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For Joan: Some Letters with Reverence, an Honorary Doctorate, and a Dialogical Tribute

Jeff Hearn, with Teresa Elkin Postila, Annika Eriksson, Karin Lund-Frank, Kicki Mällbin, My Persson, Stefania Prandi, Lina Rahm, and Jörgen Skågeby

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In 2012 I co-taught, with Anne-Charlott Callerstig, a masters course module at Linköping University in Sweden entitled “Intersectional gender, and institutional and organizational work”. Towards the end of the course I was emailed by Donald Van Houten asking for contributions to a text to be presented at a reception on International Women’s Day, March 8, 2012, at the University of Oregon, honouring Joan Acker and her remarkable career. The reception was part of the Lorwin Lecture Series on ‘Civil Rights and Civil Liberties’ and the Wayne Morse Center symposium on ‘Gender Equity and Capitalism’. To honour Joan and her legacy, I was asked to send a personal statement testifying to Joan’s impact on her life and work, to be collected together in a small book.

We were using some of Joan’s writing as key texts on the module, so it seemed appropriate to do something collectively, and accordingly I asked the students to write short “letters” to Joan. I sent off our letters, which we called ‘Some Letters Written with Reverence’; I trust Joan received them and liked them.

So, here in this writing for Joan there are three parts. In the first, the “letters” are reproduced; the next is the edited proposal I wrote for Joan to be awarded an honorary doctorate at Hanken School of Economics, the Swedish language business school in Helsinki, Finland; she received the honour in 2011; and for the last part, I add an additional personal tribute and reflection from the vantage point of now, today.

Jeff Hearn

I. Some Letters Written with Reverence

Dear Joan,

I hope you are well. We’ve only met a handful of times, but I feel we are on a similar track.

When Wendy Parkin and I set out in the late 1970s to find literature on gender and organizations, your work was among our key inspirations (Acker and Van Houten, 1974). We were more than reassured that we were onto something very important. From the 1970s you have made the critical study of “gender, work and organizations” your very own, and a special place of scholarship, analysis and intervention. You have taught me many things, and your work has impacted on mine in many ways.

You remind me and us readers: of social structure without being abstractly structuralist, and without forgetting practice and politics; of the economy without being economicist;

of class, race and ethnicity without forgetting gender and sexuality; and of what is now called intersectionality without being obscurantist and only deconstructive. You know that social categories, and their production and reproduction in practice, matter!

Perhaps above all, you have shown the importance of engaging with the world, as against some current fashions not to do that, and of writing clearly, as against some current fashions of not doing that either. Anyone can write unclearly! Few can do what you do – explain the real world and its difficulties (in several senses) clearly. Your insistence of the relations of theory and practice, and theory and politics, just jumps off the page. Thanks!

It was an honour to be there, when you “shared the stage” with Tarja Halonen, the President of Finland, at the National Women’s Studies Conference – though I still feel a bit guilty when a few years later you received an honorary doctorate at Hanken School of Economics in Helsinki, Finland, and the ceremonial people made you stand and suffer for so long in the rehearsal. The price of fame!

I am not going to go on any more, and so rather than that – I asked some students, who are doing a (mainly online) masters course on Teaching Intersectional Gender, Sexuality, Ethnicity and Equality, at Gender Studies, Linköping University, Sweden, to write open letters to you. As part of the course, I teach, with others, a module called “Intersectional gender, and institutional and organizational work”, and inevitably we use some of your work. And most of these masters students work or study full-time and then do the course on top of all that, so they are in touch with the “real world” outside universities. So here they are – I thought you would like their letters.

With warm good wishes, Jeff

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Dear Professor Acker,

With this short message I would like to say thank you for your work. I really appreciate what you have written about gender and organization. Considering in particular your 2006 essay on “Inequality regimes: gender, class and race in organizations”, I found particularly inspiring the pages in which you explained the discrimination that women undergo because of their bodies. I also found it very interesting what you wrote about men and their gender privilege, and about the belief in biological differences between genders, as a way to perpetuate inequality. Your considerations are still so up to date, and I will use them in my work both at University and beyond.

