



# HELLO, SOCIOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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*Gary Shepherd*

It was the fall of 1966: I had just completed a two year mission in Mexico for the Mormon Church and prior to that had spent six months in Army basic training in California and Oklahoma. Now I was sitting in my first sociology class on the first day of school at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. The instructor was young, a new assistant professor by the name of Charles Anderson. He was speaking with passion and urgency about the failure of Americans to engage morally, intellectually, and directly with the world in which they lived, content instead to “merely sit back and bask in the dark glow of their idiot boxes.” “. . . Content to merely sit back and bask in the dark glow of their idiot boxes . . .”

This was a phrase that captivated my imagination. I wrote it down. It was literate. It was pithy. It spoke to and reflected a fundamental truth. (I avoided owning a TV for the next twenty years as a result of that statement.) I had always been interested in history and literature—I had done a lot of reading in both. I had no idea what sociology was. I was just filling up my schedule with required courses after a three-year absence from school. But now here was a young man standing before me, not a whole lot older than myself, speaking with the eloquence

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of a writer, the moral clarity of a philosopher, and with the critical analysis of a historian, but one who pierced the complexities of our own time rather than those of a bygone era.

I was hooked. It was the Sixties. Viet Nam was raging. The Civil Rights Movement was surging, tugging along in its wake the emergent feminist movement and a dozen other liberation movements. The youth counter culture was blossoming. Urban riots were exploding and political assassinations had moved from the realm of fiction to horrifying reality. Taken-for-granted assumptions of authority and tradition that upheld structures of inequality were being massively challenged on all sides. I remember waking up many mornings with a slight adrenalin rush in anticipation of what new outrageous development that day might bring. The study of sociology seemed a perfect fit for the times. I wanted to understand it, to participate in it, and maybe—with the increased understanding I thought sociology might give me—to help change, for the better, the little part of the world that I lived in.

My twin brother, Gordon, had also enrolled in an introductory sociology course that semester. He also was intrigued and exhilarated by what he encountered. In a concurrent social psychology class, we were both reading *Escape from Freedom* by the psychoanalytic philosopher, Eric Fromm, and also some of the writings of Theodor Adorno on the authoritarian personality and its relationship to the rise and sustenance of fascism and the anti-Semitic horrors of Nazi Germany. We pondered the shocking, interlocking significance of Stanly Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority. Later during that fateful year, we read Fyodor Dostoyevsky's celebrated chapter from *The Brothers Karamazov*, "*The Grand Inquisitor*"—a meditation on the massive difficulties that impede human potential for freedom and choice. In sociology we were reading C. Wright Mill's declaration on the means and purposes of sociology, what he called *The Sociological Imagination*.

While driving an Army truck to Eastern Wyoming as part of a National Guard training exercise, Gordon and I explored for hours in conversation the implications of our readings and

were elated to discover that we had indeed begun to acquire a sociological imagination—a perspective that allowed us to apply the analytical concepts we had learned at school to achieve a richer comprehension of events daily exploding in the world around us and that we were experiencing in our own lives.

Our growing conviction that the study of sociology could take us somewhere we wanted to go—and that we might be good at it—was strengthened by other encounters. I took a class in small group dynamics. Again, the instructor—Don Hastings—was young, new, and intense. He assigned a flurry of what seemed, to un-versed freshmen and sophomores, impossibly difficult, sophisticated writing by the likes of Bales, Parsons, Shills, Emerson, and Homans. He told us to write critical synopses of what we had read and understood. I struggled mightily to comprehend what I read and then to write a coherent synthesis that employed a conceptual vocabulary I was just barely learning. I felt like I must have failed. I was stunned to get back my essay with a note from the instructor asking permission to make a copy of it for his files. My self-confidence began to edge up a bit. Not only could I talk competently to my brother about what we were jointly learning, I could also, apparently, write something more formally in a way that impressed my professor.

