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The Joy of a Serious Life

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Flashback

The Joy of a Serious Life

by Matteo Bortolini

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The main interest in life and work
is to become someone else that
you were not in the beginning
Michel Foucault

There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.
Leonard Cohen

An aphorism of the British historian John Burrow helps us understand Robert Bellah: “A guide is not a guide if he leads simultaneously in all directions at once.” Bellah was learned and smart, loved big ideas and grand narratives, but he would not lead us in all directions at once. He had a clear vision of what was right and he wanted us to follow him. At the same time, he was never weary of being reminded that other directions and other ways exist. Bob's greatness lay in his intention to embrace the whole from a particular point of view without denying the possibility and the opportunity of changing one's mind – and one's life with it. Let me explain.

I think we will all agree that Bellah's most enduring legacy is his call to focus on the symbolic side of social life. Perhaps today his enthusiastic case for a sociology armed with the finest tools of hermeneutics and interpretation is not so revolutionary as it was in the early 1970s, when his essays on “symbolic realism” aroused harsh criticism and even some outrage. The point, however, is that for Bob, interpretive social science was more than just another way of doing sociology. It represented a radical understanding of the human condition that would, and should, have a deep impact on the social scientist as a human being.

In truly Durkheimian fashion, Bellah wanted us to think about that other side of reality – that religious level of symbolic consciousness which connects what is

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drawn apart by social life and cultural symbols. As he wrote in the Introduction to his Durkheim anthology, the relation between society and religion is that between two different but mutually constitutive levels of symbolic life [Bellah 1973]. If society is a set of categories, concepts, and norms of action, religious symbols and rituals do “not merely give an intellectual conception of society, they create” society beyond the horizon of all particulars and distinctions.

As Bob explained repeatedly – for the last time in *Religion in Human Evolution* [Bellah 2011] – after the Axial break this religious level of consciousness took as its very center the idea of transcendence. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance that transcendence has for the sociology of Robert Bellah as a truly *religious sociology* – to use a Durkheimian expression. Transcendence is crucial not only as a symbol that sociologists must interpret and situate within social and cultural life; transcendence also generates both responsibility and change. As a horizon of meaning, transcendence calls for judgment, critique, and self-renewal. This I would call the paradox of the sacred – that is, the sacred as both the core of society and “something that disrupts and calls all our expectations into question, [something] that keeps us from settling into a groove” [Bellah 1976, 65].

At the core of Bellah’s sociology we find a thesis about the human condition that has both scholarly *and* existential consequences – an intuition which, in my view, radically distinguishes Bob’s work from that of Clifford Geertz. In the early 1970s, Bob wrote about his intuition in a straightforward way. He spoke of the need to attain a “second naiveté,” in which scientific rationality and lived experience would be fused together [Bellah 1975]. He called for the “whole self, mind and spirit and body” to be involved in teaching, and asked: “How can one try to integrate culture if one does not also try to integrate oneself?” [Bellah 1971, 233]. In the 1980s, Bellah became less outspoken, but he would still use sociological interviews to engage his fellow citizens in moral discussions; he also wrote that “moral vacuity creates cognitively trivial work” [Bellah 2006]. His remarks on “the renouncers” at the close of *Religion in Human Evolution* offer his last words on the intensity, and the seriousness, that the sacred imposes on us: we can never be satisfied with what we are. We must think about who we are and who we want to be – we must change our lives.

If Bellah had stopped there, however, we would not be very far from a sermon on the continuing importance of Puritan asceticism. His conclusion to *Religion in Human Evolution* does start from something that seems completely different: *play* and the joy of being able to act within “relaxed fields” where the pressures of everyday life do not apply. Reflecting his latter-day incorporation of the evolutionary theory of Merlin Donald, Bob saw no contradiction between being serious and being playful. On the contrary, speaking of Axial utopias, he wrote:

Aren't all utopias a kind of pretend play where one can imagine a world that is itself a relaxed field where the ordinary pressures of life are suspended? If we can imagine a world of Buddhist renouncers, it would be a world of sheer joy, where the sufferings and desires of this world have been left behind, where there is no coercion of any kind, interior or exterior [Bellah 2011, 586].

Bob gave us a last example of his attitude in an email he sent the co-authors of *Habits of the Heart* and myself four days before his surgery. The message mentioned the prospect of the operation, and how optimistic he was about it. After that, however, Bob wrote: "Just in case I'm not around to tell you later, I must report on another book that has blown me out of the water." I had urged Bob to read Peter Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life* because I found it crucial for the book he was writing. I guess that now you understand why. This is how he described his experience:

It is a long book, over 450 pages. I liked the book though remained ambivalent until the last chapter, containing 10 pages beginning at p. 442. But when I read those ten pages they descended on me like tongues of fire. The last two pages swept me completely away and it took me nearly an hour to recover. I just sat there overcome. I see now that the whole book was leading up to those last pages, yet I didn't expect them. Those pages express exactly what I want to do in my next book, though giving me lots more ammunition. Sloterdijk talks about the practices we will need to meet the ecological Armageddon, about how they are impossible, but the whole of human history is about attaining the impossible. We should not dwell on doom and gloom but on the greatest challenge our species has ever met and how tremendously exciting it will be to meet it. It was like a giant explosion for me, but not a destructive one, rather a global fireworks display that suddenly shed light on everything.

This is what Björn Wittrock justly called Bob's "perpetual youthfulness" in reading, writing, and discussing powerful ideas – the joy of a serious life, we may call it, using another Durkheimian expression. But I want to stress, again, that I am not talking about a mere trait of his personality or character. According to Robert Bellah's explicit theorizing, the fusion between cognitive rationality and lived existence, on the one hand, and between asceticism and joy, on the other, must be a radical and intrinsic element of intellectual work.

I would like to close with a story about the last time I saw Bob, in November 2012. He was going to lecture in Freiburg and Heidelberg, and we spent an entire week together, traveling and chatting and talking about almost everything. It was Bob's first time in Heidelberg, the German town where Max Weber taught in the late Nineteenth century and where Talcott Parsons got his Doctor of Philosophy degree in the 1920s. One rainy morning, we had the chance to visit the town with a group of German graduate students. We were brought to the Great Hall, the university's historic auditorium, and our tour guide said: "Maybe you know that a famous soci-

ologist, Max Weber, used to teach here.” And Bob said: “Yes, I know.” And the tour guide: “Maybe you’ve heard that Weber’s most famous book is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.” And we said: “Yes, we know.” At that point, the lady started to summarize Weber’s book, with some difficulty. While the graduate students giggled and silently made fun of her, Bob listened in complete respect, as if he had never heard talk about this Weber guy before.

Such a guide, colleagues and friends, was Robert Bellah. We have only just begun to follow him.

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The Joy of a Serious Life

Abstract: A short commentary on the late Robert N. Bellah which highlights the inseparable twine between life and work, affectivity and rationality, seriousness and joy.

Keywords: Bellah, intellectuals, discipline, ideas, friendship

Matteo Bortolini is assistant professor of Sociology at the University of Padova, Italy. He is a co-editor of *Sociologica* for 2013-2015, and has been a visiting fellow at the universities of California, Berkeley, Harvard, and Yale. He is currently writing an intellectual biography of Robert N. Bellah from the standpoint of the sociology of individuals. His interests also include the history of the social sciences in Italy and the US, and the sociology of fame and success.