Best,

Stefania Prandi

**

Dear Joan,

While many of us can say that we are in the process of trying to understand our positions in this world – in relation to other individuals, organisations, societies and nature at large – the outcome can take on so many different forms. To the extent that I am becoming more attentive to ubiquitous inequality and more reflexive about the privileges that come with my position, I owe it to feminist writers and writings. Thank you Joan and, please, keep the contributions coming ...

Jörgen Skågeby, Student, Sweden

**

Dear Joan,

Thoughts like insects on a hot summer's day are spinning and flying around in my head, persistent like flies. Then there is interchange, thoughts becomes entangled and intertwined, they intra-act and new thoughts occur.

Best wishes

Teresa Elkin Postila

**

Dear Joan Acker,

I am 44 year old woman from Denmark, who achieved a master degree in Denmark for 16 years ago within communication and feminist studies. Today I have my own network company and have chosen to follow a course at Linköping University in Sweden called Teaching Intersectional Gender, Sexuality, Ethnicity and Equality. I want to get updated on the development of these same topics, and women/gender in business life as of today. The best thing I experienced is that I still knew somebody – you were still there as a really important woman writing in a clear way about gender and inequality regimes in organizations. I send you my warmest thoughts and wish you all the best.

Hope we will meet one day!

Karin Lund-Frank

Linköping February 5th 2012, M.Sc., mother, wife, managing director, and student

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Dear Professor Acker,

I'm very glad that my studies at Linköping University (Teaching Intersectional Gender, Sexuality, Ethnicity and Equality) opened up my eyes and mind to your research. Not only because of what you write and the topics of you research but also that you can

explain highly complex societal structures with such ease. I particularly enjoy your tone of writing; it is never apologetic, very matter of fact and at the same time including and inviting. It is very inspiring. Thank you.

Sincerely,

My Persson

**

Dear Joan Acker

The issues of representation have for many years been occupying my mind and my academic studies as well as my everyday teaching at a feminist adult education center. Intersectionality then, is a good starting point and I really appreciate you addressing these issues in relation to organizations. It helps me think further and expand my thoughts. For this I wish to thank you.

Yours sincerely

Kicki Mällbin

**

Dear Joan

If we could meet, oh how interesting it would be! I would have so much to discuss with you about gender and organizations. I am very interested in leadership and opinions about so-called female or male oriented leadership. I think that there are a lot of different expectations on leaders depending on whether you are male or female. Lots of young women are struggling with lots of resistance and not knowing how to cope, or why the resistance keep showing up.

There are also several studies done, I just read one this week, saying lots of young females are stressed and feeling inadequate due to their role as a chief. Therefore, a lot more females than males quit working as a chief.

I recently got acquainted with a young female who I discussed gender issues with. She has been working as a single, young female within a group of older men, mostly retired ones. When I discussed the issue of gender and age with her, she said that she felt relieved to hear that it was not only her that was the problem. She also said that she had felt a lot of resistance when she was on parent leave, or wanted to take a day off to be with her family. It is amazing how still these things keep showing up despite our efforts to make a change.

I think we could have interesting discussion.

Best regards

Annika Eriksson

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Dear Professor Joan Acker

I'm told that a footprint on the moon by an astronaut would stay there for millions of years. Unless a meteorite hits the moon's surface, due to the lack of an atmosphere, nothing ever changes. On the earth it is harder to make an impact that lasts forever. On this surface everything changes. The Earth is almost five billion years old. In less than a thousandth of that time there have been people like us. If we pretend that the earth's history lasted a single year, man is not even eight hours old. Everything you've written, was written for a quarter of a second ago. We who live on this overpopulated planet where all ecological system may collapse are responsible for destroying in a moment what has taken billions of years to create. But since we have responsibility, we can make change and we can make an impact. Sometimes fighting for a better and more equal world seems hopeless, and sadness and tiredness are overwhelming. One might feel that nothing ever changes. But change is possible on this surface. Thank you for empowering us when we are so sad and tired! Thanks you for your footprint that creates change on this changeable surface!

Lina Rahm, Student, Sweden

II. Proposal for an Honorary Doctorate for Professor Emerita Joan Acker, Awarded at Hanken School of Economics, Finland, 2011

“Throughout the development of research and scholarship on gender, management and organizations, a key figure, and perhaps the single most important inspiration, has been Emerita Professor Joan Acker, University of Oregon. Her scholarship has been of fundamental and pioneering importance in established the area of studies on gender, management and organizations throughout the world. She has been part of the faculty at the University of Oregon since 1966.

