

Helen Ralston (1929-2006)

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Sister Helen Ralston, RSCJ, Ph.D., Professor Emerita of Sociology at Saint Mary's University and one of the *grandes dames* of Canadian Sociology, passed away on December 25, 2006, following a brief illness.

She was born in Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia in 1929. She maintained her family ties and Australian contacts till the end of her life, traveling to Australia at least once a year and spending there a good part of every year, since her retirement especially. Being active in research till the end of her life, she was usually a visiting fellow at various Australian universities, lecturing and attending conferences.

Helen Ralston was educated in convent schools, and eventually entered the Society of the Sacred Heart in 1957 in Albany, New York, and made her final profession in Rome in 1965. She received a diploma in Social Studies from the University of Sydney in 1952, a certificate in Medical Social Work in 1953, following which she worked at the Royal Newcastle Hospital. In 1956 she migrated to Canada, where she worked at the Montreal General Hospital. Sister Ralston launched her teaching career in 1959 at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Montreal. In 1962 she relocated to Halifax where she taught at the Convent of the Sacred Heart till 1965, when she returned to the United States to continue her education. In 1965 she received a BA in Sociology (Boston College), and in 1969 she received her MA (Boston College). In 1968, she joined the Faculty of Arts at Saint Mary's University in Halifax. With a reference from Everett Hughes, she obtained a Canada Council doctoral fellowship and went to Carleton, where she graduated in 1973 as their first Ph.D. in Sociology (Eichler, 2001). She returned to Saint Mary's University as an Assistant Professor. She became a full professor in 1989, and retired in 1994 when she was granted the designation of Professor Emerita.

Her work focused on various issues concerning migrant women, with religion, identity and empowerment as key themes. Critiquing the literature about South-Asian immigrant women as largely focused on immigrants living in Ontario, and often in Toronto, she introduced a regional perspective, first looking at the Atlantic region then in BC. She also did comparative work that dealt with Canada, Australia, Fiji and New Zealand. Her published comparative research focused on immigration and multicultural policies; interconnected gender, race, ethnicity, class and religion in identity construction, experience and empowerment amongst first and second-generation South Asian immigrant women. Dr. Ralston produced numerous published articles, reports, policy papers, and conference presentations and two well-received monographs, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India* (1988), and *The Lived Experience of South Asian Immigrant Women in Atlantic Canada: The Interconnections of Race, Class and Gender* (1997) a classic text on immigrant women in Atlantic Canada. This is an excellent record for someone who starts an academic career as a mature adult. In the last couple of years she had been working towards a theory of transnational identity in multiracial local, national and global diaspora space. What is most remarkable about Helen was the unabated zeal and energy with which she continued to be involved in research and with the international academic community way past her official retirement.

Besides religion, Helen Ralston identified both in her work and life with feminism, a challenging though not impossible combination. She had no difficulty telling the story of the tough fight she had to go through with when she came up for tenure. It was unclear whether this was because she was a woman or because she was a nun. In a sociological universe where practitioners' range of

religious identities mostly spans from atheists, to agnostics to “religiously amusical”, a religious feminist sociologist might have been seen as an impossible identity, a contradiction in terms. Helen felt supported by her feminist friends and inspired by the women’s movement. The latter “had a tremendous influence on my way of seeing the world ... It’s been my colleagues and friends who are feminists who have been a great help. I find that we learn from each other” (Ralston in Eichler, 2001).

Both as a researcher and writer but also as an activist on social justice issues, Helen had earned national and international recognition for her work in the areas of anti-sexist and anti-racist social justice. She was an active member of numerous organizations, including the International Sociological Association (having served on the Executive of Research Committees RC 05- Ethnic, Race and Minority Relations and RC 32 * Women in Society), the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association (Executive member); the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIA-W-NS) and the Canadian Social Development Program Committee of KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, among others. She was regularly invited to lecture on immigration, settlement and multicultural policies, and various social justice issues around the world and, in particular, on her extensive research into the interconnections of gender, race and class in the lived experiences of South Asian immigrant women in Canada and Australia.

