The Last Word

Memories, insights, and reflections

Cathy Covert: 'I'm right here with you.'

Professor of Journalism Catherine L. Covert was loved and respected for her warmth, wit, and scholarship. She died last fall after a long illness.

A faculty member since 1966, Covert taught newswriting and, for six years, a course on the history of mass media with David Bennett, professor of history. In August 1983 she received the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications award for outstanding achievement. She was also a recipient of the coveted Lasker Award, based on her reporting for the Syracuse Herald-American *during 1951-64, much of it on the topic of health and medical care.*

Despite her full teaching schedule and scholarly work, Covert gave selflessly to students, friends, colleagues, and family. On Sept. 21, many of them gathered at the northwest corner of the Hall of Languages to dedicate a tree in her memory. Below, a former student offers another tribute; Susan Henry '76 studied with Covert approximately a decade ago and is now herself a professor of journalism, at California State University, Northridge.

One of my more tangible gifts from Cathy Covert arrived in the mail on a raw February day in 1976.

My doctoral dissertation adviser, Cathy was spending the semester in London, while I was in Syracuse struggling with my dissertation. I had sent her a chapter that had been difficult to write, and she sent me back a large package containing my chapter (the margins filled with her comments), outlines she had created to help me structure my revisions, and, unexpectedly, an audio tape.

I've been playing the tape a lot recently. It begins with sound effects—Cathy doing a Big Ben imitation—followed by her introduction of herself as "your correspondent, Cathy Covert, reporting from the banks of the Thames."

She next describes her just-completed Saturday morning trip to the ironmonger and the corner flower stand to buy fresh violets from Devon, as well as highlights of earlier weeks, including visits to art galleries and concerts in Oxford chapels.

Then, having set the scene, she explains why she made the tape:

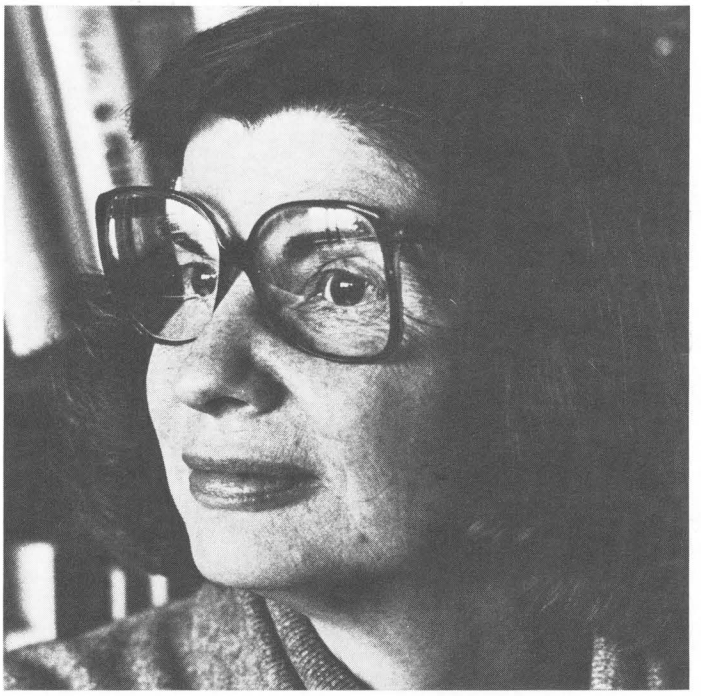
"You must think I'm very remote and far away from you, but I really am not at all—I'm right here with you. And I want you to know from my tone of voice as well as from what I'm saying I'm proud of you and what you're doing."

This is followed by an extraordinary kind of tutorial on the art of historical writing, the use of evidence, and different ways of conceptualizing history. She then talks through my manuscript page by page, telling me how to clarify and improve virtually every paragraph.

Listening to that tape now is like spending an afternoon with Cathy—humorous, stimulating, enlightening, wrapped in a warmth and pleasure that last long after the tape has stopped. It is also a reminder of many of the reasons she was such an extraordinary teacher, and why the ideas and lessons she communicated will continue to unfold and grow in her students for countless years.

The key to Cathy's brilliance as a teacher was that she herself loved learning and thinking. She was constantly excited by the work done by her students, and by the ideas our observations set off in *her*. A wonderful listener, she would probe and challenge us until we heard ourselves saying things we had never before known. This done, she would compliment us on our perceptive reasoning.

The fact that she was so interested in our work—and in us—made us want to stretch our capabilities to meet her exceptionally high standards. She asserted those standards in part through the care and thoroughness with which she responded to our work. I came to take for granted that she would write at least as much as I had on anything I submitted to her. She edited, questioned, suggested alternate interpretations, corrected, praised, and wrote long sections of elaboration pointing out where and why improvements were necessary.



Catherine L. Covert was a journalism professor at SU until her death last fall. Former student Susan Henry recalls her humor and warmth.

Yet equally important to her teaching success was her own genius. A voracious and eclectic reader, she had sought out and absorbed a tremendous range of material, which she was able to call up, explain, and expand upon in a beautifully effective manner.

And even more admirable than the strength of her mind was the fact that she stretched it constantly in the search for new ideas and interpretations. She did this both in conversation and in the classroom, where, for example, she un-self-consciously asked questions to which she didn't know the answers. She delighted in taking intellectual risks.

This receptivity to and search for new ideas was what she tried hardest to teach her students. Seeing, through her actions, her own commitment to these values, we came to understand their importance, and believe in them too.

As for myself, she taught me to want to teach, and how to teach.

Thinking of the pleasure she took in teaching and learning is what makes me saddest about her death. It reminds me of the happiness and fulfillment that should have remained for her. In contrast, her impact on me has been so deep that she still seems alive to me. As she tells me on my tape, "I'm right here with you."

Because my life is still so full of her, many of the lessons she taught me remain vivid. I especially remember one that became very significant in both of our lives: there are certain important times when one must say precisely what one is feeling.

Thinking and writing about her has led to one of those times.

Thank you, Cathy, for your example and your love.

—*Susan Henry '76*

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