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Ingrid de Saint-Georges, Andrew Jocuns,
Jia Jackie Lou, Margaret Toye and Najma
Al Zidjaly**

The entropic time cycle and meditational means: Some musings

Just a few days after Ron Scollon had passed on, Sigrid visited Hawaii. Walking through the rainforest, gazing at some very old trees, her mind wandered to Ron, who had studied in Hawaii many years earlier. There in Hawaii, he had learned to be a linguistic anthropologist, with Li Fang-Kuei as his mentor. Afterwards, he had gone to Fort Chipewyan Alberta and to Alaska, where he had made a substantial difference in the way Native Americans were treated, before he moved to Hong Kong, then to Georgetown, then back to Alaska.

Looking at a particularly old tree, Sigrid's thoughts drifted to the many weekend walks Ron and Suzie had taken together with his students and the students' friends and families when he was a Professor at Georgetown University. They had made a point to take groups of students to the Blue Ridge Mountains or to Maryland to hike. One of Ron's favourite hikes was Old Rag, the biggest mountain in the area. There in the wilderness, he had conversations with his students about theory, methodology and life in general, while everyone was enjoying the fresh air and building strong bonds.

Watching a waterfall, Sigrid thought about rhythms and cycles of time. Ron had developed the idea that there are at least six time cycles that each action needed to be considered in. The largest cycle, usually the entropic cycle, had resulted in the decay of Ron's body, but now Sigrid could see that there was another cycle that Ron had not mentioned, namely the cycle of thought. Thought, when expressed in meditational means that have a longer life-span than an individual's body, lives on. No news there. Aristotle, Socrates or Goethe come to mind. But then there is another thought cycle, and this one appears to be located in the minds of social actors who knew and understood a social actor's thoughts before he passed on. All of Ron's students are now part of this thought cycle. This type of remembrance is built on relationship and decays as the bodies of the

social actors, who had had a relationship with Ron, decay. But then there is another thought time cycle built on relationships, a cycle of thought that is shaped by the thoughts of another. This is the kind that lives on, changes, and is re-shaped for generations to come. This type of thought cycle then may additionally become embedded in meditational means that again have a larger entropic cycle.

These may be strange thoughts when someone has died, but Ron has taught us to analyse everything and to look at the world in wonder and in an attempt to understand something new from each and every experience. Jackie adds that when she is reflecting on how Ron has influenced her, she also thinks in such theoretical terms as mediational means, discourse or action. She muses that looking at the books on her bookshelves always reminds her of that day when Ron and Suzie were giving away their Washington, DC book collection before they moved back to Haines, Alaska. Students and colleagues, familiar and unfamiliar, stood around in their apartment and filled moving boxes with books lifted off from the black wooden bookshelves that lined the four walls of their quiet study. Ron and Suzie stood in the corners and offered everybody who came in tea, coffee or water. As the last van drove away, they happily concluded that those who took more books in the humanities tend to prefer tea and those who took books in the social sciences tend to prefer coffee. Right, there is no such thing as a free book. Now the four boxes that Jackie took away from them constitute half of her own book collection in Washington, DC, spanning from *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* to *The Beach of Falesá*, from the *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* to *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography*, and from *Cello* to *The History of Art*. Meanwhile, the ones Sigrid loaded in her car back then are now housed in her office in New Zealand, where they are now being read by her own students. However, these books as material objects offer only a glimpse of a vast mind, and Ron's signature or name chop in many of them attests to true generosity.

Ron was the best teacher, mentor and academic friend that a student could wish for, and as the lucky ones, we will try to give a short account here that will hopefully allow the reader to gain some insight into who Ron Scollon was for us as a teacher, mentor and friend.

Teacher

Taking classes with Professor Scollon was a unique experience, in that he constantly encouraged us to be socially responsible with our knowledge and made us aware of the importance of doing something worthwhile with our privileged graduate training. When Cecilia first introduced herself to Ron, he asked her what she had done in her studies. She told him that she was interested in immigration issues, but had not taken that direction in her work yet. He encouraged Cecilia to follow what she thought was interesting and relevant, which let her refocus the direction of her interests, studies and training. In fact, Ron always told his students to work on something that was linked to their lives and their inherent interests. He also taught us to never leave things for later, a trait characteristic of his own personal behaviour. Ron was always encouraging, willing to listen and guide.

