

**Norma and Crystal and You and Me:
On Receiving the SALT Teaching Award**

by Fran Ansley

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A lot of you probably know about the 1970s-era film, *Norma Rae*. This is a film that meant a lot to me at the time it was released. It was about textile worker organizing in the South, and it was based directly on a real story -- the long, arduous campaign mounted by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union against the J.P. Stevens Company. Stevens was a huge recidivist labor law violator that was then defending the fortress of Southern textiles, using every then-available tool at its disposal to prevent the organization of the black and white low-wage workers who labored in its plants across the rural and small-town South.

My life partner, Jim Sessions, now sitting up here at the table with me, was up to his eyeballs in that drive, working for a tiny organization called Southerners for Economic Justice, going into these little mill towns in the Carolinas. His job was to try to sit down with local pastors and see if he could help them discover enough backbone to stand up to the mill owners in that industrial war. The task was an eye-opening lesson for him in just how deep down into congregations and households and personal lives the long hand of corporate power can reach in these small one-industry places.

At any rate, in the course of that project Jim had the good fortune to work with an amazing person named Crystal Lee from Roanoke Rapids, the woman whose life and book eventually became a loose template for *Norma Rae*. He got to taste the salt of hard struggle in the long campaign, then the sweetness of the union's achievement in winning recognition. It

was a victory many of us then hoped would be the opening wedge capable of cracking open at last not only the mammoth textile industry, but the larger white supremacist, patriarchal, anti-union, right-to-work, politically retrograde industrial and financial order that dominated our region and through it exerted a baneful influence on the whole country -- and thereby the world.

From our present perspective, of course, we can see with sharp poignancy how briefly those hopes were destined to survive. Very soon thereafter, the full force of deindustrialization -- the era of "free trade" and neoliberalism triumphant -- broke over us with a crash, and textiles were perhaps its most dramatic sectoral casualty. That industry, along with much else in manufacturing, became mostly a thing of the past in our region.

But before that next phase of economic un-development had become clear, back at a point when the victory won against J.P. Stevens was still relatively fresh and hopeful, lo and behold, Hollywood actually decided to make a movie about Crystal Lee and about the union's fight in Roanoke Rapids. Amazing. The film celebrated the guts and inventiveness of the drive's rank-and-file leaders, portrayed unions as a good thing for justice and democracy, celebrated women's strength in adversity, showed the importance but inadequacy of labor law remedies, and held up a model of activist, militant racial unity among working class people as something both praiseworthy and possible.

Now as many of you can testify who still use this film in classes on labor law (or community lawyering or critical race theory or feminist jurisprudence or economic justice or whatever), the Hollywood cheese factor and other failings have become a bit more evident as the years have gone by. And of course these things happen. Not only to films, but to hemlines, hair styles, stirring political slogans, old law review articles and everything else -- junior faculty, don't say I didn't warn you! But much also endures. And *Norma Rae* is still a damn good movie in many important ways.

Anyhow, when at the end of the season Sally Fields was nominated for an Oscar for her leading role in the film, many of us economic justice advocates in the South were ecstatic. What a coup! Simply as a result of its having been nominated for the award, the film would be

seen by many more people. And if Sally were actually to WIN the Oscar, well wow ... just imagine the audience that would be encouraged to hear and see its message.

So in line with this happy attitude, on the night of the academic awards Jim and I and our two children, Elisha and Lee, were lined up on the couch, snacks at hand, and glued expectantly to our television set. That year we took way more than our normal interest in this annual ritual. I mean we had a team to root for, sure enough.

And as we sat there, of course, the pace was not exactly quick. The evening ground slowly along, but all the while it was building inexorably toward that final handful of the BIG awards, including the one we had firmly fixed within our sights: Best Actress. As usual, the network in question drew out the process interminably. They interrupted for commercials, they staged Vegas-style musical numbers, they played clips from the big nominees. But amazing to recount, when at last the Best Actress moment had arrived, and somebody opened the mythic envelope and pulled out the name, the winner was: Sally Fields!

And there she came, hustling down the aisle, all smiling tears and shining glances. She mounted the podium. Sitting there on the sofa our little economic justice crowd held our breaths. Because here was the real moment. Not the instant when the winner was announced, but the moment when she was to *speak*. Here was the instant when she could sing out loud and clear for labor rights, for the North Carolina textile workers who had *lived* the moving story and *fought* the inspiring fight, the moment when she could bring their reality into that glittering hall and beam it out to those millions of viewers across the land whose precious gaze she held in this golden moment.

And brothers and sisters, what did she do? She gained the podium, she smiled out to the camera, she threw open her arms, and she said, "You love me!"