I took a course in the sociology of religion—something I didn't know you could do. (I gradually discovered that one of the great appeals of sociology is that you can apply it to everything that involves social interaction—that there can be a sociology of virtually any human activity you may be interested in.) In any event, the instructor was Lowell Bennion, who was Dean of Students, a theologian of some renown, an early American student of the sociology of Max Weber, and an adjunct professor in the sociology department. He was also a very humble man. One day, at the beginning of the class period, he gave a sincere apology for having been, in his estimation, inadequately prepared in his presentation of material during the previous class. He said he could do better and, with our per-

mission, would like to try to go over that material again. We were stunned. We hadn't noticed anything amiss before. But it hadn't been up to his own standards. I was moved by such a display of professional commitment and public openness to his students.

Lowell Bennion introduced me to Weber's analysis of authority—a concept I had explored in other courses but not from a specifically sociological perspective. I was particularly interested in Weber's treatment of charisma as a type of social authority that must become routinized, or transformed, into forms of institutional control after it has accomplished its revolutionary mission. I have followed this interest up to the present time in the research and writing my brother, Gordon, and I have done on the role of revelation in the development of new religious movements.

There were a number of other influential courses and teachers during my undergraduate years, but perhaps one particularly worth mentioning was the first applied statistics course I took, which was just being instituted as a department requirement for majors. Like many of our own majors at Oakland, I was not fond of, nor apparently adept at, mathematics. I was not thrilled at the prospect of taking this course, and I did struggle. But the instructor, Ray Canning, approached his task with care and sensitivity, recognizing the quantitative deficits and attendant anxieties that many of his students had. He admitted that he himself had come late to statistical analysis and yet here he was now teaching us and perhaps knowing better than some others how best to anticipate and address the confusing parts that he knew awaited us.

Several years later, as an almost finished Ph.D candidate in sociology, with several additional statistics courses under my belt, I found myself in a nearly identical situation when I agreed to teach a newly required statistics course for the School of Social Work. I found myself making the same little speech of reassurance to that anxious group of social work students, admitting my own earlier inadequacies, but pointing out I had overcome these to the degree necessary to now be

their teacher, and saying that if they would make an honest effort, I would work with them until everyone would be able to grasp the basics and pass the course.

My decision to go on to graduate school in sociology seemed easy, even inevitable. I wanted to do sociology, to be a sociologist. That meant getting a Ph.D. That meant a lot more years in school. It meant forestalling a decent income for an unforeseen amount of time in pursuit of an ephemeral career that might never, in fact, materialize. Nevertheless, with encouragement from faculty at the University of Utah, and with like-minded commitments from Gordon and another close friend to do the same thing, we sent out our applications for graduate school.

My application, acceptance, and eventual journey to graduate school were inextricably tied to development of a relationship with Lauren Snow, my future wife. Lauren and I were first introduced on a blind date arranged by mutual friends. Lauren was a 19 year-old math and chemistry major working as a student in a campus virus research lab chopping up chick embryos, preparing cell cultures, and sterilizing glassware in an autoclave. She had decided she wanted to join the Peace Corps and go to Afghanistan when she graduated. I had always been attracted to smart girls—I tuned into their intelligence like signals from a radio tower. Here was a very smart girl. Independent minded with a social conscience to boot. And cute, too. We hit it off.

Meanwhile, one of my two graduate school applications elicited a positive response—it was from Michigan State University. What to do? East Lansing was a long way from Salt Lake City, even further from Afghanistan, should Lauren actually wind up in the Peace Corps. I happened to be taking a marriage and family course at the time. The research cited in our text clearly showed a strong positive correlation between length of courtship and marital success. Age of partners was also a strong success factor. I had known Lauren for all of three

months, and she was still three months shy of her twentieth birthday.