Her research has focused on women and work, gender and organizations, class, and feminist theory. Her visiting professorships include three years at the Swedish Centre for Working Life in Stockholm, Sweden and the Marie Jahoda International Guest Professorship at Bochum University, Bochum, Germany. She has been awarded the American Sociological Association's Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award, 1993, and the American Sociological Association's Jessie Bernard Award for feminist scholarship, 1989. She is the founding Director of the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon, a major feminist centre for scholarship on gender and women.

In spite of the wide recognition that hierarchical organizations are an important location of gender dominance, most writing about organizations assume that organizational structure is gender-neutral. Acker's work demonstrates that organizational structure is not gender-neutral; on the contrary, assumptions about gender underlie the documents and contracts used to construct organizations and to provide the commonsense ground for theorizing about them. She has shown that their gendered nature is partly masked through obscuring the embodied nature of work. In many organizations abstract jobs and hierarchies, common concepts in organizational thinking, assume a disembodied and universal worker. She has shown how images of men's bodies and masculinity pervade organizational processes, marginalizing women and contributing to the maintenance of gender segregation in organizations.

More specifically, her synthesizing analysis of major gendered processes in organizations, as - the production of gender divisions; the creation of gendered symbols, images and forms of consciousness; interactions between individuals; and the internal mental work of individuals - is a classic contribution that has directed the field for over 20 years.

She has also engaged in the analysis of gender in work, management and organizations with relation to class, ethnicity, race and other social divisions, long before "diversity" and "diversity management" were talked about. She has argued for and develop new gendered analysis of economy that breaks out of the boundaries of "the economic" as represented by both neo-classical and critical political economy.

She remains an active publisher and conference presenter. Her recent books include *Class Questions: Feminist Answers* and *Gendering Sociological Theory: Class and Organizations* (a collection of her articles), both published by Rowman & Littlefield. Her most recent empirical research is a large, collaborative study of organizational reform in the state of Oregon. The book, *Neo-liberalism on the Ground: Doing Welfare Restructuring*, co-authored with Sandra Morgen and Jill Weigt, was published in 2007.

Other key publications include: "Revisiting Class: Thinking from Gender, Race, and Organizations", in *Social Politics*, 2000; "Jenseits von Geschlecht? Diskurse zur Zukunft der Arbeit in den USA" [Beyond Gender? Discourses on the Future of Work in the USA], in Karin Gottschall and Birgit Pfau-Effinger, eds. *Zukunft der Arbeit und Geschlecht*, Bremen: Leske + Budrich, 2002; "The Continuing Necessity of 'Class' in Feminist Thinking" in *Social Theory and Feminism*; "Gendered Contradictions in Organizational Equity Projects", *Organization*, 2000; "Gender and Organizations", in Janet Saltzman Chafetz, ed. *The Handbook on Gender Sociology*, New York: Plenum, 1999; "The Future of Gender and Organizations", *Gender, Work, and Organizations*, 1998; "Rewriting Class, race, and gender: Problems in feminist rethinking", in *Revisioning Gender*, 1999; the book, *Work, Welfare and Politics*, 2002, co-edited with Frances Fox Piven, Margaret Hallock, and Sandra Morgen; and "Inequality Regimes: Gender, Race, and Class in Organizations" in *Gender and Society*, 2006.

Earlier works include: the book, *Doing Comparable Worth: Gender, Class and Pay Equity* (1989); “Family, Gender, and Public Policy: The Swedish Case”, in Catherine Berheide and Esther Ling Chow (eds.) *The Family in Cross Cultural Perspective*, 1994; “The Gender Regime in Swedish Banks”, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 1993; and perhaps most famously, the landmark article, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations”, in *Gender & Society*, 1990.

Her work is extremely well-known and respected throughout Finland, the Nordic Region, and beyond. It is highly cited. In recent years she has addressed the 2005 National Women’s Studies Conference, following the Opening Address by the National President, has been an academic visitor and supportive adviser on research and researchers in Hanken, and was an expert member of the Academy of Finland Evaluation Working Group on Women’s Studies and Gender Research that reported in 2002. More generally, her theoretical and empirical work has been used extensively in research and teaching by Hanken researchers in a wide variety of business and other managerial and organizational settings.