I kid you not. That's what she said. And *then* when you might have thought she would do something else, even if anti-climactically, she proceeded to tearfully thank all the folks who worked the film with her – you know, the producer and the director and all her fellow actors, etc., etc., etc. Blah, blah, blah.

So we sat there in our bleak little group, staring dumfounded at the television screen. It felt like a kick in the stomach. Or maybe a slosh of acid in the face. It was such a bitter disappointment. Sally Fields was *not* Crystal Lee, no matter how much her performance might have made us forget that for a moment. She was a goddamned Hollywood starlet.

Or at least that's what I furiously thought about her at the time.

Since then, I think somewhere I heard that the line "You love me" is maybe a quote from somewhere in the film itself, though I have never succeeded in remembering to listen for it, and it has never jumped out at me in later viewings. Anyhow, if that is indeed true, then it softens the story somewhat. All of us tend to think that others know our scripts more than they usually do, and maybe Sally was making an allusion back into the world of Crystal's story that I missed at the time. But I have to admit that even so, I have never much softened up in my own attitude toward the choices Sally made that night.

At least not until this past week.

See, this week I have been knowing that tonight's banquet was approaching. I have been knowing there would come a time soon when I needed to *say* something to all of you. And I have found myself very definitely writhing in the toils of what we might call the Sally Fields reaction.

First, even as I watched myself simply trying to process the fact of having received this award, I observed that apparently for me, it is all about me. I am embarrassed and bumfuzzled about it, yes – but even in that reaction quite discernibly **FIXATED** on myself and how I am or will be perceived by you, the talented peers whose approval I so desire.

Because let's face it – at least for a progressive law professor, this award really **IS** one of the Oscars in our scene. Along with a few special others, like the Clyde Ferguson and Derrick Bell awards so memorably and deservedly given by the AALS Section on Minorities earlier today to SALT members Angela, Berta and Mario, this is pretty much the top of the mark. So empathize with me for a minute if you can about how easy it is to fall into focusing on self when preparing to step up to this particular podium.

First, it is clear that just a glance at the list of others whose teaching has been honored by SALT is enough to trigger in you a massive attack of imposter anxiety. These are people who have been your inspiration since the first time you read their work or watched them teach or heard them speak.

Add to that the fact that you have also learned you will be honored in the same breath as two genuine HEROINES like Jennifer and Dianna. It is hard not to dread a moment that will include such a potent suggestion about the privileges and insulations of the academic world in which you have chosen to root your work.

Then in the face of your aforementioned well-founded doubt and self-consciousness in this situation, think about how exposed you feel when you see that a warm and brilliant collaborator like Linda Parris-Bailey has created a digital story that seems less about your joint work (your original understanding of the project) and more about *you*.

But it doesn't stop there. Next imagine that you have asked your significant other (on the dubious theory that he has some time on his hands these days since he recently retired) if he would coordinate getting some contributions to SALT through the vehicle of soliciting ads in the book that is being created for the dinner, and then that person somehow turns the assignment into the sweet, ridiculous, over-achieving display that you see in the program brochures scattered around at your tables as we speak.

So do you see what I mean?

It's hard not to be repulsively self-conscious.

How myopically Sally-like I must confess my mental focus has tended to be in the days leading up to this banquet whenever I have tried to think about what to say.

And actually, it doesn't stop there. Because even when I occasionally succeeded in getting beyond the particularly unattractive self-obsessed trough I have just described, when I moved on to what you might call "stage two" of my reaction, I found that my next impulse also tracked Sally's on that disappointing Oscar night so many years ago. I found that when

attempting to shift my focus from self to others, what I moved to was imagining how I would talk about all of YOU.

So the kinds of remarks I next imagined were giving thanks and appreciation to my buddies and teammates. I want to thank Dean Rivkin for nominating me (and in the process, I deduce, putting together the same kind of well-planned and coordinated petition that he has constructed for so many others whom he has represented over the course of a long and distinguished career as a litigator for social change and all-around stepper-up to the plate).

Likewise, I want to thank the Committee that did all the leg work to make this dinner such a pleasurable reality. Anyone who ever worked on the SALT banquet knows the trivia-filled burden and cascading deadlines of this endeavor.

I want to thank my wonderful feisty student Holly Cooper, now making her way as a public interest lawyer up here in the Big Apple, who so generously agreed to organize and embody a student voice for this occasion. What presence could be more important for a teaching award?

I want to thank the University of Tennessee for providing my legal education, for giving me a professional home, and for supporting my teaching work even as that work kept veering off into territory less and less familiar to the standard curriculum and its justifications. Colleagues old and new at that institution, some of you out there tonight, have been priceless friends and mentors and co-conspirators in all sorts of ways that I do not think I could have done without.

And of course I want to thank SALT -- for the astonishing fact of its existing and thriving; for being there as a support and challenge to all of us progressive law teachers; for its organizational courage and human warmth and demographic breadth and political depth -- all these strengths always a work-in-progress of course, but a really constituting a vital institution for the future of legal education and therefore of the profession.

