

IN A JAR

WIND

JOHN
ARELLA





IN A JAR

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PREFACE

I wonder how to think about people's lives and experiences so as not to take from them what matters, what is important. We have this tendency to look for or to impose order and pattern, but the categories of peoples that we create and the types of experience that we assign to these categories seem to remove what matters from people and their lives. It also seems to be a way of avoiding or not listening to what others have to say.

This is difficult to talk about. We are so habituated to classifying experience rather than having it, to saying convincing things about understanding rather than listening.

Renato Rosaldo tells a story near the beginning of his book *Culture and Truth*.¹ He says that an older Ilongot man will tell you that he used to cut off heads because "rage, born of grief, impels him to kill his fellow human beings. He claims that he needs a place to 'carry his anger.' The act of severing and tossing away the victim's head enables him, he says, to vent and, he hopes, throw away the anger of his bereavement."

Rosaldo goes on to talk about his own attempts to understand and explain what is for the older Ilongot man a self-evident truth. And he goes through various attempts at making anthropological sense out of the statement, none of which work very well. Rosaldo says that it took him fourteen years to understand. When he and his wife returned to the Philippines in 1981 she was walking along a trail and fell to her death. And he started to grasp the meaning of what these men had been saying.

¹*Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), pp. 1–21.

I don't know quite what to say about this. I use his example rather than my own, because I feel as if a part of what I have to say in this preface is captured by his description. That makes it at least partially his idea, and I don't want to steal it. But I feel uncomfortable assigning my meaning to the description of his wife's death; it is all right for him to do it, but not for me.

When Navajos talk about people who have done fieldwork among them they will sometimes say that these people are stealing, stealing their culture, their ideas, the things they care about. I feel reluctant to steal Rosaldo's experience, but I suppose I will get over it. That is the business I am in.

When Rosaldo uses this example he uses the word *force*, as in "emotional force," to describe his experience and what the Ilongot men are saying. Implicit in this is the self-evidence of truths that matter. If you listen to people telling you about the things they care about, what they are saying will make sense. I like the word *passion*, or *intensity*, better than *force*. In order to have a chance to understand anything that matters, we need this passion. The first part of this is the passion for understanding and for truth generally, and, for Rosaldo, the second part is the passion for understanding the specifics of what the headhunter meant.

You have to care about getting it right, about understanding what the world has to say to you. And as a part of this you end up being dissatisfied with your own, and with others', approximate and partial descriptions. Rosaldo, at some level, knew he was getting it wrong for all those years.

We have a huge repertoire of strategies for diminishing the intensity of life or removing it altogether. The application of Aristotle's idea, genus and species, to people and experience, is the most basic and damaging of these. We really believe in these categories, and professions (as contrasted with jobs) are completely based on the ownership of certain slices. Categorizing an experience necessarily makes it less intense. Like dealing with the category death, or grief, or mourning, or funerary ritual, rather than with our friend or lover's death.

Sometimes the categorization is useful, as in some clinical situations. When my daughter has strep throat, there is something that can be done about it. When we treat people with AIDS as diseased rather than as sinners, there is the possibility of behaving towards them as humans rather than shunning them.

But usefulness is overdone as a rationale. Mostly we think this way out of habit. The habit is based on and reinforced by the control it gives us over experience. It takes the force, the passion, out of what others have to say. And we can feel less, more in control and subdued. As if intellect really mattered and really brought understanding.

In anthropology today, there are two extreme strategies for diminishing the intensity of our experience of others. The first of these is method, rigor. Method takes the intensity out of experience at the point of attack. It insists that one focus here and not there, and ignore much of what matters, what cannot be digitalized. Rigor promises the mastery of experience. One will be able to know and therefore to control. And of course in any chronic obsessive act one feels less, sidesteps or deintensifies.

There is another way of not listening that is more sinister. Over the last twenty years this strategy has been discussed under the heading of *interpretation*; more recently the word *text* is used in anthropology (*postmodernism* is more generally used). But this way of looking or, I suppose, of not looking has a long tradition, and it is based on feigning or emphatically insisting on open-mindedness. Before anthropologists interpreted, they talked about relativism, which essentially was an emphatic insistence on being nonjudgmental. The *reductio ad absurdum* for nonjudgmental is to not believe in and therefore not pursue truth.

The problem with this, aside from it being dishonest and wrong, is that when you talk to people they tell you about truth, about their passion, about what matters to them. And if they bother to talk to you at all, they care a great deal about you understanding it. A part of that understanding is that you feel something, that you respond with some sort of intensity. As in "Aha! That is exactly the way it is"; or, "That is bullshit!" Rosaldo's initial response to the old men was simply wrong; they were talking about passion. He was responding politely and reasonably. Anthropologists are supposed to behave like this around natives; around each other they argue.