...”

III. A Personal, Dialogical Tribute and Reflection: Thinking about Joan Today ...

Alongside the sadness of losing an inspirational colleague, thinking about Joan now, today, in some kind of dialogue with myself, brings many further thoughts, and feelings, to mind. While she is and was certainly most known for her work on gender, gendering, work and organizations, it is not only this field of GWO that owes a huge debate to her.

Joan’s range was wide, from the everyday micro-sociological life of organizations, the gender ‘appropriate’ forms of work and organizational doings, the ‘ideal’ and thus ‘not so ideal’ worker, to the enduring structures of workplaces, family, welfare, and social policy, to the global and transnational, as context, practice and macro-structuring. In all of this, she was centrally concerned with the materiality of life, organizational or not, including money, pay, income, work, care, and further resources (Acker, 1989), with capitalism and patriarchy, with feminist historical materialism (see Jameson, 1988; Acker, 2006a; Foster, 2012) – some things still all too often neglected in studies of organizations, and of gender, work and organizations.

Whilst feeling at ease with intersectional social relations, this did not mean she escaped simply to subjectivism or the multiplicity of identities; her ‘intersectional’ take was from the complexity of materiality (cf. Hearn and Parkin, 1993). Such divergences point to how the concept of intersectionality can be proposed by those with very different epistemologies and politics. In accordance with her materialist take, one of the key features of Joan’s work was that she never forgot class, whilst the same time critiquing class (or at least patriarchal definitions and approaches), for neglecting gender and race, unpaid labour, the relations of distribution, and the processual nature of power more generally (Acker, 1988, 1999, 2000, 2006a, 2006b). This critical engagement with class may seem strange to highlight, but for some time the class dimension of feminist, profeminist and intersectional work, that is, a critical engagement with class, has not

always been noticed, despite the huge importance of economy, money, wealth. This lack of interest in gendered, raced class in some quarters elsewhere is especially odd with the contemporary state of the global capitalist, imperialist, patriarchal order(s), as well as the so-called ‘turn to “new materialism”’.

Her work said and showed complex material intersectional inequalities: that you cannot study gender in and around organizations without being aware of the intersections of organizational position, hierarchy, work/labour, status, class, occupation, profession, and management, amongst other things. Thus, her studies on gender and organizations have been strongly intersectional throughout their development. Joan’s work was much about intersectionality, before the concept, so-called buzzword, became more established. The broad notion of intersectionality, or more precisely intersectional structural social relations, is not new, even if in various places and epistemic communities it has sometimes been asserted as some kind of ‘new’ concept or approach, especially when addressing some particular societal configuration or problematic, such as (im)migration or racialization. Accordingly, Joan’s work prompts such questions as: how do the form and process of inequality regimes vary between her home country, the USA, and other parts of the world, such as East Asia, Southern Africa or the Nordic region? And how does an approach focusing on inequality regimes differ from those on intersectionality or multiple oppressions? Indeed, Joan was interested in many parts of the world beyond Oregon and the USA.

Her work stretched in other ways, bringing together theory, political analysis, political intervention, social change, and empirical work (the personal is political is theoretical); and spanning sociology, social policy, political economy, globalization studies, and organization and management studies. Above all, she was, is, a feminist theorist, activist and empirical researcher. She made it clear that there is no contradiction between doing empirical research and doing theory, a lesson always worth remembering. In working on both theory and empirics, it should not be forgotten that one of her final, if not the final, studies was a large collaborative empirical study from 1998 to 2000 on: ‘Oregon Families who Left Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or Food Stamps’ (Acker et al., 2001, 2002). This brought her and her several colleagues into direct work on welfare reform, economic and family well-being, and poverty. At the very same time, Joan’s work challenged us with the important question of: what is theory? Is it the interrogation of concepts, the observation and proposal of generalizations and general principles, the search for explanatory models, the relations of epistemology, ontology and methodology, or the very relations of the empirical, the political, and reflexively that very theorizing?

