



JENIJOY LA BELLE
(b. 1943)

INTERVIEWED BY
HEIDI ASPATURIAN

February – May 2008, April 2009

ARCHIVES
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Pasadena, California



Subject area

English literature, humanities

Abstract

Interview in eight sessions, February 2008–April 2009, with Jenijoy La Belle, professor of English, Caltech.

La Belle talks about her childhood, education, and family influences growing up in Olympia, Washington, and her early love of literature and poetry. She recalls her undergraduate years at the University of Washington (B.A. 1965), including studying with poet Theodore Roethke, who became the subject of her doctoral thesis (Ph.D. 1968) at UC San Diego. She describes her early years (1969–1975) as Caltech's first female professor, her Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) colleagues, including division chair H. Smith and J. K. Clark, her friendship with physicist R. P. Feynman, her initial impressions of Caltech students, and her research on poet/artist William Blake. She discusses HSS's shift in emphasis toward the social sciences in the 1970s, the impact on the division, and the appointment of economic historian R. Huttenback as division chair in 1972.

In 1975, La Belle's landmark Caltech tenure case begins when Huttenback overrules the English department's recommendation that she be granted tenure. She relates chronology and conduct of the case, detailing the involvement of HSS and other faculty, Caltech provost R. Christy, trustee L. Wasserman, numerous campus committees, and outside referees. She describes events leading to her

decision to file an official complaint with the EEOC, the agency's investigation and subsequent citing of Caltech for gender discrimination in faculty hiring, Caltech's reaction, and her satisfactory resolution of the case with Caltech in 1977. (Verbatim excerpts of relevant letters, articles, memos, and other documents are included in this section.) She outlines Huttenback's subsequent career as chancellor of UC Santa Barbara and his Santa Barbara trial and conviction for embezzling university funds in 1988, and reflects on its significance for her own case.

She discusses her literary research into Blake, 17th-century poetry, and Shakespeare's plays, and the importance of the Huntington Library (San Marino, California) humanities collections in her work. She comments on her involvement with Caltech faculty committees, and her role as chair of Caltech's convocations committee (1986–1989). Interview concludes with her perspectives on teaching Shakespeare to four decades of Caltech students, team-teaching/staging the Bard in tandem with Caltech theater arts director Shirley Marneus, and a brief assessment of Caltech's presidents.

Administrative information

Access

The interview is unrestricted.

Copyright

Copyright has been assigned to the California Institute of Technology © 2010. All requests for permission to publish or quote from the transcript must be submitted in writing to the Head of Archives and Special Collections.

Preferred citation

La Belle, Jenijoy. Interview by Heidi Aspaturian. Pasadena, California, February-May 2008, April 2009. Oral History Project, California Institute of Technology Archives. Retrieved [supply date of retrieval] from the World Wide Web: http://resolver.caltech.edu/CaltechOH:OH_LaBelle_J

Contact information

Archives, California Institute of Technology
Mail Code 015A-74
Pasadena, CA 91125
Phone: (626)395-2704 Fax: (626)395-4073
Email: archives@caltech.edu

Graphics and content © 2010 California Institute of Technology.



Jenijoy La Belle teaching a class in Millikan Library reflective pool.

“When the weather gets really hot, you’re liable to find anything in the water.”
(Photo and caption courtesy of *Engineering & Science*, March 1971)

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH JENIJOY LA BELLE

BY HEIDI ASPATURIAN

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Copyright © 2010 by the California Institute of Technology

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTERVIEW WITH JENIJOY LA BELLE

Session 1

1-16

Family background, childhood and adolescence in Olympia, Washington, and San Diego, California. Elementary and secondary education. Early affinity for poetry and literature.

Undergraduate education at University of Washington; experiences in literature and poetry classes. Memories of classes taught by Theodore Roethke and other well-known poets; youthful poetic aspirations; decision to pursue a PhD in literature.

Session 2

17-32

Graduate study at University of California, San Diego (UCSD); writing of PhD thesis on Roethke's poetry.

Applies to and is hired in 1969 as first female professor at Caltech. First impressions of campus and Literature faculty. Early experiences—positive, negative, comic, and not so comic—as Institute's first female professor.

Early experiences with and impressions of Caltech students. Recalls first meetings with science faculty Richard Feynman and Seymour Benzer. Initial impressions of Humanities and Social Sciences Division (HSS) and of Humanities chair, Hallett Smith; admission of first female undergraduates

Session 3

33-54

Memories of Richard Feynman; Feynman's views of literature and the humanities. Impressions of Humanities professor J. Kent Clark and other HSS colleagues. Evolution of division in the 1970s and gradual shift in emphasis and power structure toward the Social Sciences.

Completes first book, *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke*, which offers new interpretation of literary influences on Roethke's poetry. Reflections on Roethke personally and as professor and poet. Research on William Blake as poet and artist; collaboration with fellow Blake scholar Robert Essick on Blake book and articles.

Teaching literature to Caltech students in the seventies, and their varied reactions and responses to literature classes and literary analysis.

Session 4

55-77

Unanimously recommended for promotion and tenure in 1974 by HSS literature faculty, but denied tenure by HSS tenure committee, composed 5:1 of SS faculty, including division chair Robert Huttenback. Literature department and other humanities faculty protest decision to Caltech provost, Robert Christy. The great tenure saga begins.

La Belle holds first meetings with Christy *re* tenure issue. Christy recommends and enlists outside arbitration from distinguished literature professor. Huttenback continues to oppose tenure, and enlists Yale Professor of Literature Harold Bloom in cause after outside arbitrator recommends granting tenure. La Belle's perspectives on and responses to Christy, Bloom, and Huttenback.

La Belle's personal and professional relationship with Huttenback; how Huttenback felt "La Belle [was] not on my team." Tenure debate intensifies within HSS faculty; reactions of individual colleagues within division.

Matter referred to Institute Administrative Council (IAC), which upholds HSS tenure committee decision. How absence of defined policies and procedures on tenure decisions in that era shaped the debate.

More outside scholars weigh in, and Professor of Literature J. Kent Clark writes hilarious letter to Provost Christy and President Harold Brown on tenure deliberations within HSS [lengthy excerpt included *verbatim*]. Princeton University Press accepts La Belle's Roethke book for publication. Huttenback refuses to reconsider tenure decision in light of acceptance. More outside opinions solicited.

Session 5

78-100

Tenure controversy goes public 2/76 in *California Tech*; debate ensues over next few weeks in paper. La Belle publishes front-page statement in *Tech* on February 20 outlining her position and lamenting imminent departure from Caltech [included in large part *verbatim*]. Feynman subsequently publishes letter in *Tech* supporting La Belle [*verbatim* in its entirety]. Other campus faculty weigh in.

La Belle files formal complaint at state (FEPC) and federal (EEOC) level, alleging gender discrimination; hires attorney; and submits case to Caltech Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee (AFT). AFT finds "deficiencies in process" and recommends reforms, but upholds tenure decision. La Belle seeks advice from and is treated to power lunch with Caltech trustee and Hollywood mogul Lew Wasserman. In summer '76, La Belle, now terminated, leaves Pasadena for temporary teaching job at Cal State Northridge; remains in contact with Caltech literature faculty.

Jan. '77, EEOC issues detailed finding in support of La Belle; upholds allegation of gender discrimination under *Title VII*, and indicates that class-action lawsuit against Caltech may follow

[portions of EEOC report included *verbatim*]. Wasserman offers to act as arbitrator between La Belle and Caltech.

Session 6

101-118

EEOC expresses interest in taking Caltech to court. Wasserman meets with Caltech provost (and now acting president) Christy, seeking to broker compromise. La Belle and Caltech react to EEOC findings. Institute lawyers urge an out-of-court resolution. Faculty Board holds rather contentious meeting on tenure case and "serious" implications of EEOC findings. La Belle describes fair and balanced positions taken by Christy and Faculty Board Chair Rochus ("Robbie") Vogt throughout the case.

Christy and La Belle provisionally agree to her reinstatement at associate professor level, with revised tenure schedule and clear-cut procedures. Huttenback's role in future tenure deliberations remains a sticking point.

Huttenback is offered and accepts new job as chancellor at University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Caltech and La Belle agree on new tenure/promotion terms. Mixed reactions within HSS to resolution of tenure case. Caltech establishes formal policies and procedures regarding tenure decisions.

Marvin [Murph] Goldberger becomes Caltech president (1978) and places high priority on hiring new female faculty. La Belle returns to tenure-track associate professor position at Caltech in '77/'78—"one of the happiest years of my life." Performs as a chorus girl in Caltech Theater Arts (TACIT) production of *Fiorello!* and holds gala lobster party at new Altadena home.

Session 7

119-131

La Belle is granted tenure in '79, becoming for a time only tenured woman on the Caltech faculty.

Recounts Huttenback's subsequent career at UCSB: administrative actions; hirings and firings; resignation from chancellorship in 1986 amid allegations of wrongdoing; 1988 trial and conviction in Santa Barbara on charges of university embezzlement and federal income tax evasion; firing from UC faculty in 1991; appeals of original conviction; embezzlement charges upheld in 1992. Reflects on this episode in light of own tenure struggle with Huttenback.

Session 8

132-157

Invaluable role of Huntington Library collections as a resource in La Belle's research on Blake, Shakespeare and other projects, including research into literary life and personal history of young 17th century noblewoman Constance Aston. Publication of book *Herself Beheld*, and articles on

Aston, Blake and Shakespeare, including new interpretations of aspects of *Macbeth* and *As You Like It*. Impact of influx of female scholars on the field of literary criticism.

Involvement in Caltech committees. Experiences as member, then chair of Convocations Committee, which oversees Caltech commencement. Trials, tribulations, triumphs, and comic anecdotes about choosing commencement speakers. Exceptional quality and abilities of Caltech staff.

Experiences teaching Shakespeare to students at Caltech. Learning curve during early years. Caltech students' preferred plays. Team-teaching Shakespeare with Caltech Director of Theater Arts Shirley Marneus in class that combines literary scholarship and theatrical production; students' enthusiastic response to course. Challenges and rewards of teaching/staging Shakespeare at Caltech. General reflections on teaching of Shakespeare. Views of Caltech's presidents.

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY ARCHIVES
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Jenijoy La Belle
Pasadena, California

by Heidi Aspaturian

Session 1	February 10, 2008
Session 2	March 2, 2008
Session 3	March 16, 2008
Session 4	March 30, 2008
Session 5	April 5, 2008
Session 6	April 27, 2008
Session 7	May 11, 2008
Session 8	April 18, 2009

ASPATURIAN: I'll begin by asking about your family background—where you grew up and what some of your early influences were.

LA BELLE: I grew up in Olympia, Washington. Shortly before World War II, my father, Joy La Belle, bought a tract of wooded property outside of Olympia—40 acres of absolutely beautiful first-growth forest, made up of trees that are hundreds of years old, with a creek and two waterfalls. It was the kind of forest that used to be all over the Pacific Northwest but just isn't there anymore.

He started building a large house up on a hill overlooking the creek and one of the waterfalls, but a powerful storm came and broke the frame of the building and destroyed it. And then World War II started, and he couldn't get the building supplies and materials he needed because they were all being used in the war effort. By this point, in 1941, my father and mother had gotten married, and they moved into a tiny cabin that he had built earlier than this other house. They lived there without electricity and indoor plumbing for quite a few years. My

brother was born in 1942, and I was born in 1943. My father added on rooms as we were born and carried up buckets of water from the creek for our water.

ASPATURIAN: Where is your family from originally? What is the family background?

LA BELLE: My father's family was originally from Alsace Lorraine, on the French-German border that has moved for centuries between being governed by France and Germany. When the Germans were in power, my family would use the name Liebel, and when the French were in charge, they would change it back to La Belle and so on. I don't think that they were political [laughter]; I think that they just wanted to stay on the right side of authority. And at the time they came to the U.S., probably in the early 1880s, the name was La Belle— sometimes with an "e" on the end, and sometimes without. I've seen it both ways. On my birth certificate it does appear with an "e."

My father's parents had come to Olympia from Minnesota. His mother was forty, and his father was forty-one when he was born, which was late for those times, and they had no other children. My father's father died when he was still a young boy, and his mother died when he was in high school. I think one reason he was able to buy the land in Olympia is that he probably had some kind of inheritance. His parents were carnival concessionaires; they had a knife-throw with a traveling carnival. They only worked four months a year. Clearly my father's father was very savvy. They kept going back to the same places around the country, and he always put money in the banks in those places. He bought stock very early in railroads, and we still have some of it. But it was clearly a great loss for my father to have lost both of his parents.

ASPATURIAN: How about your mother's family?

LA BELLE: My mother was born in Teresita, Missouri, in 1915. Her father—my maternal grandfather—was named Carlye Vieth, and Vieth is certainly a very German name. He spoke both English and German and was a high-school teacher, but he died of tuberculosis a few days after my mother was born. He was only 21. His wife—my grandmother—was named Jennie. I'm named after my grandmother and my father because my father was named Joy. My grandmother was Jennie Cooper, and her father was Lemuel Cooper. They were from Iowa originally. So the Midwest was sort of the area of origin there. Her mother's last name was

Nott, Loraine Nott. My grandmother was the eighth child among ten children. There were three boys and seven girls. Only five of them—all girls—made it beyond childhood. All of the boys died. So my grandmother was the second youngest of five sisters. It sounds like *Pride and Prejudice*, with five superfluous girls all having to be married off. When I was growing up, my mother's mother was my only living grandparent. So I only had my maternal grandmother. I had no aunts or uncles or cousins.

ASPATURIAN: What did your parents do professionally?

My mother was a high-school English teacher for many years but not while I was growing up. My father and mother met in high school, although he was too shy to speak to her for a couple of years. Then, in about 1934, my mother went on to college at the University of Washington. She took a lot of English courses, but her degree was actually in psychology.

ASPATURIAN: It wasn't that common in those days for a woman to go to college.

LA BELLE: Yes it wasn't. In fact she had taken an extra year in high school because my grandmother didn't think she could afford to go to college, but then something called a co-op where girls could live together opened at the University of Washington. It was cheaper than the dorm, so my mother was able to go there. My father did not. He was a brilliant man in his own way but not in terms of having any advanced education. He did what he did with his hands, and it was brilliant what he could do. He eventually built five dwellings in the woods, each time only clearing as much as was absolutely necessary to construct a house. And whenever Daddy added a room, it never looked added on. He could build things organically so that these houses were beautiful, designed so that the green light of the forest would flow into all of them. He cared very much about windows. Everything he constructed was of glass and wood, and he came to this on his own. He had never heard of Frank Lloyd Wright. He had never heard of Greene and Greene.

ASPATURIAN: He never looked into a credential in architecture?

LA BELLE: No, and he never referred to himself that way, although he designed all these houses. As far as he was concerned, an architect was someone who had a degree in architecture. He

never even called himself a craftsman. He never called himself anything. He just did what he did. He was a genius at building things.

ASPATURIAN: What did he do for a living?

LA BELLE: When my parents first moved out there, he didn't do anything. At first, he and Mama thought they would raise silver mink—this would be a sure way to make a fortune. So Daddy built these beautiful spacious cages for the dear little silver mink up in the woods. And they fed them and watered them every day; and of course when it was time to pelt them they couldn't bear to and they let them all go. For decades afterward, you would still occasionally see a lovely little lithe-bodied silver mink dashing through the woods, because of course they multiplied. I haven't seen one for a long time, though. That story is typical of my parents, and my sister has inherited all of that love for creatures. I haven't quite, but I thought it was very nice.

When I was born in 1943, my father was working at the boat works in Olympia. He did work at Fort Lewis Motor Base, a vehicle repair plant, during the war so that he was involved, but he was never drafted. First they were drafting single men and he was married; then men without children, but he had one child; then married men with one child, and he had two children; and then fortunately the war was over. Afterward, he became a meter reader for the local light and power company. Most meter readers' goal is to be promoted into an office job, but my father never wanted to be promoted because he wanted to be outdoors. He used a pedometer to keep track of how much he walked, and when he figured that he'd done the equivalent of walking around the world twice—50,000 miles—he retired. And then he was able to really devote himself full time to his love, which was working on our property and building houses. Things were always having to be repaired. He built beautiful steps to our two waterfalls, and after they were taken out by a big storm, he built beautiful bridges. I'm very sad to say that this past winter [2007–08], the last incredible bridge that he built before he died was totally wiped out.

ASPATURIAN: It sounds like you grew up in quite a creative environment, characterized by your father's avocation. How did your mother fit in to all this?

LA BELLE: It was a wonderful combination. It was a world of the woods with my father, and with my mother, a world of words. My brother, Jan, and I were very close in age—he was only a year older than I. When we were very small, I don't think our parents always quite knew where we were coming from because we actually had our own language as many twins do. The two of us spent so much of our childhood just roaming around outdoors. I'm surprised we never got hurt because we scrambled up and down the waterfalls all day. And there were these massive trees. From the time I was very small, I think I spent most of my time sort of grubbing around in pools full of periwinkles and fish and stones and snails and slugs. Jan and I could spend whole days studying decaying logs and what was living in them. It was a fascinating world, an absolutely beautiful place.

Indoors, my mother would read to us. One of my very earliest memories is of sitting down beside her, with Jan on her other side, under a kerosene lamp because we didn't have any electricity yet, and she would be reading nursery rhymes and fairy tales. She had a wonderful melodious voice. It was very expressive, too expressive almost. I remember that when she read *Little Black Sambo*, which I liked very much, she would growl ferociously when the tigers say, "Little Black Sambo, I'm going to eat you up." My brother would be so terrified that tigers were surrounding the house at night that he couldn't sleep. My father would have to take a shotgun out and actually fire it into the dark that so my brother could sleep. However, I think that even at a very early age, I realized that the tigers lived at one level of fiction and that I lived at another level. I was not nearly so interested in the tigers as I was interested in the shapes of the words and the shapes of the phrases.

ASPATURIAN: You recall this as a specific response from an early age?

LA BELLE: Yes. I never said anything to my older brother but I remember thinking, there are no tigers but what about Sambo's little purple slippers "with crimson soles and crimson linings"? So beautiful! That's what I liked. In fact I'm still looking for some slippers like that. But doesn't it sound lovely? It was those phrases—where the butter was called *ghee* and if the tigers ran around and around enough, they turned into *ghee*. After that, whenever Jan and I ate pancakes, we would want "ghee" on them.