Categorization, method, and that most absolute of methods, emphatic open-mindedness, are simply ways of editing and controlling experience at the outset. People who are well socialized in Western thought are pretty much able to avoid life.

Opposed to this way of knowing is taking experience and

people personally rather than categorically. It involves listening or paying attention. You more or less accept discomfort and chaos at the outset. That is, rather than trying to avoid uncertainty, you accept it. The most you can do is accept; I don't think anyone really seeks uncertainty. But at the foundation of this acceptance is a faith that somewhere in the process of talking to and watching people and feeling confused, it will all make sense. Instead of editing at the outset you go after what you care about and hope that it shakes out.

Over the last few years I have made efforts to explain this to people. Mostly, people give me their own examples of these sorts of things that they care about. These are all different kinds of people and they care about all different sorts of things, but the thread they offer is always in transforming what is usually categorical into the personal. Sometimes it is about the utter nonsense of categories.

I would like to give a few examples of this that others have given me. The example from Rosaldo's book was suggested to me by Gilbert Quintero.

My oldest daughter gave me an example. She lives in Los Angeles. God intends this as a punishment against me. Obviously I have failed as a parent. She works with some sort of anarchistic political organization that is too well organized. They are trying to monitor government and change laws, that sort of thing; and they approach this in a real grass-roots, populist way. I was talking to her about the ideas in this book and she told me about a Los Angeles skid row mission that has been in existence for a very long time. It turns out that during the Reagan/Bush years the Salvation Army, missions, these sort of organizations are real growth industries, in fact they grow at a phenomenal rate. It never occurred to me that these would prosper during times of indifference but it makes sense. Kind of an American success story.

The mission runs these ads on TV to get people to donate money. And for as long as my daughter can remember they have been the standard ads about "help the homeless," citing statistics, showing anonymous people making the generic plea that we are all so familiar with. The other day when she was cooking dinner and had the TV on, one of the mission ads came on that was different. She stopped what she was doing and she listened.

This is Joe Smith, said the ad, and it showed this man. This is his wife Susan and his children Mark and June. Joe is thirty-eight and has worked as a commercial artist for fifteen years. Eighteen months ago he was laid off. And the ad went on in the same very personal way. My daughter listened, remembered, was bothered.

A third example. There is an instance that Carlos Castañeda recounts in one of the Don Juan books that depicts the utter failure of categorization. These are generally stories about shamanism and magic, and Don Juan is this kind of primitive sorcerer, a wild Indian. One day Castañeda is in Mexico City, and a well-dressed suit-and-tie businessman says, "Hello Carlos." And he does a double take and it is Don Juan. What are you doing here, says Castañeda in complete amazement. Oh I was just talking to my broker about purchasing some equities to add to my portfolio. I have to go to the bank now, but let's do lunch.

There is a recent example of something that is ultra personal that we habitually transform into the categorical. In this case the woman involved insisted on not being treated as a category. The woman was raped. And she came to the conclusion that the way that newspapers reported rapes—keeping the "victim" anonymous and reporting the incident generally instead of graphically contributed both to rapes continuing and to her continued victimization. For her this was not a categorical experience but a very personal one. She wrote about her rape very graphically and personally and the *Des Moines Register* published her account over a series of weeks. Another part to this is that other papers picked the story up, but edited it so it would not be so graphic, so upsetting.

As an extension of the same idea, Michael Ghiglieri is writing a book on male violence. While he was researching and writing this, you kind of avoided him; he wanted to tell you one horrible story after another. He wasn't real cheery to be around. But the part of the book he could barely face and then only very late in the writing was the personal account of a woman he knew who had been badly brutalized.

So this book is about these sorts of things. It is against certain ways of organizing our thoughts and our actions. It is an attack on categorizing experience and people. Therefore it is anti

social science, anti Aristotelian, anti any sort of ownership of knowledge, anti organization or bureaucracy. And it is opinionated, not open-minded. These are all ways of taking the punch out of what the world has to say.

I have had a number of people read this and support me in this endeavor. They seemed to understand what I had to say and think that it was worth saying. They include my wife Linda, Sheila Berndt, Eva Bading and more recently Cindy Knox and Barbara Leviton. Very early on a man named Greg McNamee gave me some encouragement.

There are several people who helped as critical readers. This is a really valuable thing to have, people who take the time to care about what you have to say and try to make it better. Two people who were very valuable, and very different, were Miranda Warburton and Scott Thybony. Not every insight, observation and anecdote is a gem, Farella, says Miranda. Scott is much more polite; he kind of hints at what he doesn't like. Thanks.

