

PREFACE

The Search for “Doc” Bailey: Discovering One Teacher’s Infinite Influence *by Rita Joiner Soza*

Oprah’s webcast conversation with Eckhart Tolle had started ten minutes before I could get to my computer. I hadn’t known much about Dr. Tolle and hadn’t read his books; but, based on my husband’s enthusiastic consumption of “A New Earth,” I wanted to learn more.

As I pulled on my headset I caught the soft, slow voice in mid-sentence, “there was not a decision as such, rather an overwhelming feeling that I simply must begin to write.” Eckhart Tolle was responding to Oprah’s asking why he chose to begin this new project.

I hadn’t been prepared for this instantaneous connection. The sensation caused a torrent of tears, as fierce as unexpected. Dr. Tolle was describing exactly how the idea of writing Helen Miller Bailey’s biography had come to me - less of a decision and more of a compulsion to take on the work. Many people had asked me why I was even thinking about Doc; I had no valid answer until that moment at my computer. Tolle somehow gave me the permission to continue to pursue this mission regardless of my basically nonexistent knowledge of my former history professor, Helen Miller Bailey, PhD.

My husband walked into my office just at that moment. I quickly wiped my tears away and exited from the webcast. I felt embarrassed, and a bit confused, this was just a little too existential for me, a pragmatist and business management instructor. I couldn’t explain the emotion I was feeling to myself, let alone to my husband, so I hid my reaction to Dr. Tolle’s reply and I pondered the situation for several days thereafter. Was Tolle simply describing inspiration? Somehow that word just didn’t seem to entirely capture the actual event of waking up one morning and declaring, “Someone should write a book about Dr. Bailey.” Yet in the months ahead this calling would be described as the infinite influence of a great teacher reaching out to me. I simply have no other explanation for my strong desire to uncover the story of a teacher I had known only briefly and who had died some four decades earlier. Unlike Tolle, I had not the credentials or the experience to warrant the audacity to attempt a book; regardless, two years before that webcast, I had set about researching the very cold trail of a very warm heart.

The process was amazing. Luck was on my side time and time again, once even creating access to one of Helen’s book publishers on the very day before the retirement of the keeper of the files on Helen’s first textbook were to be destroyed. Had I waited 24 hours to call Florida State University Press, I would have missed crucial leads in my investigation.

About a year later, I drove up to Los Angeles from San Diego to photograph the home where Helen succumbed to complications from breast cancer treatment. Standing on the sidewalk, I called out my name and stated my purpose to the man behind the screen door, holding back his huge German shepherd guardian. "Sure, go ahead and take your pictures. I've heard of the professor, and it's a good thing you came by today because we're tearing the house down tomorrow!" he shouted.

Other times when I became frustrated by attempts to verify information, I'd set aside the project, sometimes for months. Strangely, when I'd pull out my files and get back into it, after a few phone calls or re-reading some materials, the connections just emerged (when the time was right, I guess).

I researched in spurts of enthusiasm, dragging my dear mom with me to the downtown Los Angeles Central Library and County Hall of Records. We searched through news reports announcing Dr. Bailey's lectures and art exhibits in the 1950s and lifted the huge books of handwritten documentation of Southern California land transactions in the 1930s. I made endless telephone calls to prospective interview candidates who usually provided additional leads, some which I followed up on immediately and some which lay dormant for months. In the end, no one ever turned down a chance to reminisce about Helen Miller Bailey; indeed, quite the opposite response propelled the work.

On the other hand, guilt was an unexpected emotion which often surfaced and hindered my research and writing. Shouldn't I be more interested in the lives and history of my own family? What did my daughter feel as I recounted endless tales of the Bailey's children? While he was always supportive, I never asked my husband if he minded spending money on hotels, long distance phone calls, and "antique" Latin American textbooks – all to satisfy my curiosity about a woman he had never met.

Thus I tried to limit/gauge how often the word "Bailey" came up in my everyday conversations, but when I uncovered new evidence or met a new acquaintance of Helen's, my exuberance always won out. Whether feigned or not, but without fail, Evelyn Joiner, Geoff Soza, Sunny Elizabeth Edmonston, and my best girlfriends from Montebello High School vigorously shared my excitement with each new discovery. In this way my book is a collaborative work supported by my family and friends and written by all who shared their stories, and through whom I came to know Helen. The commonality among all contributors, and shared with Helen, is a love of humanity demonstrated by an understanding that respecting and honoring the potential in others is a genuine path to a new earth.

As the first few interviews were completed, the concept of altruism began to develop and I started to understand why telling Helen's story was so important. Indeed, students who claimed Doc had been a formidable force in their lives had emerged from her classroom to achieve illustrious careers in public service. One can easily say these "students" changed the face of one of the world's greatest cities. (Their accomplishments are described in

the last chapter of "Doc's Magic.") In the face of their brilliance, the question to me was even more vivid - Why me?

One of Helen's favorite students, Richard Avila, explained things to me this way, "Rita, this is just the magic of Helen; don't you see, she simply found you again." I've come to believe she did. Perhaps the infinite influence of one special teacher dwells in each of us. In Doc Bailey's case she would likely wish that anyone who reads my account of her life be moved to positive action on behalf of others.

Framing the full canvas of Helen's rich life was a fantastic challenge for the untrained researcher. Aided by the generosity of her granddaughter Mary Alice Bailey Welday and the extended family members who contributed so much, I offer these tales, newspaper accounts, letters, photos and illustrations to all who need reassurance of the goodness in people and as a reminder to teachers of their power to transform lives and shape the future.

Finally, to all who have backed away from a project thinking they weren't worthy, I say - When your inspiration comes don't deny it. Following your heart can be magical experience!