ASPATURIAN: So you were caught early by the quality of the language. Do you recall how old you were?

LA BELLE: It seems as if it was always there. I started memorizing poems at an early age. I loved nursery rhymes very early, and I didn't like the soothing lullaby nursery rhymes. I didn't like "Rockabye baby/Thy cradle is green/Father's a nobleman/Mother's a queen." I liked the sort of disruptive disturbing counterpoints to those. "Jumbo had a baby/All dressed in green/Jumbo didn't like it/Sent it to the queen/The queen didn't like it/Because it was so fat/Cut it into slices/And gave it to the cat." My mother also read us the true fairy tales. She didn't read us the Disney fairy tales; she read the real ones—from the Brothers Grimm. So we heard the version of *Cinderella* where the stepsisters cut off parts of their feet to fit into slippers and where birds peck out their eyes at the end. She also read us William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* very early and all kinds of stories. I particularly liked the *Just So* stories because they always began "Once Upon a Time, oh my best beloved," and I just loved the way she said "my best beloved." *The Wind in the Willows* was a book that both my brother and I related to very strongly because just as the Water Rat says that he lives "by and with and on and in" the river, we felt that we lived with and by and on and in the creek. And Mole said that the river chattered to him and told him stories, and we felt that the falls and the streams where we lived told us stories. And anytime she read us a book, we would act it out. If she read *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*, we would put saucepans on our heads and pretend to be Tweedledee and Tweedledum and fight with umbrellas as if they were swords, screaming "My nice new rattle!" However my brother eventually discovered that there were boys who could run faster and play more, and I got sort of left out. My grandmother—my mother's mother—read to me a great deal too. She came to live with us, and one of my very early memories, when I was maybe three years old, is of Daddy building her own house for her, cantilevered over a waterfall. So beautiful! That's the house I intend to retire to. She paid him \$5,000 to build the whole thing and to pay for all of the materials too. I remember that my brother and I were riding our tricycles, and somehow we got them up on the scaffolding. To this day, I don't know how we did it. My parents were looking out the window of our house and there they saw the two of us—these two little kids up on the scaffolding in our tricycles over a 90-foot ravine. And they couldn't yell at us because if we

panicked, we might fall. We had no idea we were in any kind of danger. I'm sure it was my brother's idea. I wasn't adventuresome in that way.

Unlike my mother who enjoyed lyric poetry, my grandmother, having been born in the 1890s, liked narrative poems—Poe, Longfellow. So she read us “Hiawatha,” “The Highwayman,” and “Annabel Lee.”

ASPATURIAN: Epics and ballads.

LA BELLE: “The Cremation of Sam McGee.” Yes ballads and epics. She read us all of the Oz books too. My mother thought they weren't quite high-level enough to count as literature. My favorite one was *Ozma of Oz*. I really liked the princess in there, Princess Langwidere, who had thirty heads, one for each day of the month. She could put one on as it suited her, and all her walls were made of polished silver—just one solid mirror. I like to think that that was my first influence for eventually writing my book *Herself Beheld*, on how women in literature perceive and interact with their reflected images. I was just fascinated by her. She only had this one white dress, but she had all these different heads, and each one had its own personality.

So in a way it was a very literary childhood. I was eager to go to school because we were so isolated—the nearest neighbors were at least a half a mile away. I was also excited about the school's name, which was Griffin Grade School. I thought that was a wonderful name because I loved mythological creatures. We actually had two large wrought-iron griffin andirons in our home. And in April of 1949, I remember sitting at the kitchen table across from my father when my soup bowl started dancing. I was so excited. I looked across at Daddy because I wanted him to see that my bowl was dancing, and I saw him leaping across the table at me. It was the great Olympia Earthquake of 1949. It was a 7.1 quake, and I certainly didn't think then that I would end up working where the Richter scale came into being. But one of our griffin andirons, which sat on a ledge over my head, had started to fall and Daddy was leaping to grab it before it fell on me. Even then, somehow, I felt that the idea of a child killed by griffin would have almost been worth it. But he caught it before that happened, and we went back to eating our soup. At that time, my brother was at a school in town, and it never occurred to my parents to go into town and get him after the quake. They left him there all day, and when they went in to get him at four o'clock, all the other parents had already come and collected their children, because of course all

sorts of things had broken downtown—the capitol building was damaged and so on. Poor Jan had been sitting there in the swing, alone nearly all day. No teacher had stayed there with him! Nowadays, a teacher would never leave some poor six-year-old on his own. And he could hold that over my parents for years, saying, “Remember when you...” [Laughter]

So after that, we went to this country school named Griffin. It was very small—only about seven classes in the entire school. I didn’t like it at all because I found out that I didn’t like children. They weren’t rational. They would hit you for no apparent reason. I was used to being around only adults except for my brother, and he didn’t hit me. I wasn’t used to things like the way they would take the gray crayon you’d been saving to color your elephant with and break it. And then the books were very disappointing. These were the “Dick, Jane, and Sally” days, and I found out very soon there was no storyline to these books. I mean, there was Dick and Jane and Spot the dog, and they had a cat named Puff, and it was very boring. Mama had already read us T. S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*. Cats were supposed to be named Rum Tum Tugger, Jellylorum, and Rumpeteazer. Puff? I was supposed to read about Puff? And I had already learned to read before I went to school.

ASPATURIAN: That would make a difference. Did that result in your being accelerated?

LA BELLE: It did. I skipped second grade. I didn’t skip first grade because that was when you had to learn to write, even though I thought that was very boring. To spend hours not even doing letters, which I already could do, but doing ovals. Plus the teacher read very poor poems to us that we sometime wrote out—“‘Come little leaves,’ said the wind one day.” If you were brought up reading even *Mother Goose*, these poems sounded really bad; but I think I was probably a rather obnoxious child in the first grade. I liked the teacher, though. She taught phonics, which was good.

I started reading on my own somewhere between age three and four. I had a book—a great book—called *Bouncing Bear*, and I just suddenly figured out how the little black squiggles and sounds connected. “This is a chair. This is a bear. The bear is bouncing on the chair.” I remember reading it aloud. My mother thought I had just memorized it. Then my grandmother asked me to read the same words in other texts, and I could still read them, so they realized I could genuinely read.

I think I would have loved *The Cat in the Hat*. But I was born too early. I mean that book had great rhythms and so on, whereas Dick and Jane were disappointing. The teacher also kept a large chart on the wall and, if a child caught another child making a grammatical error, you could report it, and the child making the mistake would get a black mark. I loved grammar, but I never reported anyone because I didn't care. But another student reported me for saying "ain't," and I was so upset. I explained to the teacher I did not say "ain't." I was quoting a limerick by Edward Lear, where a character in the limerick says "ain't." It was, "There was an Old Man in a boat/Who said, 'I'm afloat, I'm afloat!'/When they said, 'No! you ain't!'/He was ready to faint/That unhappy Old Man in a boat." That was not the same thing as saying "ain't." And she would not remove this blot from my chart! And I remember going home and thinking, "I will get my mother to come back in with me before the day is over." I was six. Of course when I got home, my mother was able to make me laugh at it and to say, you know, this is not going to destroy your life. She was so good at that. I had gotten so upset, and she made me see it didn't matter. My brother and I stayed at that very small grade school until we got to the seventh grade. In the meantime, my sister was born. I had asked for a sister every birthday and every Christmas, and when I was nine, I got her! I was so happy, and my parents allowed me to believe that it was all my doing, and they let me name her.

I named her Jinx. I didn't connect the word with anything bad. I think I was thinking "hi-jinks" in the sense of "frolic," and I think I probably also saw in *Life* magazine that there was a very beautiful top model named Jinx Falkenburg, whose brother had won Wimbledon or something. That was lots of fun, but Jinx was never interested in reading or in academics, and she would stay home from school if the dog was going to have puppies or if the cat was going to have kittens, and our cats had kittens at alarming rates. She would stay home to help them. I felt that cats had been having kittens for years without any help, but Jinx stayed home for every occasion. And now she lives in Montana with cats and dogs and parrots and peacocks and goats and wounded greyhounds. So it's all so hard-wired. I think it really is.

I was about to enter the seventh grade and my brother the eighth when my father came home one day and said, "We're going to California for a year. I cannot take the rain anymore. Just for a year." So we moved down to San Diego. It was a very difficult year because Jan and I suddenly were in a *large* junior high school. We were used to having one teacher all day and 15 kids in the class. Also, my mother had decided to use this as an opportunity to get her teaching

certificate. It had been wonderful to have her home all the time that we were growing up, but I think by then she had realized that it would be impossible to put three kids through college on one salary.

My father had brought us down that summer. He had rented this furnished house, which was just horrid. Suddenly we were surrounded by strangers, and it really was a neighborhood where you could put your hand out the window and practically touch the walls of the houses next door. We didn't know anyone, and we certainly didn't have very much money, but we hadn't realized that before because we'd lived in the woods with other kids who lived in the country. My father left us, intending to bring back our bicycles and a few other things from Olympia. He got up there, and there was a terrible storm. In both our house and my grandmother's, the pipes froze and burst, and so Daddy was up there for two months dealing with all this before he could come back to San Diego.

So now our mother was trying to go to school full time, with no money and two children in junior high school who didn't know what they were supposed to be doing there. Jinx, who was three at the time but already had a mind of her own, was refusing to go to the day care center, and of course the neighbors probably thought, Not only does this woman not have a husband, she never had one. Jan and I would be up all night listening to the parents on both sides of us argue and fight. We had never heard anything like this. We had no idea that mothers and fathers fought with each other, so we were just fascinated. But the amazing thing was that while I had been terrified about going to this intimidating new school, it turned out that our little nothing country school was way ahead of them in the basic subjects, like English and math. My brother, who is smart but not studious, never had to open a book all year. We thought we'd be behind, and it was exactly the opposite. Of course there were other subjects like art and music appreciation and home economics that I hadn't taken and which were suddenly part of the curriculum. My art improved considerably after my father got back. I remember my teacher saying, "It's amazing how much better your projects have gotten." I said, "Well, you've been so inspiring." [Laughter] Thank heavens my father got back when he did, because I couldn't do anything. He would look at my projects and say, "Why don't you change this, why don't you move this over here?" and so on. So it was a hard year, but also a year that was really very good in many ways.

ASPATURIAN: When did you decide that you were going to make literature your subject in college?

LA BELLE: I think I probably always thought that I would. I don't know that I thought I would be a professor. I probably thought that I would teach high-school English like my mother. And I think that would have been the case if I had not taken an education course in my freshman year of college that made me think it would be easier to get a PhD than to ever take another course in education because it was so deadly dull. I wanted just to take literature courses, and teachers often took more education courses than they took literature.

ASPATURIAN: Did you in fact move back to Washington after your year in San Diego?

LA BELLE: Yes. I came back, finished up the eighth grade, and then went to Olympia High School, which was a great school, located right across from the capitol building. It had been built in 1919, and my parents had gone to it. It was an impressive high school, and I took the usual college-prep courses.

ASPATURIAN: Were you the sort of high school kid who walked off with the literary prizes?

LA BELLE: I don't recall there were any literary prizes. I did give the valedictory address, but I wasn't necessarily the valedictorian. There was no one valedictorian—just the top ten students at the school. The speeches were given by two students. One was chosen by the students, and you can bet that was not I, and one was chosen by the faculty. And I tend to think it was more because they loved my mother, who was the senior English teacher there; but it may also have had something to do with the fact that I had taken debate classes. In fact I was on the boys' debate team because, if your debating partner was a boy, you got to debate with the men as opposed to the women. I only joined the debate team because I wanted to do oral interpretation and at that time you had to debate in order to do it. I was very annoyed that when my sister was in high school ten years later, you could just go into oral interp if you wanted to without having to take debate. So I did that and I also had four years of Latin. I worked terribly hard in high school—I mean day and night—because I wanted to go to a really good college, and I applied to the Seven Sisters. I no longer remember, but I think I was accepted at three of them.

You applied en masse at the time. I know one of the ones that accepted me was Vassar, and I was so excited. I said I'm going to go to Vassar because Edna St. Vincent Millay went to Vassar, and she had written the poem "Renaissance" when she was twenty. She hadn't gone to Vassar yet at the time.

I don't know if I think as highly of Millay now as when I was twenty. I remember that the poet Theodore Roethke called her "The Oh God the Pain Girl." But I think that's a little harsh. I did read Judith Thurman's biography of her. But she was so wildly popular in her time that there had to be a sort of backlash. She was good.

ASPATURIAN: So it sounds like in high school you developed an interest in certain poets as role models one of whom would have been Millay.

LA BELLE: I don't know if I thought of them as role models. I just was amazed that most of the poets I had read were not people who were alive. I mean I had been brought up on Keats and Shelley and Wordsworth and Coleridge and Hardy. I really hadn't studied contemporary poetry and not even that much modern poetry. In fact I even remember that my mother and I pronounced Yeats as "Yeets," because we thought it was pronounced like Keats, and they weren't teaching Yeats anywhere. One day in high school, I remember, my mother took me aside and said, "Don't tell anyone but it's 'Yates,' we've been saying it wrong." There was a little poem we would recite, which went, "There are few more distressing fates/Than growing old along with Yeats." That was our way of remembering the right pronunciation.

I wanted desperately to go to Vassar, and my parents sat me down and said, "You have a brother and a sister, and we can either send you to Vassar, or all three of you to college at someplace that we can afford." And I wanted to say, "Mortgage the house!" but what could I do? It was very hard because I had worked so hard. And my brother, who was a year older, hadn't even wanted to go to college, and my parents had said, "If you don't want to go, that's fine." They didn't try to push him, which was very smart. So he worked in a rope factory for the first year out of high school and then came back and said, "I want to go to college," and then he went. And I felt that when her turn came, my sister would want to go if only because it would be fun. So I think it was the only two weeks of my whole life that I was bitterly disappointed, but I now think I probably would have been very miserable back in Poughkeepsie. I was not a very

sophisticated girl. Very lonesome, probably. I don't know. There's no way of knowing. But my mother had gone to the University of Washington, and my parents said, "It's not where you go, it's the effort you put in, etc. etc." It did turn out to be a wonderful school and I had wonderful teachers. That is where I got to study eventually with Theodore Roethke.

ASPATURIAN: When I did the Baker's Dozen interview with you [for the alumni quarterly, *Caltech News*], you mentioned that you entered the University of Washington planning to be a poet.

LA BELLE: I thought I would be. Yes. Well once I found out that Roethke taught there I wanted to be in his class, but of course he didn't take freshmen. You had to take a poetry course and then be recommended to submit poems to be in Roethke's class. There were also classes taught by two really good Northwest poets, Nelson Bentley and David Wagoner, who was the editor of *Poetry Northwest*, and is still alive and wonderful. So I took those classes first. They recommended me for Roethke's course, and you had to submit three poems to get into it. Most of the students in it were seniors or graduate students; I got in when I was a sophomore.

Roethke kept me after class one day and said, "Do you know why I let you in my class?" And well, sure. I thought he was going to say because I knew that you were going to become the next Emily Dickinson. He said, "Your poems were not very good but I liked your name." [Laughter] I didn't care, I was so happy to be there. I wasn't great, and I worked very hard. And he was a formal teacher, so you wrote a sestina. You wrote a villanelle. You wrote a sonnet. I sat next to a girl named Theresa Bond whose poems were always better than mine. [She became the well known poet Tess Gallagher.—JLB] We were both in his last class before he died in a swimming pool on Bainbridge Island that summer. August 1, 1963.

ASPATURIAN: Was it an accident? Was he drunk?

LA BELLE: No, he was visiting some friends. He hadn't been drinking, but he had just put a pitcher of mint juleps in the icebox in the house. He came out to the pool. The mother and daughter were talking and looked over and saw that he was floating face downward.

ASPATURIAN: Heart attack?

LA BELLE: Yes. I thought at the time it was terrible, but I also thought that well, he lived a full, full life. He was fifty-five. [Laughter] You don't realize at that age.

ASPATURIAN: What was Roethke like? What were your impressions?

LA BELLE: He was heavysset. Skinny legs, but a large head. People often said he looked like a bear. But you know he played tennis and swam. He did drink and he certainly had had depression. So that was very sad, a disappointment. It was only a few months before the president was killed in Dallas. Kennedy had actually spoken at the university in '62, on November 16.

ASPATURIAN: Did you attend the talk?

LA BELLE: Yes I did.

But they did bring in wonderful people to fill the Roethke Chair after Roethke died. They brought in Henry Reed, the English poet who was a wonderful teacher, and by that point I was beginning to see that I was more interested in Henry Reed's poetry and so on than I was in writing what I didn't think was great poetry. I began taking more and more analysis courses, and I started to get more interested also in Roethke's poetry, especially given that I had been in his class.

ASPATURIAN: Did you also just start to feel that you had an aptitude and sense for the analysis that did not flow so easily for you when you were actually writing poetry?

LA BELLE: Yes I think that was true. I think I was always interested in analyzing the stories and other forms of literature that were read to me and that I read and in making connections between stories and listening to echoes in stories and in poems.

ASPATURIAN: And you suddenly realized that there was a name for this and a vocation that went along with it.

LA BELLE: Yes. Also I think it's harder to write poetry when you're young if you've been brought up like a little giraffe eating just from the top branches of the trees. I mean I would write something and think, "Well that isn't any good. That doesn't sound like Thomas Hardy, e. e. cummings, or D. H. Lawrence, so to heck with it." Whereas some students came in just perfectly innocent of anything out there but their own wonderful voices. I'm afraid I was always consciously trying to be poetic or something. And then they brought in another wonderful poet—Vernon Watkins, a Welshman and Dylan Thomas's dear friend. And then *he* died at the University of Washington, playing tennis at sixty-one. At that point I think visiting poets might have wanted to quit coming.

But I enjoyed the university so much. It was wonderful to be able to go home sometimes on the weekends—to take the Greyhound bus down to Olympia, and be back in the woods again. Also I did not type very well, whereas my grandmother could type faster than I could talk. I would come home sometimes and dictate my papers and she would type them. It was almost faster than doing it myself, even with the Greyhound bus.