Charlotte Frisbie encouraged and critiqued (some of these I will address momentarily) as did Roy Wagner. A long time ago, I had Roy as a teacher. I still have some books I stole from him. He was extremely good at teaching. He managed, and still manages, to convey ideas that matter. And he gets enthusiastic when he likes something. Charlotte gets excited in different ways, real honest and direct. Jeff Grathwohl, who was at the University of New Mexico Press, was really encouraging at a time I needed it. After he left Elizabeth Hadas took the project over and edited the book and was real helpful. It's nice to have people like this in the world. They take an interest. Let you know what they think.

Charlotte made two observations that need to be included. First, she correctly notes that there are many Navajos, including many singers, who are very strongly in favor of, and work at, cultural preservation. It is not just an Anglo anthropological trip, but a Navajo one as well.

Charlotte makes a second point that was also made differently by Miranda. I tend to write using the masculine almost exclusively. Their point is about pronouns, but I think the critique more general. In an earlier book I addressed this (specific to pronouns) in a footnote, where I cited something Ursula LeGuin mentioned in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. She in effect said that in English the neuter and the masculine pronouns have

the same surface form. And although this is true as far as it goes, it doesn't really address what these women are saying. I think for them the pronouns and the masculinized writing are much more of a personal thing, something they've been uncomfortable with for quite some time. I don't really know what to do about this, other than to acknowledge it. I'm uncomfortable for the most part with the neuter words we have invented in the last several years; and the he-and-she sorts of things get cumbersome. I suppose ultimately the most honest thing to say is that I tend to think and write in kind of a masculine way, so much so that any other way seems rather dishonest or odd. So I guess this is how I have to do it. I am not insisting on my correctness in this, nor am I not taking what others have to say seriously. I just don't know what else to do.

Each one of the chapters in the book is a story. And it is self-contained; that is you can start reading anywhere, or if you don't like something go elsewhere. Because of this, some information is placed at several points, creating some redundancy. But the book is not only independent stories; there are certain threads that connect the whole. so if you were to read the whole thing there would be, hopefully, a kind of cumulative understanding of these themes.

An earlier version of Chapter 6 appeared in *Diné Be'íina'* (Fall 1990; volume 2, number 1, pages 107–25).

There are a lot of people in this book. On the one hand I want to reveal them, but on the other I want to keep their lives private and not expose these people. This is a funny way to feel, but I feel that way all the time. So I do a variety of things to conceal who these people are while at the same time trying to keep things honest. Miranda Warburton has pointed out to me that this is paternalistic. She is correct; but I tend to be that way. Ultimately trying to both reveal and conceal is pretty difficult.

As I said at the outset and will say again, I care about the meaning in life and in what others have to say. And I wonder how to understand it, see the pattern in it, and write about it without removing much or all of what matters. I don't know the answer to this, but I do know a fair amount about where the answer isn't, about what cannot possibly work. But I don't have a formula for doing it correctly. This book and these stories are an attempt in that direction.

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BEGINNINGS

I

INTENT



This book is somewhere between a collection of essays and a beginning- middle-end sort of book with a unified theme. In small part this is intended, but in much greater part it just happened that way. The stories are about some people and some places I have known and some experiences I witnessed or was otherwise part of. My memory of it is more a series of snapshots than it is like a movie. But the snapshots are in the same family photo album; as such they are connected.

The most obvious connection is that these photos are taken by an anthropologist of some people he is studying. Sometimes someone else is holding the camera and I am in the picture, but not usually. But as with many things that initially appear obvious, there is also an inaccuracy in describing things in this way. The particular separation that has me as the observer and them as the object of study works rather poorly, and as time goes on, it works even more poorly. This is not to say that there is only an us (with me becoming a member of their group), or only me (with the others being an extension of my unconscious or something of the sort), or only a they as the scientist would maintain. It is just that the separation shifts, moves about, sometimes appearing strongly, occasionally, at least for a moment, disappearing completely. Ultimately, however, people like me need the separation and we tend more towards an I/you view of things than an I/thou relationship. We never quite join, nor do we completely separate; we tend to hover somewhere on the periphery, not knowing exactly where we do feel comfortable but knowing that when someone else tries to get closer or more distant, we don't like it.

The second connection in this book is thematic. There are certain patterns and ideas that repeat and repeat. This was not part of any grand plan; these are just things that are stuck inside of me somewhere and won't go away. Even with the exorcism ritual of writing about them, they remain. I will have more to say about these themes later and throughout.