What to do indeed? I did the only sensible thing I could and asked her to marry me. I mentioned the Michigan State contingency. She weighed her options for a day or two and then said yes, she would marry me and forgo Afghanistan, if I would contact Michigan State to see if they would hold over my program acceptance for the following year so she could complete her own undergraduate degree at the University of Utah. This was an equitable and reasonable counter-proposal. And that's what happened. Michigan State deferred my arrival for a year, and Lauren and I married five months later. Lauren took added coursework during that year, which enabled her to graduate in a total of just three years, while I, during that same year, wrote a master's thesis on the relationships between political and religious ideologies and individual cognitive style.

Then we loaded everything of personal value and necessity we could into a little red American Motors Rebel, permanently damaging that poor car's springs, and then, with exactly \$100 cash between us, took off on I-80 going east to Michigan. Accompanying us in his own loaded-down little Plymouth Duster was my brother Gordon, who had been accepted for graduate work at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He had meanwhile also married and had a baby daughter, who with his wife, remained behind in Utah until Gordon could secure living quarters and an extra-income-job on Long Island.

En route we dined on cold chicken noodle soup directly from cans and slept on the ground in sleeping bags at rest stops or behind rural town gas stations. We parted company near Toledo—Lauren and I heading straight north to East Lansing and Gordon continuing to motor east to New York City. One concrete fragment of that trip that reflects the tenor of our thinking then resides in a small poem that Gordon pieced together in his mind while driving and subsequently sent to us in a letter after reaching his destination. It's called *Shiloh* and is prefaced by a brief note that goes like this:

Dear Gary and Lauren,

Just a note to let you know that I've been captured and am being held as a political hostage by the Black Panthers. I made the Big City about 2:00 in the afternoon and my destination two hours later. The physical plant at Stony Brook is a shambles. Most of the buildings are new but already scruffy, and the grounds are incredibly unkempt. Oh well, these are things of the flesh. I will withhold judgment until partaking of the spirit.

While driving in Pennsylvania after our parting, I pulled off the freeway to gas-up at a local grocery and filling station. On the way back to the highway, I noticed a small sign pointing to a narrow road that disappeared into the hills. The sign read: 5 miles to Shiloh. To pass the time I composed a short poem (I guess you'd call it that) in my head and wrote it down when I stopped for the night.

#### Shiloh

Concrete freeways now cross the palm of this land  
Where once its soil was made sodden  
With the blood of many  
Would that these hills unseal their witness  
And the trees burst burgundy and scarlet  
A drenching rain to stain the rocks with rust  
That penetrates forever  
To be a flush of shame  
At the savagery and reckless spilling of precious  
life  
And our incapacity to restrain our insanity.

Lauren and I conjured up our own images and reflections as we cruised through, what seemed to us parched-desert-Westerners, a surreal green Michigan countryside between Detroit and East Lansing. Unlike Gordon, we wrote no commemorative poetry to capture our thoughts. But we certainly did encounter a brave new world of beginnings as graduate students at Michigan State. Those, however, are tales of influences, learning experiences, and growth for another time.

For now I will just note that I admired Lauren's trust and even courage in joining me on this initial adventure, far from the comforting security of family and home, into an unknown future teeming with strangers in a strange land. That's how we thought of it and talked about it. We knew we were literally poised at a cross-road, and that which ever turn we chose would change our lives forever. We had faith—perhaps it was naïve faith—that this unknown future would be a good one, and that together we would find ways to surmount whatever obstacles might be thrown up before us along our chosen path.

The story of all success is typically sprinkled with good fortune—being in the right place at the right time or knowing the right people who can help. But prior to being in that right place and time, there has been a preparation process, an accumulation of knowledge, skills, insights, attitudes, and values that you have picked up along the way. When opportunities do come to you, either calculated and worked for in advance, or purely by chance, you need to be able to recognize them, seize them, and then magnify them by applying those skills and qualities of character you have spent your life developing. Openness to change and a willingness to embrace change will help. So will a basic trust in yourself and in what you have learned. A little naïve faith might help too.