I lived in a sorority during the time I was at Washington. I didn't really ever consider myself the sorority type but it didn't cost any more than the dorms. It was very safe and I loved the structure. There were three hours of study hall every night when you weren't supposed to speak, while in the dorms it could get noisy. I'm not sure my sorority sisters loved me. To stay in the sorority you had to maintain a certain grade average, so I think they needed me for that. And it was fascinating to see that the young women would type their boyfriends' papers before they would do their own. Sometimes they would even write their boyfriends' papers—I just couldn't believe that anyone would do that, or that if they had a test the next day, they would still play bridge until midnight. I'm afraid I was still very grade-conscious. I was very disappointed that physical education grades counted at the University of Washington because that meant there was no way I could graduate with a 4.0 GPA. I also found out that with PE people took things they were already good at. I had thought it would be nice to learn tennis, but I got to class the first day and discovered that everyone else there was practically on the Wimbledon team.

So I took social dance. I didn't know how to dance, and I thought that it would be nice to learn. You were assigned a partner the first day, and of course I'm petite, and my partner was short. He was very sweet and very shy—a nice young man—and on the day before the final exam he committed suicide. It was so sad. I didn't know him very well. Then I had to do the

final exam alone. I could dance great on paper, but I'm not very good with music. He would always whisper, "This is the samba," so at least I'd sort of know what steps I was supposed to be doing. But now, I had to do it on my own and I got an F on the test. But I felt so bad about his death that I called up either his fraternity or a dorm—I can't remember which it was any more—and said, Is there going to be a memorial service or something? He lived in some little town near Everett, and the people I talked to said they weren't going, and I said, well somebody should go. So I went. I got on a bus and went to this memorial service and afterwards I talked to his parents, and said I'm a friend of Bob's and within 15 minutes of their introducing me to people, I had gone from being Bob's friend to being Bob's girlfriend to being Bob's fiancée. And his family was so happy, and they said, "Oh, we knew it was an overdose. We knew he would never do that, now that we see his fiancée is right here. He had this beautiful future, it was just an accident." It was like being in some awful movie. But I didn't think that I should disabuse them because it gave them some comfort. They thought it was so nice that here was this little short girl, who was their son's fiancée. So that was my physical education adventure.

JENIJOY LA BELLE**SESSION 2****March 2, 2008**

ASPATURIAN: Last time, we stopped just as you were wrapping up your undergraduate career.

LA BELLE: So let's finish that. I graduated from the University of Washington in 1965 with a BA *cum laude* in English. By then I'd known for quite a while that I wished to spend the rest of my days reading and analyzing and teaching literature. At some point in my senior year, a dean in the English department called me in and asked me what my plans were. I said I wanted to go to graduate school, and he asked if I had decided where, and I said I'd been thinking about the University of Chicago. I had gone to visit, but the cold wind blowing off Lake Michigan made me think that it might not be the best place, although I attended some classes and I really liked it.

And then this dean told me about a brand new branch of the University of California that had opened five years earlier, in 1960, in San Diego—La Jolla, really. That immediately sounded very appealing, because I had not only lived in San Diego for a year, but had also spent parts of lots of summers there and in La Jolla with my parents. UCSD had also managed to sort of buy out Ohio State's English department. I think that what must have happened is that on some beautiful sunny week, they invited them all to La Jolla, and once those Ohio State people saw a small community with all the beaches and palm-lined streets, it was an offer they couldn't refuse.

There really was a wonderful group of literature professors there, including Roy Harvey Pearce, the great Americanist, and Andrew Wright, the Victorian specialist. You know the school was built around the Scripps Institute—in some ways it was like Caltech, with students who were primarily interested in science, but it had a graduate department in English. The dean also told me that the University of Washington English department was going to nominate me for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. I'd never even heard of this, but he said it would pay for the first year of graduate school, and I knew that would be a big help too. So I was very excited about that possibility, and I remember being very, very nervous on the day of the fellowship interview.

It was a whole panel of professors appointed by the foundation, but not from my school, and it was a room of all males except for me, waiting for this interview. I had stolen some of my roommate's *Jungle Gardenia* perfume to put on before I went, thinking that if all else failed, that would be irresistible. Even today when I smell the scent of gardenias I get nervous.

The Woodrow Wilson Foundation had been founded in 1945 to ensure that “young men” would be able to have lives of scholarship and teaching. It was only in the '50s they started including women, but even then the fellowships were primarily for male seniors. I later read about another woman who was trying for a fellowship the same year I was, and indeed got one. She was a senior at Cornell, and when she went for her interview, someone there said to her, “No, this is the Woodrow Wilson interview suite. The hairdressers' convention is down the hall.” I think that's a wonderful anecdote. Anyway I did not experience anything like that, but I did blurt out near the end of the interview that I was a serious scholar and if they would just give me the fellowship I would never marry.

And I was fortunate enough to get one of the fellowships, and therefore I went to UCSD. I went down in early August because I wanted to take a brush-up French class. In those days to get a doctorate, you had to pass very rigorous exams in at least two foreign languages, and I thought I'd get the French out of the way. I hadn't studied Latin since high school, so I knew I would have to brush up on those four years of Latin and then take a little more. My parents took me down, but they sent all of my books and clothes by truck and while I was waiting for them to arrive, the Watts Riots broke out on August 11. And so all my clothes and books were stuck in a warehouse for three weeks in Los Angeles, and all I had with me were shorts and bathing suits and one denim dress that I wore for the first three weeks of French class because it was the only dress that I had. On the first day of that class, I met Robert Essick, who was the only other Woodrow Wilson Fellow in all of UCSD in the entering graduate class of UCSD. He had spent his first three years at Williams College, and then he got terrible mononucleosis, came home to Los Angeles, and ended up spending his last year at UCLA. We'd already been sent each other's names by the Woodrow Wilson people—who needs computer dating when you can be introduced by the 28th president of the United States? So that was the beginning of a very long friendship and love that remain to this day.

This was followed by three years of preparing for the oral exams—everything from the Finnesburgh Fight to the Ginsburg Howl, as we used to say.

ASPATURIAN: At what point did you decide that you were going to focus on poetry?

LA BELLE: I think that the longstanding interest I had in poetry was strengthened while I was an undergrad and was certainly further reinforced in graduate school. I was studying sixteenth and seventeenth century poetry in particular, although I tried to cover everything, and that moved me into writing my thesis about Roethke.

My thesis topic was “Theodore Roethke’s Invention of His Cultural Tradition.” Thesis titles tend to have to have as many polysyllabic words in them as possible. It was partly chosen because I wanted to work under Roy Harvey Pearce, who was such a distinguished scholar and had written a wonderful book called *The Continuity of American Poetry*, and partly because there hadn’t been that much written yet on Roethke, and that seemed exciting to me. There was also the fact that Roethke had died in ’63—this was by now ’68—and while it sounds awful to say, that was a good thing from a scholarly standpoint in the sense that it meant the canon was complete. It was interesting—he’d been considered a rather isolated sensibility, and there was this critical perception that his poetic imagery somehow came out of these great greenhouses that his father ran in Saginaw, Michigan. But I had been reading such a range of poetry ever since I was first introduced to Roethke’s poems as an undergraduate, and I started hearing all these literary echoes in his own work. I wanted to show that his floral “establishment” really was rooted in his great predecessors, such as Dante, Donne, Dickinson, Yeats, Eliot, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Roethke was a person who struggled very much with the past and the poetic tradition, and poetry is never written *in vacuo*. And I think what I ultimately showed in my thesis was that almost every one of his poems contains echoes of some other poet.

But the good news also is that the year before I began writing my thesis, I was also given a Woodrow Wilson dissertation grant. That meant that I didn’t have to earn money by teaching, and so I was able to sort of beat the statistical odds and get my PhD within four years.. I found out later that the Woodrow Wilson newsletter had published a limerick they had written to me that went “Jenijoy, La Belle de La Jolla!/We joy at the chance to deploy ya’—/To aid and abet ya’—/In a thesis on Roethka’—/And encourage someone to employ y’a’.” I thought it was a wonderful limerick. It was by Leon Howard, who had written on Melville. I didn’t know him, but I thought it was funny.

So that fall of '68 and winter of '69 I went on a job search. I went where all job searchers in my field go—to the MLA [Modern Language Association] annual meeting, which was in New York that year. It's a big convention for scholars in language and literature that mostly consists of interminable scholarly talks and prearranged interviews with recruiting universities. Caltech wasn't there that year—smaller schools sometimes would rather just put ads in the *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and invite candidates that they like to visit their school. But I had several other interviews there.

One of the problems for me there was that I am and always have been extremely claustrophobic, so I wouldn't ride in elevators. These job interviews would be on the fortieth floor of some hotel in New York, and I'd be scrambling up the emergency fire stairs. In one case I appeared for the interview coming through a window from the fire escape. I do not think that got me a job offer, but I did have an offer from the University of Washington.

The chairman of the English department there was Robert B. Heilman, who was chairman for 20 years. I hadn't taken any classes from him, and I think he was interested in me because my dissertation was on Roethke. Roethke had been at the school since '47, and I believe Heilman had started there at about the same time, and as chairman he had protected Roethke a good deal. Roethke would have these manic periods of great depression and great elation, and somehow this information got to the trustees and to various state representatives in Olympia and created pressure to fire him. Heilman protected him and wrote letters saying what a valuable person he was and how the entire school of Northwest Poetry had been built up around Roethke, who had won the Pulitzer Prize and the Bollingen Prize and all these other prizes. I was a great admirer of Heilman's too. I still use his book *Magic in the Web* when I teach *Othello*.

So he made me a job offer and said that I had two weeks to give them an answer. In the meantime, when I got back from New York, there was a letter from Caltech, inviting me to come for an interview with Hallett Smith, the humanities department chair.

ASPATURIAN: Did you know anything about Caltech or its English department?

LA BELLE: I knew the name Hallett Smith, but nothing about Caltech. Smith was one of the world's great Elizabethan scholars. For anyone who's studied that period, he taught a generation

much of what we feel, not just what we know, about Elizabethan poetry. So I actually knew who he was, but that was all I knew.

But Bob Essick had been brought up in Los Angeles, and his father had gone to Caltech in 1917 and 1918 when it was still Throop Polytechnic Institute. And then he went on to MIT and finished college there, but he continued to be a supporter of Caltech all of his life. So Bob had known about Caltech from an early age. He was as brilliant in science as he was in literature, and he had gone to lectures, by Feynman among others, at Caltech while he was in high school. So he knew of the school's great prestige, and he said, "This is a wonderful opportunity; you have to go for the interview." And, he told me it was within walking distance of the Huntington Library. We were already readers there because, when we were writing our dissertations, the professor brought us up from San Diego—if you were a doctoral candidate you could become a reader. So when I heard first that Hallett was there, and then that it was near the Huntington, that was all I had to know. So I agreed to meet Hallett at the Athenaeum.

I will never forget that interview. I remember walking into that Greco-Roman entrance hall and then meeting Hallett, this man whom I had revered for so long. He took me into the magnificent dining room, and I looked up and saw that beamed ceiling, and then we sat down at this table where the other senior professors were and I really felt I was at the Round Table at the Algonquin Club. I mean there was Hallett and there was dashing gregarious David Smith, and urbane Oscar Mandel, and Kent Clark with his sharp wit and Beach Langston with his wonderful South Carolinian drawl and there I was, little Dorothy Parker, except without the talent.

[Laughter] It was wonderful!

ASPATURIAN: Did you happen to glance around the Ath and notice that you were perhaps practically the only woman sitting in it?

LA BELLE: No. That really did not register. I was with this dazzling group of men, and looking back, it's all a beautiful blur. I have no idea what we talked about. I'm sure they asked about my dissertation, which I'm sure wasn't finished yet, and about my scholarly work, but I really don't remember. Afterward, Hallett walked me around the glorious campus and showed me Dabney Hall. Of course I didn't realize how soon we'd be out of Dabney and into Baxter, but then, finally, a few years ago, I got to come back to it.

And then Hallett left and said, “You’ll hear something from us one way or another within a few weeks.” But I only had a few days left before I had to give the U of Washington a reply. Theirs was a very tempting offer. I loved the U of Washington, and I would have been near my parents. I didn’t know what to do. I called them up and asked if I could have an extension. They said no. So I took the chance, and turned them down. I realized I might end up with neither Caltech nor Washington—and the other offers were from places that I didn’t really want to go to. One was from the University of Hawaii—I felt all my books would die, turn up their little toes—and another from the University of Texas. They had promised me a car, but I didn’t know how to drive so that didn’t matter. Anyway the letter from Caltech did come, and I was offered the job. I was very, very excited.

I started in the fall of ’69. I had moved late that summer into Pasadena and found a little apartment house on South Chester, called Casa De Rosa. It was next to what was then called the Blue Chip Stamp Store, so I always told people I lived a step beyond redemption. I got all of my towels and stuff from The Blue Chip Stamp Store, with savings stamps. I had to live close to the school because I didn’t drive, and I didn’t learn for quite a few years. I walked to school every day. And even before the academic year started, I was summoned to what was then called the Caltech News Bureau. And I met Graham Berry and Janet Lansburgh, and they told me two things I did not know. One: That the trustees had just voted to admit women the next fall. I had no idea that there were no female undergraduates—no one had mentioned it to me. Two: That I was the first woman hired on the professorial level at Caltech. I had had no idea that there were no female professors.

ASPATURIAN: You had not researched the school?

LA BELLE: They wouldn’t have announced in the Caltech brochure that we have no female professors here. Plus I had seen women in offices when Hallett took me around. It turned out that they were lecturers, but I had no real way of knowing that. So, no, I didn’t have any idea on either of those things.

There is one thing I want to say on this because I would like to set the record straight. I’ve written articles and editorials sometimes about being the first woman on the Caltech faculty, and I have gotten a few angry responses saying that I was not the first female faculty member

here— the eminent mathematician Olga Taussky-Todd was. She certainly should have been, but she wasn't. She came to Caltech in 1957 with her husband, John Todd. He was appointed professor of mathematics and she had a position as a research associate in mathematics and remained so until '71. I wanted to point that out because it has always made me feel bad. I don't know why she wasn't made a professor much earlier. I've heard several things. One is that Caltech had a policy, written or unwritten, that a husband and wife both could not be employed as professors here and so John had the professorship. I've also read that she wasn't sure she really wanted to teach, and therefore that she preferred the research position. Anyway, she should not have had to wait fourteen years to become a professor, but that's what happened. In 1971 she was indeed and quite rightly the first woman at Caltech to be appointed a full professor with tenure. And now just to fast-forward to 1979 when I became an associate professor, I was at that time the only tenured woman on the active faculty. Once again people say, well, Olga Todd was there, but she wasn't. She was already retired as professor emeritus in the fall of '77, and our other female professors came later—Eleanor Searle later in 1979, Mary Kennedy in 1981, and so on.

ASPATURIAN: When the News Bureau laid this information about your unique status on you, were they planning to make a story out of it?

LA BELLE: Yes, they said they wanted to do a story, and would I do that? I said yes, that would be fun, and there followed this flurry of publicity. It started with the Pasadena *Star News* and then the *LA Times* and pretty soon it was all over the country.

ASPATURIAN: What was the tone of the publicity?

LA BELLE: Oh dear. I had thought that it would be a chance for me to talk about how the school now had an open-door policy for women. I was looking through some clippings in preparation for these interviews, and I unearthed a story from the *LA Times* quoting our then-president Harold Brown as saying that the admission of undergraduate women would “improve the aesthetic climate” and would not “dilute the strength of Caltech's attention to science and technology.” Thanks, Harold.

The stories about me were not what I had hoped. I don't even like to talk about them now because it sounds as if I were saying such stupid things. You know, headlines like, "Girl Prof Excites All-Male Campus," or, "Tall Blonde the Rage at Caltech." Here I was, 5 foot 2, mousy hair, so it was all rather silly. Some of the things were okay. I did television news shows and radio programs and that sort of thing.

ASPATURIAN: It sounds like the print media tried to turn you into sort of a sex symbol of the school.

LA BELLE: Yes, and I let it go on longer than I should have, I think.

ASPATURIAN: Did you have control over it?

LA BELLE: At first I did whatever the Caltech News Bureau suggested. And certain things sounded perfectly reasonable. There was going to be a documentary on the way roles for women were changing, and I agreed to be in that. They came and filmed me at the school. When it came out on television, the title was *Women are Revolting*, which could of course mean either that women are rebelling or that women are repulsive. The man who had concocted and directed this was a man named Larry Schiller. No one had heard of him in those days, but he has since made his career getting the literary rights to people who have killed people, such as O. J. Simpson. But I was told he was going to do a documentary.

ASPATURIAN: This was the guy who did the interviews with Gary Gilmore for Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, and wrote *American Tragedy* about the Simpson case?

LA BELLE: Yes, and this was before all that. I remember him as a kind of big burly guy. They shot me walking across the little bridge over Millikan Pond, and they used that in the opening of the program. But what you see is me starting across the bridge, then a hand reaching out and throwing a bra out into the water, and then me continuing across the bridge. All I did was walk across the bridge, but they edited it so that it looked as if I was tossing the bra too. I was teaching a class on Jane Austen at the time, and there I was, looking as if... Oh, it was so

humiliating. But I had no idea they were going to do this, and I couldn't stop that from happening.

ASPATURIAN: Where was this shown?

LA BELLE: On TV. It was a big television show. The full title was *Women Are Revolting: Glamour, Sex, Liberation*. I didn't do anything beyond the first month or so—I stopped after an appearance on *Truth or Consequences*. Graham Berry called me and said they want you to be on *Truth or Consequences*. There's going to be a woman judge, a woman racecar driver, and the first woman professor at Caltech. And there was a panel of contestants and they asked us all questions. And I was unanimously chosen as the racecar driver.

Not that I have anything against racecar drivers, except that I somehow thought that I'd eaten so much poetry that it ran from the corners of my mouth and that people would just *know* this is a woman who has read Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. After that I cancelled or said no to everything else. By that time *Look* magazine had come out with a very large story too.

ASPATURIAN: About you?

LA BELLE: Oh, Yes.

ASPATURIAN: What kind of reception did that meet with on campus?

LA BELLE: I wanted to think that people there had simply ignored the whole thing and that they had better things to do than read *Look* magazine or watch a program called *Women Are Revolting*. But anyone who did see it would think that I was not taking my job very seriously, and that's what I just hated. It didn't look good for Caltech, and it didn't look good for women. If I had it to do it over, I would have never allowed the photographs.