In this second stage, this moving past obsession with what people think of me and moving on to thanking them for what they do, I have been visited by a flood of images and memories about SALT -- way too long to recount here, but very vivid and real. For instance:

At the very start of my career, I remember reading wonderful articles by Howard Lesnick and Pat Cain about their teaching. It was fantastic to realize there were whole worlds being invented that went far beyond the kind of legal education I had received myself, that there were master teachers out there in the legal academy who didn't patronize or preach, but encouraged, and revealed, and beckoned to novices like me. When I soon discovered that both of these people were in SALT, it helped convince me that I needed to find out more about this organization.

Then I recall as I investigated further, I learned about the SALT affiliations of several scholars of color whose early interjections in what was soon to be called critical race theory I had read with tremendous excitement during my LL.M. year at Harvard in 1987 – writers like Derrick Bell, Chuck Lawrence and Mari Matsuda. I particularly remember a Cover discussion where Chuck introduced a circle of people to some of his sister Sarah's ideas about education and set a standard for how to lead a discussion of teaching among serious practitioners.

I recall going to my first SALT meeting, a small informal gathering held in some random meeting room at an AALS hotel, and feeling that sterile space become transformed into a place of brotherhood and sisterhood. What a gift to find there were people who had been working for years to create a network for law teachers who were trying to do social change inside the academy. These were fighters, strategists, *companeros y companeras* ... a community.

I recall learning through SALT about an event that represented the culmination of a long struggle to push AALS to adopt a non-discrimination plank with respect to sexual orientation. There was to be a key vote in the AALS house of representatives on this point, and gay and lesbian members of SALT called upon us to pack this meeting as witnesses and hopefully sideline persuaders. It was a lovely moment, standing in the back of that other sterile hotel room as we savored the victorious vote -- one whose outcome on that evening had been far from sure.

I remember beginning to serve on the board and watching the organization wrestle with its own development as new waves of people came into SALT, people who pushed us in new

directions, moving us beyond amicus briefs and into the streets when it became clear that such a move was appropriate to the challenges of the times.

I recall attending many different SALT teaching conferences at all kinds of law schools, on both coasts, and places in between, and never failing to come back renewed and better equipped to do my job.

I recall listening to two of my favorite African-American students late one night at a motel in Cincinnati where I had taken them for a SALT conference on the *Gratz* and *Grutter* cases prior to oral arguments before the 6th Circuit. I had thought what would excite these students the most would be feeling the palpable proximity of the court and its power, having a chance to observe the moot arguments where advocates for the intervenors prepared to appear for real. But it turned out that what my students most wanted to talk about was the racial and ethnic diversity of our organization, the cross-race comradeship and joint effort they saw and felt among us. They were genuinely moved and amazed, and their reaction reminded me again of how much I value spaces like SALT and LatCrit where this kind of relationship building, with all its ups and downs and difficulties, is actually going forward. (And about my students -- I don't want any of you yankees or big-city types to misunderstand. These were very savvy guys with their own histories of racial justice activism and without any illusions as to whether all would be easy and feel-good in any such space of coalition.)

As you can imagine, I was proud of SALT as I listened to my students' reflections that weekend. And I was proud of us when we marched for affirmative action in San Francisco. Proud of us when we sued to stop the Solomon Amendment.

It feels GOOD to know that there is an organization ready to step up on issues of the day – from gay rights, to bar passage changes, to affirmative action, to social, racial and economic justice, to public interest law –

I really could go on and on as you have no doubt deduced.

But do you see that there is still a problem? Do you see how this second stage – the stage of thanking SALT, and all of you -- and even “the academy”(!) -- also entangles me with the trap into which Sally stumbled on that unfortunate Oscar night? Certainly thanking and praising others people is more attractive than wallowing (or anyhow *openly* wallowing) in self-focus. And God knows the praise and thanks are genuine and well deserved in this case. But all of you are kind of like the people Sally did go on to thank that night. You are the close-in movie team -- the fellow actors, the director, the film crew and all those folks a movie star could quite naturally think of addressing first. You are family, and I love you, but you are not really the people I should be talking about tonight if I want to learn the deepest lesson from Sally’s error.

Because after all, the people who *most* deserve my thanks, the ones who most merit some time on center stage, the ones whose stories bring us the most important lessons about what and how law teachers in today’s America need to teach and why – those people are far beyond this comfortable banquet circle, and far beyond the academy. They are the undocumented immigrant workers, the at-risk high school students, the union organizers, the pregnant teenagers, the community activists, the spoken word artists, the wheelchair dancers, the community-based playwrights, the digital storytellers, the folks resisting mountaintop removal, the people fighting gentrification and police brutality and ICE raids. They are the international guestworkers, the grassroots lobbyists, the defenders of women, the popular educators, the puppet builders, the participatory researchers, the civil disobeyers. And they are the practicing lawyers who are representing some of these folks in ways that recognize their leadership and help them build their power. Those are the ones who have animated my best teaching and have without question taught the most to my students.