As a member of the Faculty of Arts at Saint Mary’s University, she taught in the Department of Sociology and in the Asian Studies, Atlantic Canada Studies, and International Development Studies Programs. She also served as a faculty member of the Inter-University Graduate Program in Women’s Studies (offered jointly by Saint Mary’s University, Dalhousie University, and Mount Saint Vincent University). Having been involved in the Canadian Metropolis project from its inception (as an affiliate of the Prairie Centre of Excellence), she became highly active in the establishment of the Atlantic Metropolis Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Diversity / Gender and Immigrant Women Domain. Helen taught, mentored and inspired generations of students who will most certainly miss her.

I met Helen Ralston at a session of RC 32 (Women in Society) of the International Sociological Association Conference in Madrid in 1990. I no longer remember what she was talking about but I was captivated by the presentation and the fascinating combination of dynamism and inner calm of the speaker. As a brand new Ph.D. I was too shy to introduce myself. I met her again three years later when I was interviewing at Saint Mary’s. She took time out of her busy schedule to show me around in her favourite spot, Point Pleasant Park. Although it was one of those interviews where stars seems to align, it was the view of the sea and the port cranes from the spruce tree forest trails on an unusually sunny, warm afternoon, in Helen’s friendly company, that tipped the balance for me to join the Saint Mary’s Faculty. I had the pleasure to enjoy her company, observe and always learn from her, on both academic and life matters, since then.

All too humanly, despite her rational analytical thinking and empiricism, Helen embodied a bundle of contradictions that often exasperated those in immediate contact with her and challenged the faith of those who noticed this highly unconventional nun in action. She was a perfectionist in an imperfect world – which she knew about in a cognitive way – yet she was fighting to fix, possibly on principle: things and people who stood in her way were swept over. Classically educated, with an old-world professorial style, Helen was an aristocrat concerned for the downtrodden, human rights and women’s equality. Her lack of patience for incompetence and rights violation was feared and, sometimes, under deadline pressure, her manners left something to be desired. Ultimately, however, she was forgiving and had a heart of pure gold which is the characteristic of true nobility.

Helen was a seasoned traveler having been around the world many times. I remember our former secretary, a devout Catholic, ostensibly shaken when she heard Helen's loud voice cursing the printers and copiers reverberate through the Department's corridors, "Sister Ralston!!!" I remember the secretary's stories about Helen traveling to far away places when violent revolutions and bloody coup d'états were taking place; about Helen swimming in shark-infested waters at 6 a.m. daily in Australia; about Helen being present where volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and other natural disasters occurred: Helen always managed to return untouched and unscathed. Scandalized, the secretary would end up wondering and graphically gesturing: "No doubt someone is helping Helen...The question is, is He the guy from 'upstairs' or 'downstairs'?" I have often relayed this story to colleagues and always felt reassured myself when traveling with Helen (no matter how uncomfortable in other respects – she was difficult to get along and wanted things her way – a fighter, survivor and perfectionist she was). In a moment of remorse I had even confided to Helen my telling of this story (maybe omitting the question about the origins of the "help"). Helen's apt response had been something like that she was convinced that God has a Plan and a time for everyone to go and that there is nothing one can do to speed this up or postpone it. Thus, it is absurd to feel envy for someone's "luck". Thus, you do your best and enjoy every moment for as long as it lasts. This was ultimately Helen's legacy, another yet challenging, ambivalent and dialectical combination of spirituality and idealism, infused with rationalism and Epicurean hedonism.

I repeated one last time the story of Helen's miraculous ability to survive at the ISA conference, this last summer, in Durban, South Africa, when we were all waiting for her and she failed to arrive. I wanted to reassure myself one more time: Helen would pull through. She almost did. This is why, her death, in the end, did not feel like a defeat in a battle but more like a stealth (or a Plan?)

References

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2. Saint Mary's University, "University Community Mourns the Loss of Distinguished Professor and Researcher", Media Release, December 27, 2006.
3. Helen Ralston Personal Web Page in Sociology and Criminology, Saint Mary's University <http://www.arts.smu.ca/sociology/FacultyStaff/ralston.aspx>