ASPATURIAN: You were very young though.

LA BELLE: I was 25. And I had been Dr. Johnson’s definition of a lexicographer my whole life—a harmless drudge—suddenly thrust into the spotlight. It was exciting, and I got caught up in it.

ASPATURIAN: What were some of your initial impressions of Caltech as an institution and of some your colleagues?

LA BELLE: My colleagues were wonderful. The job-interview luncheon was only an introduction to how wonderful these people were. It was a very different division at that time. For example, there were many more English professors than there are now. There were eleven when I came to Caltech. Now we have six, one of whom is actually a professor of history and literature and doesn’t actually teach very often. Another one usually teaches film, and so literature is not taught the way it used to be. When I began teaching here, we had these wonderful three-term courses. One was a chronological introduction to literature, and another focused on modes of literature—drama, poetry, narrative. I was assigned those right off, both at the same time.

Nowadays, when new faculty are hired, they’re treated pretty gently, and assistant professors especially are given time to work on getting that dissertation made into a book. No one ever teaches more than four classes a year now, and most aren’t even teaching that much. I began by teaching six classes. Today people tend to teach just once a week, one three-hour class. I was teaching two 90-minute classes—one in the morning and one in the afternoon—at least four days a week.

And although I had read all of this stuff, it was still preparation for two different classes every day for nine months. So it would be *Don Quixote* in the morning and Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* in the afternoon, and then *The Misanthrope* in the morning and Donne’s *Anniversaries* in the afternoon. I learned a lot but it was exhausting. And interesting.

ASPATURIAN: You must have realized early on that the students here were different from those you had taught before.

LA BELLE: Yes, but you see I hadn’t really taught very much, and at that time, the UCSD undergraduates were also mostly in science. But these students were brilliant, I saw that right

away. And at that time they often saw literature as a kind of release and relief from their “real” studies. So they had a kind of amateur delight in learning it, which made teaching them a lot of fun. I don’t think it’s quite that way now. And of course they were all males. They were very sweet, those first classes. I can still remember that terrible Sylmar earthquake of 1971 and a whole group of students came down to my home at 6:30 in the morning to see if I was okay. They did just such sweet things.

ASPATURIAN: When we talk to alums from that era, it sounds like so many of them had crushes on you. Were you aware of this?

LA BELLE: They did write my name on things like construction walls. I mean nicely, not bad things, and they made me huge valentines on computers. I know that some of them had crushes. They were wonderful. And that was fun; it was exciting. They were all so bright. They wrote well, even then. But there were days when I was only three pages ahead of them in the material I was supposed to be teaching. In those early days I was also so crammed with knowledge that I think I over-lectured and didn’t allow them to speak enough. I was sort of terrified of silence—if I asked a question and nobody answered it, then I would jump in with the answer. Also I was put on a lot of committees right away. I was put immediately on the faculty housing committee because they wanted to get the accommodations ready for the women the next year. And I remember that at one of the meetings a professor said, “We can’t have bunk beds. Girls don’t sleep in bunk beds.”

And I was too intimidated by his absolute certitude and by fear that my femininity would be called into question to say that I’d slept in a bunk bed all through college. So I didn’t say anything at all. I don’t know what they finally did, but I like to visualize that the girls were each given little pink comforters when they arrived.

ASPATURIAN: What did you glean about attitudes toward women on this virtually monastic campus?

LA BELLE: Certainly those were heady days for women in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, and I would say that Caltech was a little slow to adapt—I mean, look at what dear Harold Brown said about women adding an aesthetic element. When I came, the men here still referred to their

secretaries as girls. I remember hearing them say, “I’ll have my girl call your girl”—that sort of thing. Up to that time, I really hadn’t thought about professors and gender, but as I began thinking back I realized that although the University of Washington is a huge school, I had only had one female professor there as an undergrad and none in graduate school at UCSD. There were other women teaching in my division, but as I got more familiar with it, I realized that they tended to be wives. Mary Zirin, the wife of Hal Zirin, who was a professor of astrophysics, was a lecturer in Russian for a while. David Smith’s wife, Annette, was a lecturer in French. She had a PhD and had been on the tenure track at one of the Claremont colleges before she came to Caltech. Later on, she did become a professor here and did a lot of scholarly work—very, very, very fine scholarship. History professor Robert Rosenstone’s then-wife was a lecturer in French, I believe. So that tended to be how things worked.

ASPATURIAN: So you were the only woman faculty member on the tenure track. Did you have any feelings about that in particular? Did you feel isolated? Did you feel obligated to be flirtatious?

LA BELLE: I think I was too busy to think too much about it. People did flirt with me. I suppose I flirted back because it was in my nature to do that, but I don’t feel that it overstepped boundaries. The thing that bothered me the most was that so many of my colleagues smoked pipes and cigarettes, and I would come out of faculty meetings with my eyes stinging, and my hair and clothes reeking.

But I also envied the male professors their pipes. A male student would ask a question, and the professor would tamp the tobacco down, re-light the pipe, slowly draw his breath in, slowly let his breath out, then answer the question. I felt I had no delaying tactic. I had the sense that I had to answer everything right away, and also that I had to do everything that I was asked to do. Sometimes I did things that I didn’t need to do, but that I thought that I was supposed to.

Early on, a graduate student came to me and said that every Caltech professor had to be an advisor to a sports group or sports club and that I had been selected for the ice-hockey team. So I said okay and spent many evenings on a cold bench. And these were late evenings because since our teams weren’t big, they could only get onto the ice after other teams had played. I knew nothing about the game, but I rather enjoyed it. The nature of Caltech’s sports clubs in

those days was that anyone could be on them, so the hockey club had undergraduate and graduate students and faculty. My main contribution came the day that Fred Culick, professor of jet propulsion, was injured and I got to take him to the emergency room. After that, I felt I had done my duty with the club, and one day I asked one of my male colleagues which sports club he advised. The absolute blank stare that he gave me enlightened me that I'd been hoodwinked. But I didn't mind. The Caltech team looked so great in those big padded hockey uniforms. They looked like bumblebees buzzing around with their orange and white stripes—the Caltech colors—on their jerseys. It was fun.

ASPATURIAN: How about some of your colleagues on the science side. Whom did you meet early on?

LA BELLE: I met Feynman. I was going to a meeting in Bridge [Laboratory of Physics]—the building that he taught in. I was walking up the stairs, and I heard this voice say, “Come back down the stairs.” And I went back down and said, “Why did you want me to walk down?” and he said, “So I can watch you walk up the stairs again.” I suppose I was wearing a miniskirt, which is what I tended to wear in those days. Then he said, “I'm Richard Feynman.” I certainly knew the name, but I didn't connect him with this man in the white shirt and the grey slacks. But I laughed, and he laughed. That's how I met Feynman.

I also met Seymour Benzer very early on. Now he was not flirtatious, but he was wonderful. He cared about food and he cared about his graduate students. Mr. Drosophila—I just thought he was amazing.

ASPATURIAN: How did you meet him?

LA BELLE: I went out sometimes with one of the young men in his lab, one of the graduate students. In fact I was finally even on that young man's dissertation committee because he included many quotations from Shakespeare in his thesis. “...the small gilded fly/Does lecher in my sight./Let copulation thrive.” That sort of thing. It was sort of fun. Those students worked so hard all night in those labs. And Seymour was just wonderful. And I very much liked his wife, Dottie. These professors had very close ties with their graduate students. They were

always having dinners or parties together, and there was a lot of closeness that we didn't have with the undergraduates.

Certainly I got very close to people in my own division. David Smith was master of student houses—MOSH—for a while, and he and his wife, Annette, invited people lots of times to the MOSH house. I'd never seen someone who could decorate the way that Annette could, with old Oriental rugs and moving a few flowers this way or that. When Beach Langston got sick, I took his courses over too and that meant that one year I was teaching seven classes. I had never taught Faulkner [laughter], so that was very difficult but exciting. When Beach died, his widow asked me to try to revise a manuscript on Faulkner that he had always wanted to get published. I worked very hard on it, put in a lot of time. But it was just too old-fashioned at that point. It was good, fine scholarship, but it should have come out earlier. These were people who had originally been hired to teach—to bring the humanities and the “cultural” side of things to Caltech's student-scientists. I arrived just as the emphasis was shifting to hiring research scholars.

ASPATURIAN: How did that work out?

LA BELLE: There were some losses along the way, but it had to be done. Otherwise we would have always been a kind of service division. Although I still see nothing wrong with maintaining the service aspect. I think we do perform a service too in that the teaching is terribly important, and you can't just hire people for research who don't take teaching seriously. But research was definitely the direction in which things were starting to move. Hallett Smith started it, and it was certainly furthered by Robert Huttenback, particularly of course in the great development of the social sciences under him.

When I arrived, there were several young male assistant professors here who were fabulous teachers. But they did not publish, and they did not last.

ASPATURIAN: So there was a new emphasis on being published.

LA BELLE: Yes, and I understood that coming in. Also it used to be that a department chairman might be in place for a long time, 20 years or more. That won't work either when you're building up departments and so on.

ASPATURIAN: It sounds like the division was largely oriented toward the humanities when you arrived. Did they have any sense or feeling of being second-class citizens on a science-oriented campus?

LA BELLE: Not with the scientists, who always had great respect for the humanities. I think that later the humanists may have been made to feel that way by some of the social scientists who were coming in and bringing with them a different mindset. It was very hard for those two parts of the division to be together, because they were two very different areas. We'll get into this more later, but I remember that when the issue of my tenure first arose, one of the social scientists simply came into my office and said, "Well, are you a mover and a shaker, 'cuz I can't vote for you if you're not a mover and a shaker." I'd never even heard the phrase. Were we talking about a campus earthquake? I mean, I didn't know what it meant.

We'll need to talk more about this when I have had time to think about it more, but things in the division were also moving away from the rather old-fashioned notion of scholarship based on hard research to a greater emphasis on theory. I had always thought that the main reason for humanists to come to Caltech was to be near the Huntington Library. It eventually came to the point where the powers that be didn't want to hire any people who needed the Huntington, because the idea was that you could spin theory sort of anywhere. And I think there's certainly a place for both kinds of scholarship, and you can you do hard scholarship and be theoretical too. But that was definitely a change that was coming in across the field.

ASPATURIAN: The first women to be admitted as undergraduates must have come the year after you arrived. Did you find yourself in the position of mentoring them as the sole female faculty member?

LA BELLE: I certainly did spend a lot of time talking to lots of them, and I enjoyed that very much. Some of them were very unhappy here immediately. Some of them just felt overwhelmed by that many young men, an attitude I didn't quite understand at first because I thought that really sounded terrific. But for them it wasn't. I of course enjoyed having women in the classroom because they did speak up more and they weren't afraid to ask a question they didn't already know the answer to, so I loved it. But I think that for some of them it was very hard.

One thing I want to say is that those first ten years or so, students came in better prepared than my students are now. They had much better backgrounds—a common background—in what we think of as the key literary classics. They knew Shakespeare. They knew the Bible, and they knew mythology—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. I was able to teach Milton then; I cannot teach Milton now. Today's students are simply staggered by it. The last time I tried to teach it, we weren't getting anywhere. That's been a big change. Looking back on those great early years, I think that high-school education has become weaker and that in some ways Caltech's humanities and literature offerings have also become weaker because we no longer have these extended courses. It's more what Caltech calls a smorgasbord but what I call a hodgepodge. We no longer teach year-long courses where you develop a genuinely in-depth grasp of the subject matter. In at least my first decade here, I taught courses that went a–b–c through the whole year. Shakespeare was taught that way, and so were several survey courses.

ASPATURIAN: And a student took all three terms and couldn't opt out?

LA BELLE: I think they could take two and maybe not a third, but many of them did take all three. Here's the way that I learned to teach Shakespeare: If I wasn't teaching my own class in that same period, I stood outside Hallett Smith's door while he taught and I listened. And that was wonderful. That man could teach Shakespeare.

JENIJOY LA BELLE**SESSION 3****March 16, 2008**

ASPATURIAN: Let's talk about your long friendship and acquaintance with Professor Richard Feynman. In our last session, you described how you met him for the first time on the staircase in Bridge Laboratory.

LA BELLE: I found this great quotation. Do you know Ilka Chase? She was a novelist and actress in the 1920s and 1930s, and she was in the Bette Davis movie *Now, Voyager*. This wonderful quotation, where at one point she said, "George Moore unexpectedly pinched my behind. I felt rather honored that my behind should have drawn the attention of the great master of English prose."

So I thought I would say that I felt honored that mine had attracted the great quantum electrodynamics master.

ASPATURIAN: How did the friendship progress after that? Did he seek you out? Did you seek him out?

LA BELLE: It was usually casual. I'd run into him on campus, or he'd take me to that dark Pat and Mike's place in Pasadena with the leather banquettes where other people were drinking Scotch and he would explain subatomic particles with salt and peppershakers. I remember one very exciting time at Freshman Camp. In my early years, I used to go to Frosh Camp regularly because I thought we were all supposed to. This was in the early '70s. I gradually learned that you didn't have to go every single year.

Somehow we got a boat ride away from the camp to the Isthmus, Richard Feynman and I. I always called him Richard—I know other people called him Dick. It might have been Mildred and Murph [Goldberger] who actually took us and dropped us off. And I remember that Richard pretended all evening that he was French, and he spoke very bad French all evening. I'm now thinking he was adumbrating Jean-Lou [Chameau, current president of Caltech]. He was in such high spirits. He was simply one of those men who understood that flirting was a universal,

natural part of human interaction, and he seemed to enjoy it so much. It was mostly verbal. I can't remember who said it—it might have been Oscar Wilde—who defined flirtation as attention without intention. I think that's very nice and I think it was like that with Feynman. Maybe it was different with other people.

I was always very tempted because he wanted to sketch me, but I felt that it would not be the right thing in the professorial relationship. I believe he mostly sketched women in the nude. And now of course I'm sorry but on the other hand maybe it was best. I used to sit next to him often in faculty meetings, and he almost always was sketching someone in profile. And of course we got to talk a lot backstage at the annual Caltech musicals we put on. And he talked to everyone. He was very open.

ASPATURIAN: Did he ever speak to you about his first wife, Arline?

LA BELLE: I'm trying to remember. I certainly knew about her, but maybe it was the way we all knew about her and it always sounded like such a terribly sad story. It seems to me I remember his once saying she was very beautiful. Other than that, no.

And of course he did write that famous letter in support of my tenure, in which he referred to the “mongeese” who were being obstructive in my case. “Cornered mongeese” was his phrase, which I thought was very funny. But I think would that make sense only in context, so we can discuss that more when we get to my tenure case.

ASPATURIAN: Now he was a physicist who apparently achieved the lowest grade possible on the English entrance exam for either Princeton or MIT. You were a professor of literature. Aside from your personalities meshing in some nice ways, where was the common ground?

LA BELLE: Simply because he was so open to it. He knew that I had studied [the poet William] Blake so he got interested in Blake and went and read Blake and then came back and talked about it. He didn't like fiction, because it wasn't factual and we talked about there being a higher truth perhaps than fact.

ASPATURIAN: Was he able to grasp that idea of the higher truth?

LA BELLE: No, he didn't like that. He could have grasped any idea, I'm sure, if he had wanted to, but it just didn't interest him. He was highly verbal himself but he didn't seem to be particularly interested in the language of poetry. If he liked a poem it was because he liked the idea in it, not the way the poet got to the idea. But to me, the form and the content are so inseparable, or if I had a choice it's almost form for me. And yet he spoke so well, and his talks were very well crafted.

Amazing, amazing man. One of the happiest moments of my life was looking out of the window of my house one day when my parents were visiting, and seeing him talking with my father. And I never asked what they were talking about because I didn't want to. They might have been discussing just about anything, but I thought, here are two of the men I most love and admire on earth and they were standing there, talking.

ASPATURIAN: Did you live near each other?

LA BELLE: Yes. I lived in Altadena at the time and he did, too. I guess he was on Braeburn, I was on La Solana. And he had some kind of laser beam that he would sometimes shine into my bedroom window at night. The whole room would light up. This was just his way of saying hello, and it was always very startling, but always also kind of pleasing.

ASPATURIAN: If it had been anyone but Feynman you would have called the cops.

LA BELLE: Yes I would have. In fact at first I didn't know what it was and eventually it dawned on me that it was he, but it was fun.

ASPATURIAN: He clearly had a lot of charm. What do you think the essence of it was?

LA BELLE: I think it was that he made the person he was talking to feel charming and witty and suddenly feel that you could do high-level physics. And he was a wonderful listener.

ASPATURIAN: People have also talked about this other side to him—that he could be curt. He could be dismissive, not want to suffer fools gladly. Did you ever see this side of him?

LA BELLE: No I didn't. I didn't see him in serious situations. We wouldn't have argued about literature because he didn't take it seriously, and I didn't care that he didn't take it seriously. And I found it amusing that his favorite Blake poem was the only bad poem that Blake ever wrote in his life: "Fair Eleanor."

ASPATURIAN: What did he like about it?

LA BELLE: Probably because it's a very traditional poem, it's very unBlakean. Very easy to follow. It could have been written by any number of people because it's one Blake wrote before he had found his voice.

ASPATURIAN: Did the fact that he could not really relate to a large swath of the humanities bother him at all?

LA BELLE: No, because he enjoyed the humanities. I think many of the scientists here have a high regard for the humanities, more so than the social scientists who seem to feel they are competing with us in some way. Richard loved being in the musicals. Look how well he got along with Shirley [Marneus, the director of Caltech Theater Arts]; they got along amazingly. He saw the genius she was in her own way. Of course in those productions, we just had small parts. It was the students who did all the real work.

I was thinking of this because [Professor of Literature] Kent [Clark] just died. I was thinking that now, except for Oscar Mandel, all the old guard who were hired by Hallett Smith—this really great group of men—have now all gone into the dark—George Mayhew, Beach Langston, Kent, David Smith, and David Elliot.

ASPATURIAN: With that, let's talk about some of your colleagues on the humanities side, and those who particularly stood out in your mind.

LA BELLE: Kent sure did. One of my favorite things was to get to sit next to Kent at a dinner party because he was a most agreeable companion. He was a confirmed punster, and he was so quick. I remember one time when I was sitting next to him during a dinner at the Athenaeum.