There is another linkage that, while ultimately personal, is not solely mine. It has to do with discovering and conveying, writing about, the meaning, the things that matter, in people's lives. It is why I write about these things in this way, or more correctly, in these ways. This personal connecting thread starts as a reaction to the ways in which we remove what matters from people's lives—the ways that we depersonalize and objectify in the name of accuracy and understanding, making the living inanimate, a reverse genesis. As social scientists we are the very worst at this. By the nature of what we do, we put ourselves into contact with people and in the act of writing about them we kick the life out of their stories.

MEANING

Man likes to define himself as the one who seeks meaning, or who creates it and/or imposes it on his world. The one who questions, searches for answers, looks for what matters in it all. What this really tells you is that we are a species that is particularly fond of grand definitions of itself.

Today we are more involved in editing the meaning from experience than in seeking or creating it. As a part of this, we ignore what others have to say. At the same time we loudly complain of the absence of anything that matters in our lives. People say they want their existence to be more meaningful. They want their work to matter, to make a difference. They want their marriage to be more intense, to have better communication with their spouse, to share more, argue less. They don't really know their children, and so on.

And yet we vigorously sidestep those events that matter to humans. We avoid the uncertain, the painful, and the tragic and are surprised that the joy, the passion, and the beauty disappear with them. We promise that birth will be both safe and beautiful, that people will die only of old age after having worked things through and resolved things totally with their families—

the beautiful, peaceful, and correct death, carried out in conformity to a very rigid etiquette for dying. New possessions take on huge importance, product quality is equated with quality of life. We insure ourselves beyond all reason so as to be able to keep these possessions and maintain the ability to purchase new ones. And the desire for security becomes hugely addictive; we gradually increase the dosage of protection that promises us peace and safety. Then we wonder about the excitement that is gone from our lives.

We have stopped listening, and created huge industries that eliminate the painful messages from the world. I recently watched a television news special on the twentieth anniversary of man walking on the moon interspersed with commercials for Aetna insurance and Gallo white zinfandel.

We devote our best efforts to avoiding those messages with the strongest meaning. And people speak louder and louder, I guess out of frustration at not being heard or taken seriously. As the volume increases, we make an even greater effort to screen out and insulate ourselves from these sounds. The people speaking care about what they are saying, but to the bystander it is simply noise.

The urban affluent travel to work in a climate-controlled Mercedes, passing the projects and other desolation that they will not see. The windows are hermetically sealed and a Blaupunkt stereo fills the interior and even further insulates the traveler from the world outside. On leaving the automobile a Walkman is surgically implanted. The rich live in the suburbs or in city fortresses. They want quiet, a world with no visual, auditory, or emotional noise, a very small protected world. Various sorts of security systems protect them from messages they would rather not sense.

For the less affluent a boom box is permanently attached to the side of the head.

There is a bleak poetry in the world living on the edge of our consciousness. The louder it gets the more we increase the magnitude of personal noise to distract from the unpleasantness of the message. When the kids are yelling we turn up the TV. In a city, people fill their space with louder and louder music to offset the clamor created by everyone else for the same purpose. You can buy white noise machines, noise to screen out noise. Or

you can buy sounds that should be meaningful and use them as noise. My personal favorites are those recordings of nature from pseudo outdoor outfitters—really clothing stores to make it look like you've been there or are about to go. Places like Eddie Bauer that inhabit suburban shopping malls. There are recordings of the ocean, the woods (however woods sound), whales singing B. B. King songs. There is an optional scent machine to go with it.

Soon there will be a boom box that no one can carry.

There are two things I take as basic to the pursuit of meaning. First, what matters is there for the taking. If we pay attention we will understand what is being communicated. The world is not trying to trick us or otherwise hide from us. But we do make rather extreme efforts to confuse ourselves, to hide from these messages and to rationalize this in terms of the mystery of the world or the difficulty in understanding, that sort of thing.¹ There is meaning and it can be found. We don't need to invent or enhance it.

Second, the pursuit of meaning necessarily produces discomfort. Much of what matters to humans is unpleasant. When we see or hear about certain things, and actually think about them, it makes us sad and angry. These emotions are certainly not the only products of understanding, but they are the ones we try to avoid.

There is in addition an even more fundamental discomfort that we seek to do away with: the discomfort of uncertainty, of not knowing, of hearing messages that are out of our control, and that confuse or frighten. And we have certain basic habits of thought that reduce or eliminate this fear while at the same time eliminating anything of importance from what is being said.

ANTHROPOLOGY

Anthropology is a part of what we are talking about, a part of those habits of thought that bring comfort and familiarity and do away with what is important in people's lives.

At one time anthropology prescribed discomfort as an avenue towards discovering meaning. Ethnographic fieldwork

¹ Bishop Berkeley said, "We have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see." (*Principles of Human Knowledge*, p.3).