To truly avoid the Sally problem, I need to do more than name off this anonymous cascade of characters. I need to tell you about some of my Crystal Lees. These are the people whose lives and stories and struggles and problems have motivated and moved my students over

the years, the true juice, the original book, the real deal. But of course just like at the Oscars, these festivities are running late. So I will glance down at my cheat sheet to give you some high spots, and I will not mention everyone, and I will certainly not do any of these fine folks justice, and I will talk too fast, and then we can all go home. But here are a few words about a few of those Crystal Lees of mine.

There is Loretta Perkins, the veteran, hard-boiled, sometimes exhausted but always caring teacher of high school English at the struggling black high school near our campus who has welcomed generations of my students into her difficult but inspiring classrooms.

There is Artemio Jimenez, the mushroom worker in a small town near Knoxville who was fired after he invited organizers from the United Farmworkers to visit his community and talk with workers there, but who was told by a federal judge in the Eastern District of Tennessee that he was out on summary judgment because as a farmworker he has no protection from anti-union retaliation -- a ruling that inspired the local Jobs with Justice chapter to organize (with my students' help) a public hearing on the right to organize as an international human right.

There is Bill Murrah, the community development worker at our local legal aid office, a white Southerner who went from a Baptist school in Birmingham to Union Theological Seminary in New York City, returning over 30 years ago to live in Knoxville and do base-building work among poor black, white, and now Latino communities in East Tennessee, and who regularly welcomes my students into collaborations with the diverse groups he serves.

There is Antonia Lopez Paz, the young pregnant poultry worker whose willingness to go public with her complaint about lack of access to bathroom breaks eventually led to a union organizing drive, an NLRB election in which the union won by an astonishing landslide, and the successful negotiation of a first contract.

There is Linda Parris-Bailey, a person of dazzling talent and powerful endurance, the woman who made the digital story we saw earlier this evening, the anchor of a venerable black repertory theater company in East Tennessee (of all unlikely places for such an endeavor to take

root and grow), and someone who has matched up many of my students with community-based artists in unlikely collaborations that repeatedly prove the value of taking educational risks.

There are multiple sets of of high school young people who trusted my students enough to tell their stories and weave them into courtroom dramas that were eventually polished and rehearsed to the point of being ready for prime-time performance in the law school's moot court rooms at the end of the semester.

There is J.J. Rosenbaum, who took time out of her intensely busy work as a Skadden Fellow at Southern Migrant Legal Services in Nashville to help design and supervise projects that allowed my students to meet and work with clients of hers on cutting edge efforts to challenge practices in some of the South's most brutal industries.

There was Deadra Hingle, a member of Knoxville's spectacularly inclusive Circle Modern Dance Company who was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease and pledged to keep dancing until right up to the end, a pledge that enabled her to inspire and mentor the law student of mine who choreographed the last major production in which Deadra appeared before her death, a dance-cum-lobbying effort that centered on the Americans with Disabilities Act and was fittingly called "The Mobility Project."

And there are more, of course. That's just a start. But the evening really is over. Pretty soon the orchestra is going to strike up if I don't bring this to a close. So these sketchy hints will have to do for now. And anyhow, this is crowd that I know can imagine much of what's unsaid. I know each of you out there tonight has your own set of Crystal Lees, the ones whose stories and struggles and generosity and heart and fire-in-the-belly are the indispensable ingredients to your best work as law teachers for social justice. So tonight I want to hold up this prize and say straight into the camera: Here's not to me, or even to us, but here's to *them*.

It's not that I don't want to say thank you to SALT for being so kind to me; of course I do. This honor warms my heart. There's no point in denying, after all, that the SALT teaching award feeds my deep and unremitting desire that you, my inspiring colleagues, should love me.

Nevertheless, the main thing is *not* all about me – or even you. The main thing is that tonight the real honor is owed to those who make the best parts of our public performances possible. That’s why the main thing I want to say to this glittering assembly is -- Here’s to all our Crystal Lees. Here’s to the union organizers and the textile workers in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, without whose grit and courage *Norma Rae* would never have been conceived or made. Here’s to Loretta and Artemio and Bill and Antonia and Linda and J.J. and Deadra and many many more. Here’s to all the oppressed or precarious or excluded or enslaved or rebellious people whose suffering and whose resistance and whose solidarity with others have inspired my best students, and your best students, to seek a path that is joined with others who are fighting for justice in this world.