The first course was cold potato leek soup, and I turned to him and said, “I don’t like the vichyssoise,” and he said, “Vichyssoise qui mal y pense.”

It was a play on the motto of the Order of the Garter, “Shame to him who thinks evil of it” [Honi soit qui mal y pense]. But he just tossed it off and went right on eating his soup. In a play on his name, the students often called him Super Prof, Clark Kent, and the fact that he could get the students to understand and enjoy the Mighty Milton shows that he had some kind of special abilities. When the issue of my tenure came up, he was a very strong advocate on my behalf. David Smith of course was wonderful. In Kent’s obituaries, they talked about his part in founding the Baxter Art Gallery, which we had here for several years, but that was really David Smith and Kent together. David had a wonderful, wonderful artistic eye and was also a man who enjoyed life to the full. It was just such a great, close-knit group, and they admired each other’s talents and worked so well together. They genuinely liked each other.

ASPATURIAN: How about the early social scientists in the division. Who were they and what were they doing?

LA BELLE: I almost don’t know. I’ve been trying to think about when the social sciences began to be emphasized very strongly. I have heard the phrase “palace coup” to describe what happened, but I don’t really know exactly how things went. I actually was talking the other day to [Professor of History] Robert Rosenstone and [Professor of Economics] David Grether, who came in the 1970s. I said, “David, what happened?” He said, “I don’t know.” And I said to Rosenstone, “You were here, what happened?” And he said, “I don’t know. I was busy working on my stuff.”

ASPATURIAN: Was this move into the social sciences something that Harold Brown spearheaded? He just thought there should be a more scientific component in the division?

LA BELLE: I don’t know. At the time I didn’t know what was going on. I was so busy leaping from literary masterpiece to literary masterpiece each day and trying to work on my writing that I didn’t know what was happening. And it’s very strange if you go back and look in the old catalogs. In the 1970 catalog, it says that Hallett Smith chairs the division, but when you look in next year’s catalog, it says that Huttenback was the acting chair from ’70 to ’72 and then became

the chair in '73, and he'd only become a full professor in 1966, so something happened. Maybe it was that Harold Brown had just come in, and Hallett had been chairman for twenty years. What I've never known is whether Hallett willingly stepped down or was told that it was time to make a change. But the interesting thing is since Huttenback, who was a historian, left, we have never had another humanist as division chair.

ASPATURIAN: Huttenback was a historian?

LA BELLE: Yes, although he wrote a book with Lance Davis, who was an economist, but since then we've never had a humanist. They've all been economists or, now, political scientists. Jean [Ensminger] is an anthropologist, but since Huttenback, they have all been from the social science side. And that part of the division has really been built up. The problem was that in the early days, it was all seen as one division, which as you'll see when we get to my tenure case meant being judged at the first level by economists and anthropologists, who were in no position to properly evaluate your work. That would of course never happen now.

I think that the social sciences and the humanities often tried to sort of model themselves on the way the science programs worked. That means putting more emphasis on specialization, where you have a group of professors and graduate students working on a particular issue or in a particular area. But it really doesn't work in the humanities here, because we are the only department in the world that I know of that is expected to maintain a high level of research specialization, but that has no graduate students. So, we're not able to take advantage of the symbiotic relationship that develops between teaching and research at the graduate level. And that makes it very hard.

ASPATURIAN: In your first years here, as you became aware of some of these dichotomies, did you consider going elsewhere?

LA BELLE: I thought about it during my tenure case when I thought I might no longer be here, but otherwise, no. That was because, first of all, it was so wonderful! I admired the humanists I worked with so much. Then there was the Huntington Library, where there were so many things to work on and a large group of humanists from all over the world, so you never felt isolated in what you were doing. I always felt in my early years here that we never took enough advantage

of that connection. And various attempts to do more—and I can find old memos I wrote about how to achieve this—seemed not to have worked out. We have some connections now. [Professor of History, now at USC] Bill Deverell was working very hard on this, and then he didn't stay. But no, I didn't think about leaving.

ASPATURIAN: You mentioned in our last session that as the first woman on the faculty, you were put on a lot of committees.

LA BELLE: I was on every committee. Eventually I got to be head of the affirmative action committee and that was exciting.

ASPATURIAN: So you have had a pretty good look at the inner workings of the Institute over the course of nearly forty years. How different was it then from what we see now?

LA BELLE: I guess the main difference was that the professors did so much more of the direct work, like for instance taking the minutes at the faculty meetings, which is now done by a member of the staff. Once it was all professors who went and visited high schools in other states, whereas now it's the director of admission who does the recruiting.

ASPATURIAN: The bureaucracy was almost nonexistent.

LA BELLE: In fact for a long time it stayed pretty low. It seemed to increase in David Baltimore's era, and now it seems to be coming back down a little again, with people like [Professor of Astronomy] Anneila [Sargent] taking over administrative jobs [vice president for student affairs]. It seems to me that's a better approach with such a small school.

ASPATURIAN: True but I wonder sometimes when I read about Caltech back in the '60s and '70s whether or not the campus was to some extent a collection of little fiefdoms.

LA BELLE: Yes, and certainly there weren't the rules and number of mandated meetings we have today. Hallett Smith used to say that we'd have one meeting a year, whether we needed it or not. That was sort of a joke but we certainly did have far fewer meetings, and obviously hiring was

done in a much more casual way. I mean now when someone is hired, they have to meet and talk with everyone in the entire division, and all kinds of background materials are passed out. Things were different thirty years ago. I once asked David Grether how Hallett hired him. I said, “Did you present a paper or anything?” He said “Well, no, Hallett asked if I knew his son-in-law at Harvard, and I said yes. That seemed to pretty much mean that I had the job.”

Now Grether had all of the right qualifications, but it was just such a different way of doing things.

ASPATURIAN: Very. So Grether, an economist, was hired by Hallett Smith, who was a literature professor.

LA BELLE: Yes. I think that he chose some of the social scientists. And when I asked Rosenstone how he was hired, he said, well, he was just filling in for some instructor who was gone and then that instructor didn’t come back and he got the job. In some ways, I think that everyone felt very lucky to be here. But I didn’t know things were any different elsewhere. I wasn’t very savvy. I did not become a very political creature until I was taught by the master, Robert Huttenback, how to become more political. He taught me many things. I admired him for that.

ASPATURIAN: Do you recall in your early years talking to some of your colleagues about how nice it would be to have more women on the faculty? Was this something that caught your attention?

LA BELLE: I remember talking about how the female students were coming in, and how I thought that was a really good thing. And once I was allowed to have some input in hiring—though not much as an assistant professor—I was eager to have more women here. We did hire some, but they did not get tenure. Several of the young men in this division didn’t get tenure either—I think it was a publication issue.

[Sorting through papers, rustling] I have a few notes here on a humanities retreat we had a few years back. We were going to discuss the big picture, at a hotel in Oxnard.

ASPATURIAN: Might this have been Mandalay Bay?

LA BELLE: I think so. But to me it just sounded like an oxymoron looking for a place to happen: Oxnard, where the Ox meets the Nard. It's a terrible name. The main subject we were discussing was: Is there a single substantive answer to the question of what humanities should be at Caltech? John Ledyard was the division chair at the time, but he didn't go, so that we wouldn't think our chairman was judging us all. And I don't know what everyone else ended up with, but my answer to that question was no. The big issue has always been whether our humanities program should mimic humanities research departments at general research universities. In recent years we had tried to do this, but it's clear that there are all sorts of problems with such an approach here. First of all there's the problem of scale. We're just such a small group. There's the problem of programmatic focus. Each person thinks it should all be about whatever he or she is working on. There's the problem of the relationship between highly specialized research and service-oriented teaching. So, we were looking at endless discussions of what our vision should be, and I'm just very suspicious of the vision thing. There were no conclusions reached, and we haven't had a retreat since. I'm just as glad. There were no spouses or anything—just hard work.

ASPATURIAN: Let's talk about your early research.

LA BELLE: The first big and main project was on Roethke. His dates were 1908 to 1963, and he was one of the finest American poets of the 20th century. He wrote; he taught; he received all of the awards you could receive during that time—the Bollingen Prize and the Pulitzer Prize and the Fulbright and the Guggenheim, and he had a great influence on a number of poets—Ted Hughes, Robert Bly, James Dickey, and, according to some people, Sylvia Plath, although I've never seen it as much as some seem to. And he had a very wide stylistic range, starting with a very strict meter in his earliest poems, then moving to free verse, and then finally finding forms of his own.

I talked in our last session about how I wrote my dissertation on his literary influences. So I worked on transforming the dissertation into a book, and after I started at Caltech, I spent two summers in Seattle working with the Roethke collection at the University of Washington, sifting through all of his notebooks. He always wrote his poems or ideas for poems in these same notebooks—he was always kind of terrified later in life that he would run out of ideas and

felt that he could come back and mine these. I also looked through all of the books he had annotated. Everything was there—I believe that they actually have his childhood train and collection of arrowheads too, but I did not investigate those. I just stayed with the notebooks.

I think I told you that my dissertation was titled “Theodore Roethke’s Invention of his Cultural Tradition.” But when I was transforming it into a book, I thought of titling it with a line from one of his poems, “The Pure Serene of Memory In One Man.” I liked that idea because “pure serene” echoes Thomas Gray’s line in “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”: “Full many a gem of purest ray serene.” And it also echoes Keats’s line from his sonnet about first looking into Chapman’s Homer: “Yet never did I breathe its pure serene.” And the main thesis of my book was to demonstrate Roethke’s reliance on tradition, just as that phrase does, with its echoes of both Keats and Gray.

ASPATURIAN: Did that go against the prevailing view of him as sort of a self-invented poet?

LA BELLE: Yes, against the view of him as both self-invented and writing out of extremely isolated experiences.

ASPATURIAN: So you took a point of view contrary to the prevailing critical thinking.

LA BELLE: The critic Stephen Spender is a great poet himself and admired Roethke, but he said, “It’s difficult to think of poems that derive more completely from the fusion of the poet’s isolated sensibility with a very solitary experience, going back to his childhood in the greenhouses.” And what I was trying to show was the opposite of that. To put it most succinctly, what I wanted to write was the definitive study of Roethke’s influences, and I wanted to trace the poets that he imitated and assimilated throughout his lifetime and then measure the significance of those relationships. Roethke in an early essay that he wrote warned: “There’s a good deal of nonsense that’s been written about influence in modern poetry,” and I wanted to avoid the sort of abstract, critical commonplaces that weren’t supported by clear, hard, specific evidence. I didn’t want to say Roethke’s work is Wordsworthian or Audenesque or Eliotesque. I wanted to find the exact poems in the exact sources that were essential to understand the growth of his mind—what he wrote and how he wrote it as he moved from these early very formal lyrics to his final sequences of poems.

ASPATURIAN: If I recall correctly, you were in his final class before he died?

LA BELLE: I was in the last course he ever taught, and that emphasis on specificity is also the way he taught poetry writing. He made us write in very specific forms: a villanelle, a sestina, a sonnet, or sometimes he would come in with just one line and say that's the first line of your poem, now write the rest of it. I remember once it was, "I long to talk with some old lover's ghost," a line that years later I realized was from John Donne. At the time I didn't know. And he didn't tell us it was Donne because then you'd think, "Well, now I have to write a metaphysical poem." But he thought that conscious imitation was a good way to learn how to write and that's the way he did it himself.

ASPATURIAN: What did he look like?

LA BELLE: He's been described often as sort of like a shambling bear. He had a very, very large head, with kind of a moon-shaped face.

ASPATURIAN: Funny, because when you hear his name you sort of think In the Round.

LA BELLE: Big shoulders, a big upper body. Very skinny legs. But you wouldn't notice that unless you saw him play tennis because he wore very baggy pants. And actually he was a very good tennis and badminton player. His face seemed rather passive, almost pudding-like, but when he was talking or reading poetry it became very expressive. And a wonderful laugh if he was amused. And he also sort of swayed when he walked, another thing that made you think of a bear.

By the time I had him as teacher, he was already not well. Too much drinking. Probably various kinds of medications. He still would choose one person in the class who would play tennis with him, but he didn't move much on the court, so it had to be someone who was willing to hit the ball to him. I did not know how to play tennis.

I remember one day when he had won some big prize that he told us, okay we're all going down to the Blue Moon Tavern, but I wasn't old enough. The University of Washington had very strict laws about how there could be no tavern within a three-mile limit of the college, and of course no drinking under the age of twenty-one. The class was mostly made up of

seniors, so there were probably only a few of us there who were either under twenty-one or in sororities with no-drinking rules and who would have gotten in trouble. So we couldn't go, and on a few other occasions like that I felt a bit left out. But when I was going through all of these endless notebooks in Seattle, I did find that he had written a couple of lines about me once, and that was so exciting. The words said, "Jenijoy La Belle. Jenibelle La Joy, my unfussable sweetly impossible."

ASPATURIAN: What did he think of your poetry?

LA BELLE: He would keep me after class and the highest compliment I would get from him was, "I'm pleased with you, pussycat." I guess he liked some of it. He kissed me once too, after class. He was the first man who ever kissed me. I was a sophomore so I guess I would have been seventeen, going on eighteen. It was very fatherly, but now it would be startling. I just thought it was very nice, just a kiss of approval. Now looking back it seems strange, but at the time, I thought—my first kiss!

ASPATURIAN: Was it his own emphasis about relying on poetic models that made you think about who his own influences might have been?

LA BELLE: It was not only his classes, but also other teachers there who got me fascinated about the process of poetic composition and how these various poets seemed to work with past poets. Let me give you just one early example from a Roethke poem. His book *Open House* came out in 1941, very early in his career. There's a poem in there called "No Bird." It's a very brief and exquisite lyric that simply begins "Now here is peace for one who knew/The secret heart of sound/The ear so delicate and true/Is pressed to noiseless ground." That's the first of two stanzas. One critic wrote that it might have been written by any astute imitator of classical English verse. But Roethke almost never modeled his poems after some general style or literary period. Instead he used the distinctive practices of individual poets. And this same critic went on to say that probably he was imitating Herrick. But there wouldn't be any reason for him to imitate Herrick.

ASPATURIAN: Herrick being a 17th-century poet?

LA BELLE: Yes. But when Roethke deliberately echoes the cadences of another poet, he does it on purpose. And as I say there was no reason to follow Herrick. But I think there's a significant reason in that little poem to echo Emily Dickinson. I think that the poem is her epitaph, that he wrote it as a tribute to the dead poet. And so he begins the poem, "Now here is peace for one who knew/The secret heart of sound." He is explicitly, though subtly, commending the musical tones of her poetry and paying homage to it by adopting some of her practices. It has a beat of eight syllables—six syllables—eight syllables—six syllables, which is called common meter, and is one that Emily Dickinson regularly used. And his indebtedness is also there simply in his language. Here's the last stanza of "No Bird"— "Slow swings the breeze above her head/The grasses whitely stir/But in this forest of the dead/No bird awakens her." And here is a last stanza of a Dickinson poem, beginning "On this long storm the Rainbow rose": "The quiet nonchalance of death/No daybreak can bestir/The slow archangel's syllables/Must awaken her!" So, here you have the similarities of language—death. no. bestir. Slow. Awaken her. And then we have another Dickinson poem, which ends "Our pace took sudden awe/Our feet reluctant led/ Before were cities but between/The forest of the dead." Roethke takes up that whole phrase, "the forest of the dead." And since in both of Dickinson's poems she's writing about death, it's apt that Roethke summoned up these poems when he composed her epitaph.

And although no bird awakens the dead poet, Roethke's imagination is "awakened" by the two poems. So that's an utterly minor example and so simple, but it shows that it's not enough to place Roethke's poems just in a general tradition. You have to find the particular author and even the particular work that the modern poet is responding to. And then once that special context is found, the true meaning of the poem comes out. Because otherwise you wouldn't even know that it's necessarily an epitaph poem. Now is Roethke doing this consciously or unconsciously? It seems to me in these early poems that it's very conscious. With later poems it's much harder to determine. I think finally that the classification of conscious or unconscious motivation is not the central point. The central point is that it happens time after time. It happens over and over again.

ASPATURIAN: How long did you spend preparing this manuscript for publication? You were teaching, you were on it sounds like a dozen committees.

LA BELLE: I was also my writing my early articles on Blake at the same time. So I'd say at least two years. I was also trying to bring in all the material from the Roethke sources that I was finding, to back up the things I'd already said. When I finally finished and thought I had it in a form to send out, I sent it to the University of Washington. Their press seemed the logical place since that's where he'd taught. I didn't know anything about how publication works, and publication was very different then. You did not do multiple submissions then—that would have been considered terrible. Once when I was getting desperate about something else, I sent an article to two different places. Then I got so worried I went to Hallett and I said, "I don't know what to do, I sent this article to two places." And he said, "Maybe you'll get lucky and neither one of them will take it," which was vintage Hallett. He also made me see that you don't do that.

The University of Washington kept the Roethke manuscript for a full year. That was unconscionable too, but it never occurred to me to question it. I somehow in my youth and ignorance thought that there was a committee there every day going over it line by line and discussing it. Obviously what happened was that it got put in a drawer, and when I finally wrote after a year they said, we're sorry, we'll get back to you. Six months later, they did and said, well, we are bringing out some other Roethke book and don't think we can do two. We do wish you such good luck. We are sending back your manuscript under separate cover. In the end I was glad because Princeton accepted it, and they're a much more prestigious and better press than the University of Washington, but at the time I thought Washington would be the right place for it. Anyway, Roethke was the perfect person for me to write on because I got to work on all these other poets while focusing on this poet, watching what he did as his mind grew until finally the poet became the tradition and the tradition became the poet.

ASPATURIAN: Now when it came to publication, the title had changed?

LA BELLE: Yes. The only thing that Princeton said they didn't like about the entire manuscript, which their editorial board had accepted unanimously, was the title. They didn't like *The Pure Serene of Memory*. At that point I changed it to *The Echoing Wood of Theodore Roethke*.

ASPATURIAN: Is that a line from one of his poems?

LA BELLE: Yes. "I hear my echo in the echoing wood."

ASPATURIAN: It also reflects the ambiance in which you grew up, doesn't it?