As Ingrid prepares her classes she is thinking of Ron, asking herself what all of his students ask themselves: How can I be for my students even a parcel of what Ron Scollon was for us? How can we even start to make sense of the experience we had taking

courses with him? What was it that created this deep-felt sense that those classes were important, not just for some degree, but for our lives? Why was it that we would not have missed them for the world? Where did the excitement, challenge, and the sense of learning, engagement and intellectual adventure come from? We might never have an answer to these questions, and in a way maybe they are meaningless. But since Ron always challenged us to observe and to unpack situations and events, Ingrid will try for a second to stop and ponder about what makes her long for these classes, even now they are long gone. Why do they carry through and, 10 years later, have such a strong impact on her? We might try to be a link in that chain that moves forward from his teaching to our teaching and to our students' lives. We might do so by trying to spell out what were some of the ingredients of that experience. It might be a starting point. This might do for the moment, however partial and limited the words to account for that experience.

Ingrid believes what made us so engaged was, firstly, that there was with Ron, as a teacher and a mentor, both an elegance and what Bertrand Russell describes as *reverence* towards his students. For Russell, reverence is that rare quality of the teacher that does not seek to mould the learner into his own preconceived model, but sees in all learners 'something highly individual and strangely precious' and wants to provide the right mold for these unique qualities to develop and mature. Ron's mentoring always made us feel that what he was interested in was to see us grow into new selves with new powers. Reverence could be felt and seen in a great many actions he took towards us. His office door, open at all times, always made us feel he had plenty of time to discuss whatever matter was on our mind; emails and papers were reacted to so fast it made us feel we were the most important item on his agenda and that the conversation entered into deserved all his attention. Reverence was exerted by gracing us with a fabulous quality in listening.

Jackie ponders that reading Ron's emails was very much like listening to him lecture. In the classroom, he constantly encouraged us to think beyond what he wrote and what he thought. He gave each person in the room time and confidence to speak their minds, as one could never be wrong in his class. A trivial anecdote, a random thought, or a seemingly obvious question, mediated by his mind, were transformed into ideas that could inspire many a dissertation. In our experience, a term paper led to a conference presentation then a journal article and finally a dissertation, with unfailing encouragement from him at every step, yet without any pressuring guidance. Ron seemed to be happiest when we did not agree with him entirely or follow his instructions exactly. The spaciousness he created in the classroom was inspiring to all.

As Ingrid puts it, a fundamental orientation in his courses was that research was to address real-life issues and social problems. That leitmotiv came back again and again, and he would resist any other form of research by writing down in our text's margins: 'What is the point?', when our work would fail to satisfy what was for him the point of departure of any research as well as its aim and goal. In his teaching, Ron challenged our assumptions and deconstructed them one by one, sometimes in an unsettling way for us. When we had reached the point where we could not look at past situations with the same naïve gaze again, he would set off to show us many other possible alternatives to the original analysis, through rigorous, meticulous and careful thinking. He made visible and explicit the principles governing the institution we were in – academia – and through that

also ensured we were equipped to deal with this or other institutions later. He thus ensured access and possibilities for autonomy and emancipation beyond the here-and-now.

As Ingrid and Najma recall, activism and social change, from this point of view, started in the classroom, by giving us tools to think about the institution and then to choose wisely what should be our own path in social life in the light of the knowledge acquired. Thus, through this teaching he encouraged the spirit of liberty. He made us feel that there was about nothing we could not do if we gave it careful thought and were creative enough to invent solutions where there were obstacles.

Jackie recalls that John Rakestraw, the director of the *Apprenticeship in Teaching* program at Georgetown University, once said that the best kind of teachers do not pass onto their students the results of their thinking, but show them the process of how they think. To us, Ron is the best example of these publicly thinking minds, someone who taught us how to think, not to simply learn what he thought.

Mentor

Ron redefined the concept of mentorship for Cecilia and really for us all. He gave us advice, guided us, and provided space, unique to each of his students, which allowed for an unobtrusive academic flourishing within each of us, in our own terms and at our own pace. Ron respected us as students, independently of whether we were pursuing masters or doctoral degrees. He gave us credit for our accomplishments and treated us as colleagues in front of accomplished figures in the discipline.

As Najma recalls, when she first walked into Ron Scollon's office in the Fall 1998, she was in utter awe of his impressive work as a scholar, but her wonder and reverence for this man grew as he also revealed himself to be profoundly personable: after Najma had exchanged greetings with Ron, he asked her, 'How would you like me to call you?', and for the first time in Najma's journey from Muscat, Oman to Washington, DC to pursue higher studies in linguistics, someone was paying careful attention to her name. This simple question signalled a true respect that Ron felt towards others.

As our academic adviser, Ron always recommended us to take other professors' classes. Even when we signed up for every class he offered during graduate study at Georgetown, he told us at the beginning of each semester to read over his writings as quickly as possible, so that we could start exploring others' work. As Jackie recalls, on a three-page annotated bibliography that he sent her while she was preparing for her comprehensive exam, none of the titles were his own book or article, but it included important literature on space and community in sociolinguistics, urban studies, as well as humanistic geography.

