cup of coffee to one side. I sat down next to her and said I would resign as her home teacher if she ever felt uncomfortable about me again. She promised.

Sometime in 1979, Mary asked if I would babysit Kevin and Patricia while she and Richard celebrated the publication of his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. When I arrived, Richard handed me the first copy of the book, handsome in its green, yellow, and black jacket. The children are asleep, Mary said, take a look at the book if you want.

I wanted.

It was a magical evening. Starting with the Wittgenstein epigraph that pointed out that when we think of the future we suppose it will be a direct extension of the present as opposed to an extension of the present over a curved or changed line, I fell into a reading reverie broken only by the nagging hope that they would make a long evening of it. Richard was arguing that “pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements . . . determine most of our

philosophical traditions,” and that the image of the mind as a mirror that correctly or incorrectly represents what we experience has held philosophy captive for millennia. Instead, he thought, we might better be engaged in a kind of hermeneutics developed by Hans Georg Gadamer, a turn from attempts to find truth to work that focuses on romantic ideas of self creation. Truth isn’t something we find, but something we make. Mary and Richard finally came home, and because it’s a long book, I had to buy my own copy the next day.

Not long after that visit, Gadamer came to town. His lecture drew hundreds of listeners, and although the 80-year-old German didn’t use a single English preposition correctly, he charmed us all. After the lecture, Richard found me and invited me to come to their home for a reception. You’re working on Rilke and Heidegger, aren’t you? Come talk with Hans about it.

Hans!

I arrived at the small reception, mostly Richard’s graduate students, and Richard asked what I wanted to drink. When I hesitated, he took me into the kitchen, found an almost empty bottle of 7-UP, and poured it into a wine glass. It’s old and flat, he said. Wish we had something else. Come meet Hans. He told Gadamer I was working on Rilke’s “Duino Elegies.” Gadamer asked what my angle was, and when I told him about the “standing” metaphor I was tracing through the poems, the poet’s attempt to counteract physical and cultural entropy through standing figures, stanzas and *Gestalten*, letters and figures, he nodded vigorously. It’s all there, he said. I knew it was remarkable when I first read it, just after it was published, and I knew Martin needed to see it.

Martin!

I gave a copy to Heidegger, he said, and Heidegger liked it as much as I did.

And I was grateful for the “hermeneutics of home teaching.”

On another memorable evening, the Rortys’ friend Harold Bloom was in town to lecture. I sat next to Mary in the crowded auditorium and listened to the big man with the photographic memory talk at great length about some fascinating topic. And although I’ve forgotten what Bloom’s lecture was about, I have a clear memory of Mary, next to me, knitting at a steady pace, her knits and purls matching Bloom’s ideas.

Mary is not just a knitter. She also has a way with words. One late afternoon, with the setting sun slanting through the tall side window of the Princeton Chapel (our sod laying and funnelcake sales had finally resulted our being able to build the unusual chapel), Mary gave a carefully written sermon. The warm light playing sensuously on the high wall behind her, she spoke about various kinds of love. Had I given the sermon, it would have sounded like C.S. Lewis’ *The Four Loves*. But Mary had done more than read Lewis; she knew ancient Greek philosophy through its original texts, and she knitted and purled a complicated and beautiful story. The quality of the sermon was unexpected in our ward; we were, for the most part, people with the skills to pull the electrical wire in the building, or to set the open rafters, and even if our skills lay in the academic sphere, we weren’t likely to write our sacrament meeting talks with an eye to beauty. Turning to erotic love, Mary described how the curve of a lover’s

arched foot was as meaningful as anything in the world. I sat there dumbfounded.

Fifteen years later, I spent five afternoons in Provo Canyon with Richard, looking for a lazuli bunting. He was a passionate birder and had accepted a summer speaking engagement at BYU on the off chance that he might spot one of the beautiful little birds. He was also thinking (or was it Mary who was wondering?) about BYU as a possible place for Kevin and Patricia to go to college (BYU quickly fell off the map as possible universities, for reasons Mary would have to elaborate). Near Stewart Falls above Sundance, I saw a flash of blue and pointed at it. Richard raised his big binoculars and found the bird. While focused tightly on the little beauty, he held out his bird book so I could see the lazuli bunting on the cover. Richard looked and looked and looked. Finally he handed me the binoculars. I glanced quickly at the amazing flash of blue on the back of a striking red, white, and black body and quickly handed the glasses back. That night we had dinner in Sundance's Tree Room. I feigned horror when Richard ordered quail. After that initial sighting, I emailed Richard every spring on the day I spotted the first lazuli bunting in Utah Valley. The year he died it was the second of May.

On his last morning at BYU, lecturing about pragmatic philosophy and its connections with postmodernism, Richard recited a "double dactyl" he had composed, a strict form that announces its playfulness with the opening "Higgledy-Piggledy," and requires that a single word comprise the double dactyl of the sixth line. I'll remember Richard with a double dactyl of my own, borrowing

the sixth line from his:

- Higgedy-Piggedy,
Rorty the pragmatist,
Trotskyite parenting,
“Richard McKay”;
Challenge philosophy’s
Phallogocentrism,
Mirror of Nature,
- And those who prey.