LA BELLE: It does, but it also reflects that all of his poems are somehow echoes.

ASPATURIAN: Yes, but I think that it's an interesting choice.

LA BELLE: There is a very famous book of essays by T. S. Eliot called *The Sacred Wood*; so I was echoing that and then Blake's lovely poem "The Echoing Green." And Blake and Eliot were two of the people who had influenced Roethke a great deal, just as Keats was. The book finally came out in '76, a year after Princeton accepted it in '75.

ASPATURIAN: So this was a prelude to the whole tenure thing as well, was it not, in terms of timing?

LA BELLE: The timing was bad, yes. It had been sent off to Princeton but not yet accepted when I first came up for tenure.

ASPATURIAN: You said that you were also conducting research on Blake. What was the nature of that?

LA BELLE: I had known Blake's poetry growing up and in school, but in what I believe was my first year of graduate school one of our professors gave a public talk on Blake's designs for *The Book of Job*. And Bob Essick and I, good graduate students that we were, went to every talk, and we went and sat down at this one, and it was a slide show. We saw these incredible, powerful engravings, and Bob was at that moment possessed by Blake, seized by Blake, and that one noon show changed his entire life. He has gone on to become one of the foremost Blake critics in the world, and he has the largest collection of Blake's prints, books, and original drawings in private hands. And I became fascinated with Blake too, but I sometimes wonder if, to quote another poem of Roethke's, "I dance with William Blake/For love, for Love's sake."

I was always more interested in the verbal than the visual, but for Blake of course it was both. And so because I was so interested in how a poet like Roethke responds to past poets, one of the things that interested me with Blake was the way the artist responds to past artists. So I

published a couple of articles—a book chapter and a journal article—on Blake’s response to Michelangelo—his artistic visions and revisions of Michelangelo’s art—who was one of his great masters. Then Bob and I together coauthored a book on Blake’s designs for Edward Young’s poem, *Night Thoughts*. It’s fascinating because he is both illustrating the poem and commenting, sometimes negatively, on the poem within his designs. It’s just a fascinating topic—how does a poet-artist respond not just to past artists but to earlier poets?

In its day, *Night Thoughts* was a terribly popular poem. At one time Edward Young’s name was right up there with Milton and Shakespeare, and now we only pay any attention to it because Blake designed and engraved these illustrations to *Night Thoughts*. It’s a lugubrious poem about death and the things you think about—Robespierre slept with it under his pillow. That was a lot of fun to do, because we could do very close plate-by-plate commentary of all the designs while setting the work in its historical context. And then very early on we also coauthored another book on Flaxman’s designs for the *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

ASPATURIAN: And the publication dates on these?

LA BELLE: The one on *Night Thoughts* was out when I was up for tenure in 1975 but was dismissed as irrelevant, although I don’t know why. Actually both of those studies have been reprinted many times. Flaxman was a close friend of Blake’s. Actually when you just close your eyes and think of designs for Homer—for the *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—what you think of is Flaxman’s clear outline drawings that seem very pure and heroic. He designed them and Blake engraved them because any money he made in his life he made from engraving for people. He didn’t do very well with his own great works. He had a few patrons but not many. So I worked on both Blake and Roethke and published on both in those early years.

ASPATURIAN: And what were you teaching primarily?

LA BELLE: I was teaching everything. I would simply start with Dante and would just go through the canon for an entire year. One class was taught through genre, so tragedy and comedy. We’d start with *Oedipus* and *Antigone*, Euripides and so on, and go on all the way up to Beckett. And many of those I had certainly not taught before. I had to do my homework for

the class each time. It was wonderful. I suppose you never learn as much about things as when you are teaching.

ASPATURIAN: That's an interesting thought. Who are your favorite authors to teach?

LA BELLE: I love to teach Shakespeare, and I love to teach almost everything I choose to teach, except in those days I was also assigned what to teach. I would never have taught Hobbes's *Leviathan* on my own. I can tell you right now I don't think I did a very good job.

ASPATURIAN: I'm interested that that was assigned. It's really political philosophy, political theory. What were you doing teaching it?

LA BELLE: I don't know. I remember spending a lot of time discussing the cover of the book because it's a great cover of a great giant made up of little people. And Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. I remember having to teaching that too. And the students were saying, please please, can you teach a course in science fiction, and I said, "No, because that's what you're reading on your own, aren't you?" And they said, yes. So I said come and take my course on *The Faerie Queene* and it will really expand your mind.

I think I could be pretty happy teaching a lot of things. But Shakespeare is easy to teach. It just is. It's so much easier than other 17th century authors because it's not allusive in the same way. You really don't have to read all the footnotes to understand it as you do with certain other authors. Blake's fun to teach because nobody understands the last great books; so Blake's mythmaking is as close as I can get to what they do in physics. They make these great myths.

And I was able to teach straight Blake classes once in a while, and I tried to lure the students in by putting up posters of Blake's "Ancient of Days," with his compasses, thinking that geometry would draw them in.

I remember when a book came out by an author at Berkeley, called *Visionary Physics*, and I took it to Richard Feynman, thinking that maybe we could sort of team-teach this class on it, but he read the book and said it didn't really say much about physics, and from my point of view, it didn't really say much about Blake, so we dropped the idea. One year, Caltech invited Bob Essick to team-teach the Blake course with me, and it was a fabulous course. And Bob,

who had been teaching graduate students in English at UC Riverside, said that our undergraduates wrote better papers than his graduate students.

ASPATURIAN: To what did he attribute this?

LA BELLE: They are so damn smart. He really connected very much with them. There was no theory that he could suggest they couldn't catch onto. When we taught that class, I tended to focus on Blake's brief *There Is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions Are One*, then *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and then Bob would take over on *The Four Zoas*, and the students were with us all the way.

ASPATURIAN: I know it's hard to make generalizations, but are there some authors to whom Caltech students naturally gravitate and others that for the most part they just can't relate to?

LA BELLE: I always had trouble teaching Austen. Mostly it was because there were no women in the classes then. Much more recently [John] Sutherland taught Austen here and he had eighteen girls—I call them girls—and one young man in his class. My mostly male students just didn't see how dangerous and exciting and wonderful her language is.

ASPATURIAN: I think a lot of men just don't get Austen. They even had trouble with *Pride and Prejudice*?

LA BELLE: Yes and in fact I think that may have been the only one I ever really taught. Maybe I got to teach *Emma* once. In those early years I was told what to teach, and so there were many things I would not probably have taught. I never got to teach [Richardson's] *Clarissa*, but you can't make them read a million pages or whatever it is.

ASPATURIAN: Who are authors to whom they respond?

LA BELLE: Blake, Shakespeare. I had mixed results with Lewis Carroll. I thought the students might really like *Alice in Wonderland*. Some of my early classes did. When I tried to teach it again maybe twenty years later, they no longer had read it as children, which seemed to make a

difference. I had thought that because he was a mathematician that they would like his jokes but it didn't go over. But you never know. Reactions can depend on just the tastes of an individual class, or relate to whether I'd waited until it was too late in the course.

ASPATURIAN: I'm curious with Shakespeare, who can be responded to on so many levels—the plots, the characterizations, the universalism. How well in general are Caltech students able to relate simply to the language?

LA BELLE: That's what I stressed. The plots can all be summed up in three sentences. Shakespeare is all language. That's why I never understand these translations of Shakespeare. What is it but the language? But the students do respond to the language, and the harder and knottier it is, the more they are willing to work on it. They approach it as a problem set. And I've been amazed at what they can get out of a given passage. At least one assignment is always to just choose a passage to analyze. No fewer than ten lines. No more than thirty.

ASPATURIAN: Can you provide an example?

LA BELLE: They figure out what they think it means. They deconstruct it. And then they show how the way that it's written and what it says connect. So a passage that is very hard to understand is often very often hard to even read aloud. Shakespeare slows you down when he wants to slow you down so that you have to say every word. I don't like phonetic intensives to be carried to silly extremes. But often Caltech students are very good at showing how certain sounds in a passage back up what's going on, so that in some very painful speeches the long "I" sound "ai" is repeated over and over until it almost becomes a cry of woe. Another example is the deliberate slowness of the phrase "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow." We did *A Winter's Tale* last term. I had not taught it before, and there's one speech in it that's considered by several critics to be the most obscure passage in Shakespeare, and one of our students of course chose to write about that. It's an early speech by Leontes when the jealousy is starting to take hold of him. And you read it and you just say, what is going on here? I'm not sure I was totally convinced by what this student did, but his work was really brilliant. He just struggled with it.

ASPATURIAN: Is that the “Sir Smile, his neighbor” speech?

LA BELLE: It’s either that one or very close to it. It begins with the word “affection.” “Affection, thy intention stabs the center!” As complex as some of Othello’s speeches are when the Green-Eyed Monster has him in its grip, it’s nothing compared to this one, which is just crazy. It never has the clarity that Othello has before he finally goes mad. There’s no wrong thing that you can teach the students here—really everything goes pretty well. And they do read. They read the material.

ASPATURIAN: Have you had students come in convinced there is absolutely nothing for them in a literature class who go on to have a transformative experience?

LA BELLE: I think so. That’s exciting. There are also some who you feel just don’t ever really like it. But I’ve only had a few students who were really surly about it. I remember one incident in the early ’70s—it was very shocking. This student wrote this really awful paper, he had been very unpleasant all through class, and the paper was plagiarized. I found exactly the source, and I turned it over to the Board of Control [BOC]—the honors system panel. I was expecting that I would be able to flunk him or give him a low grade or something, but the BOC came back to me and said, “Well, this isn’t really plagiarism. He was just trying to say “blank you” to you personally as a teacher and so he did it. And so we have decided that his punishment should be that he can write a whole new paper.” At that point, I was sorry that I hadn’t just given him an F on it, said that it wasn’t written very well, and kept the BOC out of it. For years after that, I didn’t turn things over to the BOC. If I found something, I would confront the student and say, Look.

ASPATURIAN: What an idiotic response.

LA BELLE: Maybe that was just a bad Board of Control. Frankly, I try to design assignments that really are not the kind that can be plagiarized. And our students don’t tend to do that. Sometimes a student from a foreign country who hasn’t quite grasped how to write a paper thinks that it’s okay to take things from others. I don’t consider that plagiarism, but rather something that we have to get cleared up. And once we do, everything goes smoothly.

Nowadays they're much better at Freshman Camp about discussing plagiarism, and I don't think it's an issue. On the whole, I think that our students sometimes see their humanities class as an amusement, as something entirely different, and I think that some of our professors don't like that attitude. But that doesn't bother me. I think that's a good attitude, to see it as a respite from something else one's doing.

ASPATURIAN: Have you kept track of what some of your students have gone on to? You've talked once before about your recollections of Phil Neches, who is now a trustee.

LA BELLE: Yes and Louise Kirkbride, who was one of the very first girls here, and she's a trustee now too. I have especially followed those students who were double majors. I had a student who was a double major in math and English and eventually ended up doing a dissertation on Blake, Gauss, and Mozart. And went on to write on Dickens.

He went on to UCSD for graduate work in English actually, but he is now in computers. Just by sheer accident, he was visiting here recently, and I ran into him with his wife and little girl, and he told me he was no longer in the literary world. His mother still lives in Pasadena, and he was visiting. Sometimes I hear from and get e-mails from students. When I was writing columns for a while for the *LA Times* and those would get syndicated, I would hear from students I hadn't heard from in a long time. That was really exciting, because they'd be more likely to pick up a newspaper and read something than they would be to pick up the *Blake Quarterly*.

My very first publication was when I was in graduate school. One of my professors had been sent some books to review for *The Kenyon Review* and of course I leapt at the chance to even get a book review publication out. The book was called *Rebels and Conservatives* by Amanda something. It was on Dorothy and William Wordsworth's circle, and she had worked on it for seventeen years using 600 books and manuscripts. Never had there been such a waste of time and energy since the construction of the Maginot Line. And what I proved in this review was that the whole thing was just a patchwork quilt that she had fumbled together from hundreds of other critics. I called the review "She Dwelt Among the Trodden Ways," which is a play on a line from Wordsworth. Anyway it was such a wonderful witty review that it was later included in a book on younger critics of North America.

But I sent it to my mother, thinking she'd be so proud, and she said, "Oh darling, from now on please only review books that you like." It did make me think, but I did do a couple more negative reviews of authors who deserved them.

ASPATURIAN: Oh, that reminds me of a great quote by Oscar Wilde. He said something like, "Mrs. Charlotte Yonge has published another book. We are told it took three people to write it and even to read it requires assistance." [Laughter]

JENIJOY LA BELLE

SESSION 4

March 30, 2008

ASPATURIAN: What year did the issue surrounding your tenure begin?

LA BELLE: It was 1974. I was thirty. Late that summer I had been coordinating and also teaching in the Summer Support Program at Caltech. It ran from mid-August through September, and it was a cram course for incoming students who needed extra help in various disciplines to kind of bring them up to speed before the quarter started. I was running that program. In September, Robert Huttenback, the HSS division chair, told me that the senior literature faculty were getting ready to do my initial review and that I should gather together my publications and my unpublished materials.

ASPATURIAN: How long had you been a member of the faculty at that time?

LA BELLE: I came in '69, so this would have been the beginning of my sixth year. That's when they make tenure determinations. I was an assistant professor at this point. So then on November 5, there was a meeting of the tenured literature faculty, and I was "unanimously and enthusiastically"—I'm quoting from a memo that I later saw—recommended for tenure and promotion to associate professor. Each member of the group also wrote a letter of support. Beach Langston chaired the literature group for that academic year, and its members were David Smith, Oscar Mandel, Hallett Smith, Kent Clark and William Cozart. So that was the first round.

ASPATURIAN: These were all literature people.

LA BELLE: Yes. They had also solicited a group of letters from outside sources, seven to be exact, of whom only two knew me. Those two were Roy Harvey Pearce, dean of graduate students at UC San Diego, who had been director of my dissertation, and Ronald Berman, who was then chairman of the NEH, the National Endowment for the Humanities. This is standard procedure. To this day, we still ask two of the tenure candidate's former professors to write.

The other letters were from professors at UCLA, Yale, Cornell, Northwestern, and the University of Washington. The University of Washington professor had not been on the faculty when I was there as an undergraduate, so I didn't know him. I wasn't told at the time who these people were, but everything eventually sort of came out. And these letters were generally favorable. So a week later there was a meeting of the divisional committee on promotion. Huttenback chaired the committee.

ASPATURIAN: For the record, Huttenback was an economic historian?

LA BELLE: Yes, I would say that was a good description. He had been acting chair in '70-'72 and then he was the actual chair starting in 1972, and he also appointed himself chair of this committee, something that would certainly never be allowed today. Nowadays, the division chairman is never chair of the committee on promotion. It shouldn't have been allowed because if there turns out to be disputatious problems, it makes a tenure battle into a vote of confidence in the division chairman and turns a judicial process into a political war.

ASPATURIAN: And also potentially into a personal one.

LA BELLE: Yes. Nonetheless, Huttenback chaired the committee. The other members were Lance Davis, a mathematical economist; Rod Paul, another historian; James Quirk, an economist who wrote on professional sports leagues; Thayer Scudder, an anthropologist; and Oscar Mandel, from literature. A strange jumble if ever there was one.

ASPATURIAN: So you, as a member of the literature faculty, were evaluated by a committee roughly eighty percent of whom had no literature background at all?

LA BELLE: Yes, six people, and only Oscar Mandel had a literature background. Maybe I shouldn't say this but I will. I very much admire Oscar, in fact I love Oscar deeply, but I believe he was put on that committee because, of all the tenured literature professors, he is not a fighter. He's brilliant, he states his opinion, and if someone questions his opinion, he gives a wonderful shrug, but he's not a warrior. Whereas others would have fought fiercely, and indeed did fight

fiercely for me. Oscar always voted for me. It wasn't that, but he doesn't fight. Hallett had been on that committee previously, but now he was taken off and Oscar was put on.

So those were the members. They voted 5-to-1, Mandel in opposition, not to recommend promotion to the rank of associate professor with tenure, thus overriding the strong endorsement of the tenured English faculty and the generally positive tone of the outside letters. They never consulted with the tenured English faculty before that meeting.

And the next morning Huttenback came bounding into my office, with his usual hearty good humor, and informed me that I would not be promoted or given tenure. And that is when the division within the division began. It was almost instantaneous: Letters of protest to the provost and vice president, Robert Christy, began to fly thick and fast. The first letters were very calm and restrained.

This one to Christy is from Hallett, and so typical of the way he writes: “Dear Bob, I’m very reluctant to write this letter because I’ve tried since my retirement as division chair to avoid doing anything that might interfere with or hinder my successor. But the present case is so unusual, and its implications so important, that I cannot in good conscience remain silent. The division committee on promotions, without any consultation or discussion with the tenured English faculty, voted 5–1 against promotion. This surprising action was taken in the face of very favorable letters from outside the campus, some of them by distinguished authorities in the field. I do not recall that the administrative council has ever overridden a division chairman’s recommendation not to promote, but I think this case deserves very careful attention.”

That was the gist of it. Other professors from the literature group also lodged objections with Christy. Beach Langston did, William Cozart did, and so did several others. Several professors outside my field also protested, including [Professor of History] Bob Oliver. He was very outspoken about this in his oral history, more so than Kent or others. I was surprised when I read it—he wasn't afraid to say anything. In his letter, he pointed out that the tenor of the external reviews was clearly supportive of my promotion. He had a nice line—he said, “Why ask for an outside opinion if it is to be disregarded? The division’s promotion review committee is rather like the gambler who calls ‘heads’ and then declares the contest ‘two-out-of three’ when the coin comes up tails.” I thought that was a nice image. Dr. Christy then asked me to meet with him.

ASPATURIAN: Within what period of time did this all take place?

LA BELLE: Oh, this was all over a couple of weeks. Things were all going rather quickly then. So I met with Christy, and we discussed academic procedures. And I stressed that I was not expecting the IAC, the Institute Administrative Council, which was of course made up of all the division heads, to directly overturn the tenure decision. Instead I decided to ask the council to arbitrate between two such contrasting opinions of my work—that of the tenured literature faculty and the outside scholars in my field, on the one hand, and that of the promotion committee on the other.

ASPATURIAN: May I interject with a personal question? You must have felt frustrated if not angry about this, and yet you seem to have handled it with a certain measure of calm and diplomacy. What was your reaction when you heard all this?