Cecilia continues: as in any mentor-mentee relationship, we wanted to look good for him, but he encouraged us to do our best – not to impress him, but to truly master the material so as to later become good teachers of our own specialized craft. Ron had an uncanny ability to bring out the best in us and managed to make us do more, going beyond our own and others' expectations. He provided infallible support in the dissertation process, always giving us an immediate response to our work and always telling us to write, to get something on paper, in order to converse. Cecilia remembers him telling her at one of those low points of dissertation writing how she could not, in her mind,

compose, produce and complete an entire dissertation at the snap of the fingers, telling her that this was an easy way to get lost in the process. Writing, he explained, would instead allow him to converse with her on what she was embarking to do, and to actually have something concrete to show.

Andy puts it differently. He says Ron's advising was always dead-on: he always seemed to know what to say and offer a way of thinking about something that we would have never considered. We were never led in a direction that was not somehow worthwhile to pursue, and in pursuing it we often discovered research interests that we never knew we had. Similarly, if one of us mentioned a conference announcement during class or in the hall within his earshot we soon found ourselves outlining a panel to contribute to it. Or if one of us came to him with a question on a topic, he not only knew the original author but also current work being done and how we could contribute to it.

As Andy says, Ron always seemed to have his finger on something that had never been studied from a sociolinguistic perspective. His talent for finding topics that had been given little attention rubbed off on his courses. He never taught the same course the same way twice. He always brought a fresh new way of thinking about a topic and a fresh way of representing it academically. At the same time, Ron knew just how to exhort the right kind of pressure onto his students, always ready to ask just the right question to make us think beyond, a tactic that culminated in the oral and dissertation defences, where Ron was always the one asking the most difficult questions. While he was the best mentor a student could hope for, he also always expected the very best of his own students and many of us were terrified of what we called 'the infamous Ron-questions' that we had to answer during examinations.

While Ron was great both as an advisor and a friend, Andy hates to say that there is a downside to having worked with him, but there is. The downside is that it is very difficult to find someone else like him in academia. When we sent him a draft for comments he would have it back the next day. Andy adds, he never danced around things – he either did them or did not. He met every obligation that he took on and sadly there is no one else like him in academia that Andy has met. As young professionals in academia we appreciated Ron's tenacity in meeting the obligations he committed to and we now strive as best as we can to meet our own obligations, knowing now how difficult it can be to meet them when, as an academic, you can be pulled in multiple directions at once. Knowing that, we are proud to have worked under his tutelage and hope that in years to come we all may live up to the expectations that have become synonymous with Ron's name.

Friend

Margaret recalls when she arrived in Washington, DC in late August 2001. As an international student with no friends or family close by, she was naturally homesick at the start. Time spent at Georgetown was enjoyable, but returning to her suburban apartment on evenings and weekends was a lonely experience. Then, on the morning of September 11, Flight 77 hit the Pentagon just a few kilometres away and the Twin Towers fell in New York City, and she felt particularly alone. The next day many classes were cancelled, but Ron held his. We didn't, of course, talk about Mediated Discourse Analysis. We just talked about what had happened, where we had been at the time and how we

were feeling, and wondered about what was to come from these events. For Margaret and others, simply having this class to go to meant actually having something to do (other than watching those images repeated on TV) and gave students a chance to just talk to other people. Surely, Ron held rather than cancelled the class for that reason – that students like Margaret actually needed somewhere to be that afternoon in a nervous city that had come to a standstill.

Ron and his wife Suzie were incredibly generous throughout their time at Georgetown. They often opened up their home for parties. They extended their friendship not only to us students but to our partners, children and friends. Cecilia recounts that during those times at their house, not only did we enjoy the intellectual experience of sharing ideas, but Ron and Suzie always offered us their delicious cooking. These get-togethers were but one example of Ron's friendship and mentorship. Seeing Ron and Suzie's love for one another, and their companionship, showed us another rich side of Ron, in addition to other, more formal dimensions of his life. Their home, in fact, became a salon for students and faculty alike. Suzie frequently closed the evening with 8 Treasures Tea, and at times with several readings of poetry. When they had the opportunity, they went out of their way to learn more about each research project done by their students. For instance, they took the long, long way to see their son and daughter-in-law in Dallas and visited Cecilia's dissertation research site in east Texas.