Joan’s take on the multiple facets of gender and gendering was itself about theory, empirical inquiry, and also political intervention. Her recognition of gendering and gendered processes, rather than the reifications of gender as a noun, was also very much, and perhaps increasingly over her career, about inequality regimes, and the intersections of multiple forms of inequality and oppression. Her 2006 article in *Gender and Society* is especially instructive as a guide to her way of working; I quote here the abstract in full:

In this article, the author addresses two feminist issues: first, how to conceptualize intersectionality, the mutual reproduction of class, gender, and racial relations of inequality, and second, how to identify barriers to creating equality in work organizations. She develops one answer to both issues, suggesting the idea of “inequality regimes” as an analytic approach to understanding the creation of inequalities in work organizations. Inequality regimes are the interlocked practices and processes that result in continuing inequalities in all work organizations. Work organizations are critical locations for the investigation of the continuous creation of complex inequalities because much societal inequality originates in such organizations. Work organizations are also the target for many attempts to alter patterns of inequality: The study of change efforts and the oppositions they engender are often opportunities to observe frequently invisible aspects of the reproduction of inequalities. The concept of inequality regimes may be useful in analyzing organizational change projects to better understand why these projects so often fail and why they succeed when this occurs. (Acker, 2006c: 441)

The abstract begins with both conceptualization and how practically to identify barriers to creating equality. It is theoretical, empirical, practical, and political. The answer to both these challenges, namely, “inequality regimes”, refers to interlocked practices and processes that continue inequalities in work organizations, and, to my ears, harks to the work of the Combahee River Collective (1977): “the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking”. Reading on, the critical societal location of work and work organizations is highlighted, and indeed, as we shall see, this speaks to the heart of (gender) revolution and revolutionary change. But this breadth does not mean that she shied away from the messy practical and political business of organizational change projects, with all their constraints, limitations and compromises; this is not reformism; the fact is they actually affect people’s lives – including the institutional possibility of doing feminist research and doing political change – and may even succeed. Critics of reformism still have to their own organizing, and their own organizational change projects.

Being concerned with practical change in organizations and workplaces, paid or unpaid, did not mean she was any kind of reformist. In the journal *Monthly Review* in December 2001, in a rejoinder to Barbara Epstein on ‘What happened to the Women’s Movement?’, Joan wrote of revolution: “The daunting reality facing radical and socialist feminist visions was, and is, not only that we have no gender and race egalitarian alternative to capitalism, but that the interweaving of gender and race with the economic, political, and social relations of capitalism is much more complicated and pervasive than we had imagined. To fundamentally change the situation of women, almost everything else must change.” (Acker, 2001: 46). How prescient, especially in the current contradictory state of the world, and the faltering global embodiments, environments, political economies, and technologies.

For these and other reasons, I have found Joan Acker’s frameworks fundamentally helpful in their deceptive simplicity and yet comprehensiveness. As indicated earlier in

the first part, they have been part and parcel of my teaching, whether to social work students in the UK, gender studies students in Sweden, or management and organization students in Finland. They also work, albeit with different degrees of sophistication at different academic levels, undergraduate, doctoral, and so on. They have been foundational in researching the multiple ways in which gender power and gendered power operate through organizations and management. For example, in studying gender relations and gender equality policy in the largest corporations in Finland, my colleagues and I noted (Hearn et al., 2009: 13-14):

... gender relations operate in multiple ways within organizations and management (for example, Acker, 1990; Davies, 1996). It is suggested that there is not only a methodological multiplication of 'levels' of gender analysis in organizations, but also to a substantive dispersion. This may involve dispersion of gender power, dispersion of "gender policy"/"equality activity", and dispersion of gender in corporations, even if such multiple ways serve to maintain structured gender dominance and gender inequalities. The examination of these gendered phenomena in corporations within a relatively gender equal society such as Finland adds further weight to the ways in which such dispersions may reproduce structured gendered power relations. The combination of relevant social forces include: relative societal gender equality and relatively strong ideologies of gender equality by international standards; somewhat uneven existence and relative underdevelopment of corporate policies on gender equality; and continuing presence of men in corporate organizations and management, especially at the highest levels of boards and top management (see Hearn et al., 2002: 39).