LA BELLE: I wasn't frustrated yet; things were moving so quickly. I was just sort of nonplussed, and it never occurred to me at that point that things wouldn't still work out. I never wanted to make giant claims. I didn't want to say, this has to be overturned. I always wanted to discuss just procedures because the IAC or Christy could not judge the quality of the work. There's no way that they had the expertise, although I didn't feel that the people on this committee, except for Oscar, could really judge it either. That's why I thought there was some problem here and that we could work it out.

ASPATURIAN: So your outlook was fundamentally optimistic.

LA BELLE: Yes, at that point. It took a long time for me to really get frustrated. This went on for a while. And I do want to say at the outset that I always found Dr. Christy to be more than fair. He was just and unbiased. He could seem very cold. But that was fine with me. I really came to appreciate his dispassion compared with some of the zeal of the people in my division. He was a scientist who neither praised nor censured me but always seemed interested instead in studying the outside forces that were at work. And that was good.

Next there was an attempt on the part of Provost Christy to settle the matter through outside arbitration. I was told that my materials would be given to a very distinguished senior

person in my field of study. That meant everything that I had published and all the unpublished work that I wanted to have looked at, including my unpublished Roethke manuscript. It had been just turned down by the University of Washington, which had held on to it for much too long, as we talked about in the last session. Bob Essick and I had jointly coauthored the book on Blake we talked about last time, and I had a good many published articles. But I hadn't yet published a book on which I was sole author.

ASPATURIAN: Was this outside person also given access to the outside letters of recommendation and other materials?

LA BELLE: No. I believe it was just all of my materials. Actually, I certainly wouldn't have been against that, because I knew that they were on the whole favorable, but I wasn't asking for that. I was simply told he would be given all of these writings. I agreed to abide by this person's decision, and I understood that Huttenback would do the same. I wasn't told at the time who this outside person was but it turned out to be Claude Simpson. He was the Coe Professor of American Literature, Emeritus, at Stanford, a senior research fellow at the Huntington Library, and a leading scholar of American literature. And he was a member of the Caltech visiting committee. At that point I might have known his name, but I didn't know him personally. I had never met him. He read all of my published and unpublished work and in a lengthy and detailed letter to Christy said that in his judgment they made a good case for promotion and he believed that the literature group's recommendation was justified. Huttenback's response to Simpson's analysis was that he was unwilling to accept it.

ASPATURIAN: Did he write that in so many words?

LA BELLE: He didn't say any of this to me. He must have reported to Christy that he was unwilling to accept it. After seeming to agree to accept the judgment of an outside expert referee, Huttenback refused to abide by Simpson's verdict when it turned out to be favorable to me. Now one of the problems was that Huttenback almost never put anything in writing, so I made sure that I put everything in writing. I would keep notes and write memos. Anytime anyone told me anything or said anything, I wrote it down and then sent it back because I

thought that was the way we did things. Anyway, in my opinion, Huttenback then began to seek various ways to build a negative dossier on me.

ASPATURIAN: When Christy received this outside appraisal, and Huttenback said he found this unacceptable, what did Christy say to him?

LA BELLE: I don't know. I have no idea what went on there. I probably hadn't learned about that immediately anyway. The first thing that Huttenback did was to send letters to as many of my former students as they could find addresses for at the time. Here is Huttenback's letter to all of my students: "Dear Student, As I hope you are aware, both the Institute and the division are attempting to gain more information as to the teaching abilities of the faculty."

I mean, really. They didn't seek any such information on anyone who was up for tenure besides me.

"I note that you have taken courses with Jenijoy La Belle. I would appreciate it very much if you would write me a totally honest appraisal of her as a teacher, possibly comparing her with others in the division. You can trust me to keep the information absolutely confidential. Thank you in anticipation for your cooperation. Sincerely, Robert Huttenback, chairman. P.S. I would appreciate a prompt reply."

ASPATURIAN: How could he do this? There were no provisions in place to prevent a division chair from running open loop in this kind of matter?

LA BELLE: I don't know. Of course I saw nothing wrong with writing to my students. Much, much later, I would find out that legally you cannot treat people undergoing tenure in different ways.

ASPATURIAN: That's what I meant.

LA BELLE: But that's what he did.

Next he triumphantly announced to the tenured members of the division that he had an "important" letter about me written by none other than Harold Bloom. He was then and is now a Yale literature professor, and certainly one of America's most provocative critics. Let me tell

you how Huttenback got this letter. Bloom was at Caltech being wined and dined and interviewed for the prestigious Dreyfus Professorship. I have a copy of the scheduled activities for his visit, so I know exactly what he was doing every minute of the time he was here.

He flew in from Hartford and was met by Stuart Ende, my junior male colleague in literature. Now Stuart was a former student of Harold Bloom's, who'd had already been given a "special" early promotion to associate professor by Huttenback in disregard of regular evaluation procedures. He hadn't been given tenure yet, but he had been given this special associate professor position to show how truly outstanding he was. So Bloom then had an interview alone with Huttenback, followed by cocktails and dinner. Just the two of them. The next morning, professors Huttenback, Ende, Rod Paul, and Bloom had breakfast. Then Huttenback alone gave Bloom a tour of the campus. At ten o'clock Bloom was to go either to Assistant Professor Joyce Penn's Lit I class or Susan Ende's Lit III class. Susan was Stuart Ende's wife, and she had been hired as a lecturer, although she did not have a PhD. Next, Bloom had an interview with the provost and of course Huttenback attended that too. He had lunch at the Athenaeum with a mixed group representing the division as a whole—I was not included. Then at two o'clock, there was a discussion with the literature search committee, which of course I was not on, about promotion, tenure, and publication. He gave a talk at four o'clock, open to the campus and to people from the Huntington Library. Following that, Bloom had dinner at the Athenaeum with the Dreyfus committee and Huttenback.

ASPATURIAN: How did you find all this out?

LA BELLE: Oh, everyone was given the schedule of his activities. It was passed out to everyone to show what Bloom would be doing, and certain people of course were invited to the lunch. And I saved all of those things because I thought they were interesting. But here's the most amazing thing. He was picked up the next morning at some hour so early that only birds are familiar with it and taken back to the airport. Amazingly, with this packed schedule he had found time to read some of my published work on Blake, along with the first forty pages of my Roethke manuscript, which Huttenback had given to him. He then scrawled a quick letter in pencil on our division stationery, extolling himself as a scholar. Most of the letter was actually devoted to him, modesty not being one of the charms for which he is most noted, and the rest

disparaged me. Now Bloom once claimed in *Time* magazine to be able to read 1,000 pages an hour. Thus I figure that he spent approximately two-and-a-half minutes on my Roethke study—on the first 40 pages of a 250-plus-page book. But his blooming letter, as I like to think of it, was touted as the final word on the subject to one and all. It was immediately announced as such by Huttenback, and everyone went and read it.

ASPATURIAN: When you say one and all...

LA BELLE: I imagine it went immediately to Christy, but it certainly went to every tenured faculty member in the division. So after Hallett Smith read it, he wrote to Huttenback saying, if you seek long enough you can find a negative report on anybody, and pointing out that Bloom's views on poetry had come under a barrage of criticism and that it was no accident that Bloom belonged to a one-man department at Yale.

ASPATURIAN: When did you learn this?

LA BELLE: Almost immediately. Everyone knew. I then wrote a memo to Huttenback that I think deserves to be included. It was dated December 16, 1974. [Reads from document:]

It has come to my attention that some of my work has been shown to Harold Bloom for his opinion. You may remember that in September when I handed in my work to you, my only specific request was that it not be sent to Professor Bloom and you said that it would not be.

Let me just add that it was acceptable then and is today for a candidate who is up for promotion to give the name of one person to whom he doesn't wish to have his work sent.

My reasons for this were twofold. One, Professor Bloom has consistently excluded from his studies any consideration of Blake's visual art or its relationship to the poetry. My work on Blake is deeply concerned with these topics. I'm not sure why Bloom has assiduously avoided half of Blake's work, but I suspect there might be a prejudice against any verbal-visual studies. Two, my work on Roethke, and some of my work on Blake, deals with the relationship between the poet and his tradition. This is a field of great interest to Professor Bloom, but my approach to it is markedly differently from his

and implicitly criticizes his mythological–psychological approach. In considering his opinion of my work, one should, I think, keep in mind these two points, plus the fact that even Professor Bloom could not have read all my work carefully in the limited time he was here. I did make this one entreaty and understood that you would respect it. I cannot help thinking that because of my request you knew that Professor Bloom’s reaction would be negative before you even showed him my work.

ASPATURIAN: I think it shows a certain restraint on your part that you didn’t add as a third point that Bloom appears to be a megalomaniacal blowhard.

LA BELLE: In other words Huttenback knew that Bloom would be a hostile referee.

ASPATURIAN: Let me ask at what point in this process did you begin to smell a rat?

LA BELLE: I don’t know. I still thought maybe Huttenback didn’t remember. Maybe he didn’t remember that I had given him that request. He certainly had no record of it in his file, he said.

ASPATURIAN: Now his manner to you in all this time was genial and cordial?

LA BELLE: He was always perfectly friendly to me. The air was always full of his feigned friendliness. He would so like to have helped me. He would so like to have defended me if only I had given him something, anything, to work with. If only I had measured up! That was always the attitude.

ASPATURIAN: In a number of the other oral histories I read about your case, there is a fair amount of speculation about Huttenback’s inability to deal in an equitable and rational way with a young female scholar.

LA BELLE: I don’t see how we would know. He had never come up against one. I was the first female person ever to come up for tenure in any division, so I don’t know. He said something very interesting to me fairly early on, Huttenback. I always thought of him as Huttenback, but I suppose I always called him Bob to his face; everyone did. But he always called me La Belle. He said to me once very early on, “La Belle, I just don’t feel you’re on my team.”

And, you know, “his” team. He didn’t say “our team.” We were in the hallway, and he just said this. And not only was I not on his team, I was in his eyes clearly on the opposing team. Now I know very little about sports so I probably shouldn’t even say this, but after that I always visualized a football game with him as the quarterback. I would think Huttenback, quarterback, quarterback, Huttenback. Hut Hut. Don’t they say Hut Hut in football? So I thought about that. He was the ball carrier, and his teammates Lance Davis and Rod Paul ran interference for him. And I was on the other team—the team that was supposed to be beaten, the team that was supposed to lose. Huttenback and his fellow players often huddled, I think that’s the word, before meetings. They were always prepared for meetings, and therefore when he gave the signal, his backup team was always ready to rush in and make the right plays.

Where were we?

ASPATURIAN: I asked about personal difficulties and when you began to suspect he was acting in bad faith.

LA BELLE: By then, I think I had, but he always acted friendly and I always acted friendly. I realize now that I think about it that there were probably some things I shouldn’t have done, but I probably would have done them anyway. For instance every spring, we used to have a big annual faculty dinner honoring the people who were retiring and becoming emeriti. That spring—I think it would have been 1974, just before this all started—Hallett was retiring, and I was honored to be at his table during this dinner. And various people had gotten up and paid tribute to him.

The day after that dinner, the *day* after that dinner, Huttenback went into Hallett’s office and told him he would no longer be able to keep his office starting with the next year. I couldn’t believe that. I wrote a letter to Harold Brown the next day saying how much I appreciated what he had said about Hallett at the dinner and how he hoped that Hallett would remain an active part of the community. Now Hallett was being told that his office was being taken away, and I thought that Harold Brown should know about that. The day after that, Hallett was given his office back. So I had gone over Huttenback’s head.

ASPATURIAN: Do you think Huttenback had found out about your letter?

LA BELLE: Probably.

ASPATURIAN: And this was before your tenure case?

LA BELLE: I believe it was. I haven't checked the dates on that because I never thought about whether there was any connection until right now. I'm not sure, but those sorts of things probably didn't help. I mean it was awkward. Many of us so admired the integrity and the style of our former chair and had loyalties to him. So, I sent that memo.

Getting back to my tenure case, the next thing to happen was that Huttenback wrote to all of the tenured members of the division asking them to send him their written views about my promotion. This resulted in a volley of position papers as professors began lining up on both sides of the debate. Huttenback then told me that there would be a discussion and a vote of *selected* members of the division.

Roger Noll, who was a professor of economics, then sent a memo to Huttenback about this upcoming discussion, and he also sent a copy to me, saying he thought that I too had the right to read it. He said that he couldn't see how an appeal to selected tenured faculty would be an appropriate way to make such a decision, and that there was no way for this procedure to create a fair accounting of my case.

ASPATURIAN: In other words, they were going to cherry-pick?

LA BELLE: I guess so. One of the people invited to "comment" was a law professor who taught part-time at Caltech and part-time at USC.

So people started writing these letters and commenting on them before this "discussion," which was really a debate, took place. David Elliot, who was a professor of history, wrote a letter to Huttenback saying that for him the clincher in this case was Claude Simpson since—I'm now quoting Elliot—"You told me a month ago you would regard his opinion as—was the word 'decisive'?"

By now quite a few letters had come in from my former students to whom Huttenback had written, and Huttenback also sent out a notice to everyone to come in and look over these letters. I didn't get to of course, but... Elliot also pointed out in his memo to Huttenback that they were "remarkably favorable." When Elliot read the file, there were about thirty letters in it.

And the two at the top of the file were unfavorable. But then the respondents confessed that they had gotten Fs in the class. Elliot writes that he ended his reading of the letters with the feeling that this was a pretty impressive response. And let me add that once the letters showed that I was a good teacher, the whole issue of my teaching ability was dropped and never mentioned again.

The day of the divisional debate arrived. It was December 19. It was made up of Chairman Huttenback and I guess at this point anyone among the tenured division faculty could come and “other professorial personnel.” No direct vote on me was taken, but it was moved, seconded, and passed that “the division of humanities and social sciences should continue to adhere to the standards of the most distinguished counterpart departments in the country.” After another month had passed, my case went back to the IAC, and they confirmed the negative recommendation.

ASPATURIAN: On the basis of what?

LA BELLE: I don’t know. I guess the first time they hadn’t seen things like the Bloom letter, or I guess the Simpson letter for that matter. Anyway, that’s what they decided.

ASPATURIAN: Was this just a reflexive validation of the division chair’s authority?

LA BELLE: I don’t know. Everything, all of it, was filtered through Huttenback. At the IAC meetings, he was the only division member there. So everything that was said was his version of what went on.

ASPATURIAN: So at this point the turmoil within the division had not really reached the wider campus except for what Christy knew?

LA BELLE: This is a small campus, and I imagine that a lot of people knew a lot but I don’t know. So far as I know at that point it had pretty much been kept within the division. And, as I say, we’re only talking about a couple of months. School doesn’t really start until the end of September, and I guess it would have been early January at this point.

Huttenback came to my office. Once again, nothing was ever in writing, no procedures and no requirements for tenure. And at that time, he explained to me that the reason for my not

being promoted was a lack of a book published by a major university press. It was true—I had not yet done that. There were also other attacks—on my collegiality. That I wasn't very visible—which seems ironic in the light of all my activities. And also Huttenback had never come to any of the seminars or talks I had given to the joint Caltech-JPL seminars.

ASPATURIAN: I've got to interpose again here that there seems to have been a personal element in all this. Nobody was quite able to get to the bottom of what that was?

LA BELLE: I don't know that it was personal. Huttenback divided the world into two groups. He always did this. There were those in his little coterie, and there was the enemy, and he showered favors on his inner circle and he did everything he could to get rid of those he considered his foes.

ASPATURIAN: Were there others in the same boat as you who had been denied tenure as well?

LA BELLE: Yes. I'll give you a good example. William Cozart, probably not a name you are familiar with, was a tenured English professor in the division. However, Huttenback froze his salary. There was no way that Cozart, who was married and had a family, could go on without ever getting a raise again. He left and went into the computer world. Huttenback always said, well, Cozart went into the computer world where he could make more money. But the reason that he did it was because he knew he would not ever get a raise. Huttenback had told him so.

ASPATURIAN: A division chair had that kind of latitude?

LA BELLE: They still do, over raises. Raises are in the hands of the division chair.

ASPATURIAN: But there are checks and balances in place now, are there not?

LA BELLE: I don't know about that. That decision was so unfair. Cozart had won every teaching award, was a fabulous teacher. Everyone liked him. But Huttenback wanted to drive him out so that he could bring in someone else who would feed his ego. And he firmly believed that his little coterie were the best and the brightest. And some of them were. Anyway, people

with power like to exercise power even in the trivial arena. So to get back to my case and his visit to my office. He informed me that my contract would be renewed only for a one-year period, which was standard, and that my employment at the Institute would terminate at the end of the academic year 1975–1976. Not long after that, Roy Harvey Pearce, my dissertation director at UCSD, wrote a letter to Harold Brown.

At that time he was dean of students at UCSD and I can't tell you how high his scholarly reputation was. I'll just read a little section of this. [Reads from document:]

Dear President Brown, Now that the affair is over, now that I can in no way affect your decision, I want to protest for the record the treatment accorded my former student Jenijoy La Belle. As you may know, I was asked to contribute to the file in connection with her being considered for tenure. I wrote at the outset that I might be found biased, since I had directed her dissertation, then did my best to give an objective evaluation. I suggested that it would be most important to write to a number of people, experts in her fields, who did not know her personally. Since some of those people have written to or talked with me, and since I have seen what they wrote, I now know that most of the letters were strongly in her favor. And I find it amazing that your judgment, for in the final analysis it is your judgment, depended so much upon the adverse letter of Harold Bloom, who is well known for his imperious, dictatorial, sometimes even manic insistence that only he is authoritative in the matters on which he has written. I can only conclude that those sitting in final judgment on Miss La Belle were either incompetent to judge her or had made up their minds in advance that she must not receive tenure. [He ends it saying] Somewhere, somehow, you've all got out of touch with the idea of the modern university and the role of literary-humanistic studies in it. Sincerely, Roy Harvey Pearce.

ASPATURIAN: To which Harold Brown responded?

LA BELLE: I don't know whether Harold Brown responded or not.

ASPATURIAN: This I assume was cc'd to you?