Ingrid muses, another dimension that made every conversation with Ron so worthwhile and exciting was his creativity and wide-spanning knowledge, and what Russell again would call his '*vital warmth*'. You always came up more alive and intellectually richer out of a conversation with Ron. You entered into a lively discourse, full of real-life anecdotes and stories. The stories made concrete and vivid some complex thoughts, suggested paths to overcome obstacles or worked as metaphors to encourage new actions and connections. Great authors and poets would be called on to make a point or entertain a pleasant thought. Vital warmth was in the empathic way of listening to our concerns and taking them seriously, in being there in times of personal hardships and finding the right and often very moving words to address them. It showed in the parties that Ron and Suzie organized at their Huidekoper Street house and that turned many colleagues into life-long friends. Vital warmth showed in Ron's sense of humor and in the joy he always seemed to feel at working out some idea or problem. Ron always had so many innovative ideas and he kept on handing them to us, offering us to inquire about them as he thought he would never have the time to work them out himself. We were cleverer for having these ideas to discuss and felt he had generously graced us with a special gift each time. Vital warmth was present in the way his wife Suzie, his kids and family and his friends were so often brought into the discussions or the classroom. Life and work seemed woven into a seamless cloth so that it never felt as though he had 'too much work'. This would have been like saying 'there is too much life'. A lunch in DC's Chinatown could turn into a very fun and exciting fieldtrip, a visit to your home-place could appear in Ron and Suzie's next book. Suzie was a life and a work partner, their daughter Rachel would be first reader of their next book. Writing would be done in the early morning hours so that the rest of the day was freed for encounters and conversations, and the weekend for dinner and a hike.

As Cecilia mentions, Ron's generosity continued to be palpable as he faced the diagnosis of cancer, in that he included students, and those interested, in his path to the end of his life, through shared stories and continuous communication. He also showed his generosity in taking the trouble to spend time with those of us who had the opportunity to visit him during the last year of his life. We are grateful for his generous gift of a long-lasting friendship, for an appreciation for nurturing a morning cup of Darjeeling tea, for the enjoyment of a good glass of single malt scotch, for the appreciation of the beauty of nature experienced during an Old Rag Mountain hike in the Shenandoah National Park, and for the lesson of respecting one's knowledge by doing something worthwhile with it.

Najma adds that besides being a great professor, Ron was a great man: he was a fatherly figure and a gentle soul who overflowed with love. Hence, he saw his duty as more than simply taking care of his students academically – he also took care of us on a personal level. He paid special attention to those of us who were non-Americans and far away from home. Every holiday, he and his wife Suzie opened their home to us so that we did not feel left out. They also opened their doors to us every weekend whenever we missed a hearty home-cooked meal. He also helped to respect and protect students' religious background. For example, at parties, he made sure that the food was prepared according to Muslim rules, or that vegetarian and vegan meals were present. On long and beautiful hikes, when everyone else was ahead of Najma, he made sure that his Arabian mentee who had never hiked in her life before was not left behind. He joked about those hikes as he joked about everything, but Najma knew then as she knows now that he must have been a guardian angel. He took care of her and helped her develop professionally and personally. In all the years we have known him, he consistently was there, doing his best to make sure that we thrived as academics and as human beings.

It was the combination of all his qualities – wit, courage, accomplishment, humor, warmth and caring – that made Najma come up with a special address term created only for him: Basha Ron. *Basha* is a prestigious title, formerly held by high officials in countries under Turkish rule, that is no longer in use. Najma coined *Basha Ron* to pay him the respect he bestowed upon her and to balance her need to show closeness and deference to him. This was, after all, her witty, wise and knowledgeable professor who carried himself with dignity and grace: *the* Ron Scollon. But at the same time, he was a gentle, loving soul who was, above all else, hilarious and caring.

As Jackie says, Ron's personal trajectory will continue to flow not only in the material books and mediated discourses that he left us but, more importantly, in the trajectory of every historical body that emanates from their crossings with his. We are fortunate to be part of Ron's nexus of practice.

Most people never meet in their lives a teacher that gives them access to their own power – and here we do not mean the power to dominate and constrain, but the power to construct, expand and question. As Ingrid says, and we all agree, it has been both an utmost privilege and pure life energy to meet and work with Ron and his wife Suzie. We are richer as scholars and as people for knowing them and forever grateful for each exchange and every conversation shared.

Above all, Najma writes, Basha Ron made me believe in myself because he believed in me – and this is so true for all of us.

But most importantly, the world is simply a better place because of him.

Notes

This piece of remembrance is written by some students who were taught by Ron Scollon during his time at Georgetown University.

This article was scheduled to appear in issue 20(3), the first issue to appear after Ron Scollon's death. Unfortunately, because of a regrettable error, the article was never sent to the publisher, and no one noticed that it had not been published until now. Our sincere apologies for this error. The Editor.