This is just one way in which Acker's (1990) multi-faceted analysis of gendered organizational structures and processes speaks to me; moreover, the multi-dimensionality is also not fixed, but subject to changing historical, gender, sexual(iz)ed, intersectional conditions and possibilities, of which two obvious examples are the growth of ICTs and virtualization, and the elaborations of globalization and transnationalizations. Thus we can now speak of both gendered virtual organizational structures and processes, and gendered transnational organizational structures and processes, and then in turn trans(national)patriarchies and trans(national)patriarchal organizational structures and processes.

And so more recently, in the Preface of the book, *Men of the World*, I began with Joan's work on globalization:

So, how is globalization gendered? Joan Acker (2004) provided one succinct answer in terms of: 'gender as embedded in globalizing capitalism'; 'gendered construction of a division between capitalist production and human reproduction'; 'masculinities in globalizing capital'; gender as a resource for globalizing capital'; and 'the gendered effects of globalization'. But why do many, perhaps most, especially mainstream, texts on globalization fail to discuss gender relations? And why do many of those that do, even with the recent explosion of interest in gender

and globalization, omit explicit and developed analysis of men and gender relations? What have men got to do with the global and the transnational?

(Hearn, 2015: xiv)

For me, this was a productive springboard in working in some detail on the embodiments, organizing structures, processes and flows of gendered globalizations, with a specific emphasis on stability and change around men and masculinities transnationally.

Yet, along with all these substantive and particular debates and contributions, I now see another fundamentally important feature that presses now even more strongly: namely, that she and her work have acted as a communal point of contact and solidarity for researchers and scholars of gender and organizations, for *GWO*-ers. This goes beyond if and when there were or are disagreements between us. Like two other great North American social scientists, who themselves have in different ways worked on the empirically-inspired theorizing of gender, Erving Goffman and Dorothy E. Smith, her work can be taken up in many different directions, and by those subscribing to very different epistemologies and ontologies. Those interested in “doing gender” or “doing difference”, and those concerned with gender regimes or inequality regimes, or with neo-Marxism, globalization or intersectionality, or with ethnomethodology or pay injustices, or with transversal dialogues in feminism, could all and have been joined up via her work. This joining was and is in and through a loose, sometimes distant, and more or less tolerant network of recognitions amongst researchers, in which *GWO* itself has also been central. In this way, Joan’s work was a node, a reference point, a place where many feminist, profeminist, and feministic (and a few non-feminist) researchers could agree to start or finish, even if the differences sparked in-between. That, for me, is truly lasting legacy; she has been central in the building of a field and a network of scholars and activists.

Finally, just two further thoughts. The first one is on men and males, still a ticklish subject for some feminist, gender and queer scholars and activists. In the short piece in *Monthly Review*, noted above (Acker, 2001), Joan Acker also emphasized the central place of male privilege in blocking revolutionary social transformation: the fallacy that the “problems there were in larger society would automatically be solved as the working class triumphed.” (pp. 46-47). This was recognized as both a comprehensive and inclusive issue of “almost everything else must change” and as a practical political matter around, for example, why “[m]ale support for pay equity was difficult to mobilize.” (p. 48). With this, she ended on a key question: “A go-it-alone feminist movement will not be broad enough. But, can the men adapt?” (p. 49). This is a key driving question for social change, one that drives many broadly (pro)feminist researches and politics (for example, MenEngage (<http://menengage.org/about-us/>); *Study on the Role of Men in Gender Equality*, 2013). So, can the men adapt? Or is there a need for a more drastic agenda of abolishing “men” as a gender category of power (cf. Wittig, 1992; Lorber, 2000; Hearn, 2015)?

And last. I was told a story about Joan that rang true, but I have no real idea if it is – and it is also about men too, if in a different way. The story goes that on a panel in the US,

perhaps the ASA, perhaps the symposium on ‘Gender Equity and Capitalism’ I began with, I don’t know, she was asked to name one thing that you would do to enhance gender equality (or some similar question). Her answer, as reported to me, was “Abolish football!” Apart from really not knowing if the story was true, I will probably also never know if she meant American football or that other sport called “football” or “soccer”, depending where you are in the world. Either way, I like the story; it reminds me of her wicked humour; and I liked and like, and admired, Joan and her work hugely and warmly.

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