

a life—and death—in the classroom

by jon smajda

Monte Bute is many things: an admired sociology professor, a dedicated community activist, an author and blogger, and a friend and one-time board member of Contexts. He is also a dying man. Rather than keep his condition to himself, Bute, radically, chose to look at death as a fundamentally “teachable moment,” bringing it into his thought, his writing, and his classroom. In the process, Bute might just have become the ultimate public sociologist of the life course.

Jon Smajda: What’s going on with Monte Bute?

Monte Bute: Well, I have stumbled into the world of death and dying. It was never an academic specialty, but now it’s becoming an experiential reality. Turned out that I have one of the rarest forms of cancer that exists... the type of thing that just sort of controls a lot of your world pretty rapidly. I then went into really severe decline very quickly, but continued to teach through all of that. And more than anything else, what it turned into was sort of a subtext of all of the classes I was teaching—often, purely by serendipity, not by intent.

JS: Your experiences as a sociologist have caused you to look at sociology and see what sociology can do to understand what you’re going through, but you’ve said you’re not finding much.

MB: No. The parallel to Durkheim and *Suicide* really stood out to me. Durkheim, of course, made a great breakthrough by dealing with suicide sociologically, but he threw the baby out with the bath water! I’ve recently run across an article, “Understanding the Experiential World of the Dying: Limits to Sociological Research,” and it just struck a bell with me. That *that* is just a central issue.

JS: What exactly did Durkheim exclude? Writing on suicide, how did that create blind spots for sociology?

MB: Well, he wanted to create, to point out to people, the paradox of what was truly the field of sociology. And he did so by excluding anything to do with the personal aspects of suicide. He didn’t want to know any details about individual cases; he didn’t care about motive, intention, any of those things. He wanted only to look at statistical rates and to be able to set up a classical invariant model of research. His whole premise to justify sociology was to turn the tables... and deal only with the archives of statistics on suicides. And to some degree, a lot of the approach to death and dying has been the same way. Let’s look for regularity, let’s look for pattern, let’s look at massive numbers of cases. And there’s value in all of that, but what’s often lost is the truths that come from the individual case, the single case, the negative case. And much of that, especially with dying, no matter how much you turn it into a sociological research project to study, you don’t realize that this is primarily an emotional experience, to face death. There’s no experience more lonely than dying. It changes in different cultures, but that’s the central point of it.

JS: So it’s not something that individuals go through in a vacuum.

MB: No, no, no, the social context is very powerful, probably the most important aspect to this, to me, was I received this diagnosis of terminal cancer out of the blue, on a cell phone, the day of my 65th birthday. Within a month, anonymously, former students and some colleagues created a “Fan Club” page on Facebook. That sort of “outed” me. And this no longer became a lonely, singular journey. It became a community. Suddenly it was



Photo courtesy Caitlan Mason

Monte Bute, in a family photo.

a wide array of people involved, at different levels, in creating dialog about this experience... this suddenly turned it into a sociological experience. What began to immediately happen, being a sociologist, is I became a participant and an observer at the same time. That sort of double consciousness about the experience I had, there is nothing you could be more involved in than facing your own death, but at the same time there was detachment. So I was observing myself and others. [Dying was] an experience among a community of people.

JS: One of the things I’ve heard you say is that dying is a stage of the life course, it’s a process that people go through. It’s not just something that happens to you.

MB: People who work in the death and dying field, they have spent so much time trying to explain what a “good death” is. And when they talk about a good death, [they mean] that you should know it’s coming, you retain control, you have dignity and privacy, control over pain, you’re in a secure place, and there’s emotional support, etc. All of that stuff. I’ve come to a very different conclusion. Those things are all well and good, but my experience and understanding of this is, in fact, if you know that the end is coming, and have some time, this can be a liminal experience. You have an

opportunity to reexamine the meaning of your life, and even more importantly, the meaning of what does it mean to be human. And, to me, a good death can be a death in which you go through affective and cognitive dissonance. You're... unsettled. Now I don't want you to die in that state, but this should be a time to go back to first questions and to final things. You reexamine and maybe you retell the narrative of your life. But you also look at the social and historical context that you're living in. You begin to look at the human relationship with the cosmos, you begin to look and see that you are an animal that's in a lived body. So many things come to the fore, and I think we're so busy turning this into a therapeutic experience and a medical experience that we sort of lose the tragic nature of life, a chance to become a lay philosopher, a public philosopher in an odd way, and a public sociologist.

JS: What do you mean by "public sociologist"?

MB: Being a public sociologist is taking all social phenomena and using it, any form of social interaction, to help people make sense of their lives. And there



In 1972, Bute protests against the Vietnam War near the campus of the University of Minnesota.

is no greater taboo than the process of dying. People flee from the idea of dying, and so they add to the loneliness of the process. So for me, once I was "outed," it caused me to step back and say, "My god, this is a teachable moment." I will turn this into... a learning experience for my students, for my colleagues, for the general public. This is probably the most important public sociology project of my life.

"Dying was no longer a lonely, singular journey. It became a community."

JS: I think one of the striking things is the way you're using literature.

MB: In this dying experience, I have found that literature and film have spoken more deeply to me and to the people around me than the social sciences. And that's unfortunate. For instance, Kurasawa, the great Japanese director, had an early film called *Ikiru*. It is the story of a Japanese bureaucrat who just plods to work every day. One day, he discovers that he has stomach cancer and has a year to live. The movie suddenly shifts to a memorial service, and we only discover through the memorial service how he spent his last year. And it was the most powerful image of someone who confronted death, confronted the meaning of their life, what they'd been doing, and it was a moment of awakening. Now those are things that should be captured more often by sociological ethnographies, life stories, biography—and they are occasionally—but they're not what we spend most of our time working with students on.

JS: One last thing I wanted to ask you about is the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*. And I bring this up because every sociologist knows about this book, and every sociologist gets asked about this book, because it's about a sociologist, and most people cringe. And then you said you re-evaluated your opinion of this book.

MB: I had read it and written it off as sort of a trite self-help manual, but I went back and I've reread that twice dur-

ing the past 15 months. [*Tuesdays*] is what sociology should be doing about the process of dying. It is a profound rumination on the biological, the social and cultural, the psychological, and the spiritual elements of your coming demise. I'll bet 95 percent of people who read that book could not tell you that he was a sociologist. He wasn't using "soc speak," he wasn't babbling with journal diagnosis and definition, he was a human being who used the sociological lens to bring his own lived experience of this tremendously solitary experience to readers, to viewers, to people who were terrified by death. And he managed to turn this into a Socratic experience with his former student. [Morrie] talks about love and marriage and death and happiness, all of these topics, and he constantly has the sociological framework there without ever telling anyone he's using this sociological paradigm to explain lived experience.

Monte Bute is in the social science department at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, MN. He spoke with *Contexts'* web editor, **Jon Smajda**, who is in the sociology program at the University of Minnesota.