LA BELLE: No, it was not cc'd to me. I think I got it many years later. Pearce was not the kind of person who would have spread it around. You can see how old it is, though—this yellowing paper. [Laughter]

Well, I taught for the rest of the academic year '74–'75, and spent a lot of time working on various 17th-century manuscripts, which we can talk about sometime later, at the Huntington Library. Richard Feynman would often come and have lunch during that winter and spring, with me and the other scholars there. We had many pleasant walks and talks in the garden. My main goal at this point of course was to find a publisher for my Roethke manuscript. Earlier in the fall I had sent out letters to the directors of several top university presses inquiring if they would allow me to submit my manuscript for publication. You didn't just send things in. You certainly had to ask, and several very good presses replied affirmatively with, of course, the stipulation that we talked about last time, that I would not submit the manuscript to any other publisher while it was under consideration. So I had to choose one, and I chose Princeton University Press, although the editor warned me that the competition for space on their very limited list was fairly keen. I did not tell anyone at Caltech that I had sent it to Princeton. A few months later Princeton sent me two encouraging reports from their outside readers with some ideas for revision. They weren't major revisions, and they were good suggestions, so I did some more work on the manuscript and sent it back. On September 23, a few days before the fall quarter of 1975 started—that is to say, the beginning of my last year—I received another letter from Princeton. I just let it sit on my desk at school for several hours, because I was doing some work that needed to get done, and if it was a rejection, I knew I wouldn't get the work done that day, so I didn't open it right away. And I finally opened it and I read that the editorial board at the Princeton University Press had voted unanimously to accept the manuscript. I would have turned a cartwheel in my office if I had had room! I will never forget flying into Kent Clark's office and telling him the news.

But speaking of Kent, I wanted to go back and read from a document he wrote after my book was accepted. He originally wrote it to [Professor of History] Peter Fay—sometime in November or December of 1975—as a memo discussing all sorts of divisional policies, but on January 12, '76 he sent it with a cover letter to Harold Brown. It was in excess of thirty pages, and it contains his thoughts on divisional policy, and it should be preserved in its entirety in some archive or other.

I'll only read this section, which begins by telling how “the nonstop saga” of my tenure consideration “shed brilliant light on divisional politics.” [Reads from document:]

The best way we can begin, I suppose, is to recall the divisional meeting which attempted to decide the fate of Jenijoy. The scene, which is as memorable as a public hanging, deserves to be recorded for its drama alone. Recollected in tranquility, it is the sort of artifact that could hardly have been better scripted by Woody Allen, and it is as full of ironies as *Oedipus Rex*. But beyond its intrinsic drama, it furnished a textbook illustration of many divisional problems. On this basis too it merits extensive treatment.

As rational discussion, the meeting on Jenijoy was only fair. It would rate perhaps 2.7 on a scale of 10, but as drama it had everything: inspiration, enlightenment, exhilaration, suspense, pathos, bathos, comedy, and tragedy. First of course there was inspiration. I was thrilled when Roger Noll and Lance Davis explained how truly excellent the social science portion of the division has become. And I was delighted when Lance gave a graceful nod toward Bob Huttenback as if Bob too might be truly excellent. Conceivably, I might have been even more thrilled if I had not known the people personally, but nevertheless it was inspiring. I found myself willing to stipulate that if they were even half as good as Lance implied, they were very good indeed. And I could not help feeling a twinge of pity for people like Feynman and [Professor of Biophysics and biology division chair Robert] Sinsheimer, who must inevitably suffer by comparison. Then came the exhilaration. Professor after professor explained his standards of excellence for academic tenure and promotion. And as standard after standard came forth, each one higher than the other, no one, I hope, could help feeling a giddy sense of pride in being a member of such an organization.

Equally dizzying and slightly terrifying was the speed with which our standards in literature and history rushed up beyond those of such places as UCSD, UCLA, and Stanford. Our ascent was so rapid, in fact, I feared we might all get the bends. But even more exciting than our swift rise to eminence was an almost unbearable suspense. Would a letter, solicited from Princeton at the last possible moment, promulgate such lofty standards for publication that it would settle Jenijoy's hash by definition? Would it be approved by a majority of the division? Fortunately the suspense did not last long. After a certain amount of unseemly bickering, Princeton standards were duly approved.

This serene sense of difficulty overcome was almost ruined by a moment of pure bathos. Some pedant, who should have been a lawyer, said in effect that we had just passed an *ex post facto* law. Whether or not Jenijoy actually met Princeton criteria, he implied, she could not be fairly judged on standards adopted many years after she was hired. At this point Bob Huttenback rushed to our rescue. As our expert witness on the subject, he assured us that although current Princeton standards had been established at Princeton only recently, Jenijoy had been informed all along that she must meet them.

The pathos for the drama was furnished, as we all remember, by Ted Scudder, one of the original judges, who left a sickbed to help us arrive at a just decision. When he explained how carefully he had examined Jenijoy's critical writing and how deeply he had agonized over his ultimately negative verdict, he brought a lump to our throats. And when we reflected that he is as well qualified to judge literary scholarship on Theodore Roethke and William Blake as he is to conduct a symphony orchestra, some of us almost sobbed aloud.

A good deal of the comedy, I regret to say, was furnished by me. Still dazed from the discussion of standards, I heard myself trying to explain to economists the economics of scholarly publication and, sillier still, the significance of Jenijoy's work on Roethke. Luckily I was not the only clown in the room. Some other yo-yo, I've forgotten which one, found what he thought was a verbal problem in one of Jenijoy's recommendations, and he insisted on arguing that the recommendation didn't mean what it said. For a few moments there, until cooler heads prevailed, it looked as if we might have to stop and conduct a course in remedial reading. But the higher comedy, as opposed to the inadvertent farce, was reserved for Lance [Davis]. He wittily encapsulated the sense of the meeting by saying in effect—this loses a great deal in paraphrase—that divisional arguments on promotion and tenure are nonsensical, since the whole problem can simply be handed over to the editors of professional publications, the ultimate judges of all human excellence.

While all this oral drama was going forward, an even more fascinating unspoken drama was being played out underneath—like a subtle musical accompaniment. If you listened carefully you probably heard the violas playing something like 'That Old Black Magic,' as background for one of the silent assumptions. This theme, delicately hinted in the preliminary literature but never quite expressed in open argument, said that to know Jenijoy is to love her and that to stay around her any length of time is to lose all power of judgment. Hallett Smith, in particular, the violas said, suffered from what might be called 'The Jenijoy Parallax.' He was so bemused by her potent charms that in spite of forty years' experience as a writer, scholar, and administrator, he could not tell a first-class literary brain when he encountered one. And of course it followed that although Hallett's scholarly reputation is perhaps higher than that of all his truly excellent colleagues combined, his judgment in this case could be safely discounted. At one point, while Roger was commiserating with Jenijoy's advocates on their gallant but misguided devotion to an inferior scholar, I feared one of them might leap to his feet, put his hand on his heart, and declare, 'I am not now, I never have been, and I never wish to be Jenijoy's lover,' or that some impolitic boor might attempt to defend a lady by suggesting she's not nearly so irresistible as her critics seem to suppose.

In harmony with this major melody went the allied theme that Jenijoy's addled admirers had perhaps corrupted other literary scholars and that testimony from her early advisors, whatever their eminence as literary critics, was at worst prejudiced and at best irrelevant to her present status as a scholar. This last thought was voiced openly by Roger, who modestly explained, by way of contrast, how truly excellent his own references were—not one of which was written by anyone who had known him very long.

More delicate but no less appealing was a countermelody that sounded something like 'Hearts and Flowers.' Played on a faintly audible violin, it suggested that all opposition to Jenijoy proceeded from nothing but the highest and most disinterested motives, completely unsullied by personal prejudice or political chicanery, and that only a passionate fool would hesitate to sacrifice one unworthy scholar for the prestige of the division and the honor of Caltech. This *obbligato*, I am happy to say, was only slightly marred by a bass viol or two, which kept saying, 'We'll get rid of that girl, and we'll find a reason yet.'

Well, we all know that the drama concluded in tragedy. With infinite regret, we declared Jenijoy dead—good perhaps, but not great, and certainly unworthy of our division. Some of us, purged of pity and fear, felt sadder but stronger. Some of us, like Didi and Gogo in *Godot*, murmured, 'nothing to be done,' and a few of us even reflected that this catastrophe might have happened to us too if we had not been truly excellent. Then we all washed our hands and went to lunch.

And that of course is where the story should have ended, in good, heavy-breathing tragedy. Unfortunately, real life makes hash of great art. In this case the corpse refused to stay dead. Contravening all known laws of dramatic structure, the show went into extra innings and transformed itself into something between romantic comedy and sheer farce. It was as if Antigone, instead of dying about her business, had escaped from her cave, spit in Creon's eye and pirouetted off the stage. Jenijoy's executioners, as it turned out, had selected the wrong brand of hemlock. They had rest their case solely upon publication. They had tacitly abandoned their earlier argument that Jenijoy is a bad teacher when an actual survey, taken belatedly by Bob, showed that she is a good one. They had dismissed their colleagues in English as incompetent or prejudiced clowns, discounted outside literary experts, and thrown themselves upon the mercy of the editors as upon the oracle at Delphi. Jenijoy's magnum opus on Roethke had not yet been published. It had been rejected in fact by a press; hence it was second-rate. And though it might be patronized as a 'nice try,' it could only be used seriously to cast doubt on the brains of anyone who saw it as a significant contribution to scholarship in modern poetry.

As a corollary of this basic judgment, it was easy for instant experts in literary criticism and publications to wave away Jenijoy's published articles as

either trivial or disqualified by their appearance in journals less prestigious than PMLA [Publications of the Modern Language Association of America], and of course it was easier still to ignore her then-unpublished work as beneath notice. If Jenijoy's prosecutors had any presentiment that scholars of English might conceivably be right about the quality of her work, or that when David Smith and Oscar Mandel agree on a literary judgment, the author must be remarkable indeed, or that they might suddenly find themselves cast as characters in a comic opera, they gave no sign. Secure in the voice of the Oracle and thoroughly convinced of their own probity and excellence, like the protagonists in classic tragedy, they lined up behind their fearless leader and marched straight into a barrage of custard pies.

The denouement, as we all know, was too pat and implausible for the most artificial of comedies. Oscar Wilde would have been ashamed to write it. All through our discussion of standards, the name 'Princeton' had rung like a great gong. Princeton, we learned, is the place where assistant professors of English are made to bleed, where each drop in academic employment occasions a rise in standards, and where the scrutiny of literary excellence is as blank and pitiless as the sun. And it was from Princeton, of all places, that the Oracle, which had been mumbling all along, finally spoke clearly. The editors of Princeton University Press and their referees declared unanimously that Jenijoy's book on Roethke was worthy of their high standards, and that they would publish it. This declaration, which had been preceded by a rain of acceptances for her other unpublished work, established her at once, by the criteria of her judges, as undoubtedly fit for the general excellence of our division and probably worthy to eat, occasionally, at the Athenaeum. It rescued Jenijoy from a fate worse than death—from being patronized by Rod Paul—and it probably saved her whole academic career. It brought about in short a comic reversal of fortune that would have nauseated Aristotle and sent George Bernard Shaw into shuddering fits.

Fortunately one thing saved the whole farce from becoming absolutely outrageous and from degenerating into sloppy and maudlin sentimental comedy. There was an obvious danger, when the good news from Princeton arrived, that our division chair would rush, sobbing, to Jenijoy's office, throw his arms around her neck, and tell her how glad he was to find that she was truly excellent after all. There was further danger that Lance and Rod would apologize to Jenijoy for all the trauma they had unwittingly caused her, and that they would volunteer to move heaven and earth to right the wrong. But all three men restrained themselves nobly. No one stepped out of character. If other members of the division expressed themselves openly and handsomely in Jenijoy's favor, and many did, at least we were spared the sound of blubbering and the ridiculous spectacle of grown men dancing in the halls of Baxter.

It goes on some more, but I think I'll stop there.

ASPATURIAN: Do you think Harold Brown, although undoubtedly a brilliant human calculator, was able to appreciate this document?

LA BELLE: I don't know. But you're right. It's so wonderful. Kent's use of understatement, his use of hyperbole. That's why I wanted to read it. His brilliant use of repetition so that "truly excellent" becomes like Antony's "honorable men" speech [in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*] and gets turned on its head.

But I need to backtrack for a moment. When I got the news from Princeton, I was so thrilled that I actually used my Caltech telephone to make a long-distance call to my mother. I had never done this before because we were told we weren't supposed to use Caltech phones for personal long-distance calls, even though I had heard various reports that some people were doing that all the time. I called her, even though I knew that she was at school teaching, and had someone in the secretary's office go and get her out of class so that I could tell her. The next morning, I went to Huttenback's office. I went in and said I knew he would be very pleased to hear that I had had six more articles accepted for publication since I had last talked to him, and that my manuscript on Roethke had been accepted by Princeton, and that I would like to request a reconsideration of the tenure decision.

And he immediately said "No." He said, "No, the decision has been made and it is final." I wrote it down as soon as I left his office. This was almost exactly a year after the tenure process began.

ASPATURIAN: Was he cordial?

LA BELLE: Yes, he probably said it this way [breezily, cheery]: "No, the decision has been made and it's final." I later learned that he met that afternoon with Dr. Christy and Vice Provost Neil Pings, who must have convinced him otherwise, because on the following day he told me he would do "some sort of review."

I of course knew that it was an AAUP [American Association of University Professors] policy that tenure decisions can be reviewed if substantial "new evidence" can be presented in a candidate's favor, and in most cases there is no specific time limit on when the candidate can

request reconsideration. He may do so at any time up to *de facto* termination of his employment, which would have been at the end of the following academic year, because I still had a contract. And I imagine that Dr. Christy was not one to ignore due process.

The memoranda then started flying again. The tenured English faculty wrote to the IAC and said they felt that their judgment of my work had now been “overwhelmingly vindicated,” and that the sooner the request for reconsideration was settled, the better. Their unanimous desire was for an expeditious and quiet settlement of the case. After several weeks of negotiations, the IAC affirmed that it was Institute policy to grant a review. And who was charged with the responsibility of making up a reconsideration procedure? Once again, Huttenback, who by this point was clearly placed in an adversarial relationship to my tenure candidacy. So once again the prosecutor had been made the judge, plus he got to handpick the jury. The literature group then asked that my tenure review not be confused or combined with the decision on another member of the literature faculty, Stuart Ende, who was up for tenure at this time, and who, as you may recall, had already been promoted to associate professor by Huttenback.

ASPATURIAN: But he had not been granted tenure at that time?

LA BELLE: Yes. Tenure required following certain procedures, whereas Huttenback had just promoted him on his own without, as far as I know, consultation with the tenured English faculty. The literature faculty asked that my case be decided first. Huttenback did not heed their requests. First of all he added two more members to the already unbalanced divisional promotion tenure committee, and said that it would decide the matter for both of us. Now there were three historians, three economists, one anthropologist, and one literature professor, still Oscar Mandel. With Huttenback as chairman. Then he instituted a reconsideration procedure that took the decision completely out of the hands of the tenured literature faculty. He hired—i.e. this time they got paid—five English professors at other universities to review my work and report on it.

ASPATURIAN: How could this happen? It did not occur to anyone in the upper echelons of administration that they were getting themselves into potentially deep water legally?

LA BELLE: We'll talk more about that later. The administration—I think the entire school—always believed that their chairmen were trustworthy, honorable men. I believe that they believed that. Plus no one talked to them—the Caltech tenured lit faculty—as far as I know, or talked to me, except Christy that one time. Everything was filtered through Huttenback. I mean, he violated rules and principles at Caltech, and eventually, when he went to UCSB, he violated the laws of the state of California, but nobody knew this yet.

ASPATURIAN: It sounds like Caltech didn't have many provisions in place to safeguard against this kind of arbitrary behavior.

LA BELLE: Actually I'm sure that Hallett had run it somewhat that way too. They all did. The way people got not just fired but hired was much looser in those days. So Huttenback got this elaborate procedure going with these five outside professors who were supposed to review my work. Several things happened that showed the true nature of this review. The outside readers were specifically asked to compare my work with Ende's. Also, Huttenback removed a significant portion of my work from the packages sent to the readers.

ASPATURIAN: How did you find out?

LA BELLE: A secretary came in and asked me what she was supposed to do with all these copies of some of my work. And I said, well, it was supposed to have been sent out. And she said no, everything's already been sent out. So I was apprised of this. I went to Huttenback. I wrote another memo of course about it and I was able to get the material included. But I didn't see how an equitable decision could be reached when such tampering was going on. I had been told earlier by Huttenback that this time the process would be antiseptic. That was his word. "This will be a completely antiseptic process."

But at least to some minds it was starting to seem tainted. There had already been a sort of *sub rosa* competition between Ende and me: I mean why had he gotten some sort of special promotion when I had many more publications at the time? Now we were put into direct combat, even though we specialized in different fields, and at no time had it been made clear that we were competing for the same tenure spot. His area was romantic poetry—Keats, Shelley, and so forth.

Also in many universities, Berkeley for instance, they have a clear prohibition against making comparisons of this sort, even within their own internal committees. You have to judge a person individually. Next, all of the earlier evaluations of my work, including the damning letter from Harold Bloom, were sent to the outside readers. So it was thus made patently clear to these readers that I was involved in a tenure controversy, whereas Ende, with the special promotion, was not. And this put me at a disadvantage. The major issue for the outside referees would become the dispute—and the reputation and opinions of other scholars, rather than the merits of my work. Plus much later I learned that Huttenback had included a cover letter that focused attention on the controversy.

Then when the letters finally came in, they were evaluated by people without expertise in my field except for Oscar. At the meeting of the divisional promotion and tenure committee, the vote was against me and for Ende. It went to the IAC committee and there was a split vote. I do not know what the split was. On the last day of January 1976, Huttenback called me at home, because it was on the weekend, and he asked me to come to his office, where he told me that President Brown and Provost Christy had determined to abide by the original action, which denied me a permanent post. I'm not sure why I remember this part but I do. I left Baxter and was walking to the car, where Bob Essick was waiting for me because he knew that I wouldn't be in there very long. You know how sometimes you have that feeling you're being watched? I turned around and looked up, and I could see in the upper window of Baxter, Martin Rubin and his wife. Martin Rubin was an assistant professor who had just been hired and was already in Huttenback's coterie. They had their faces pressed up against the glass, and when they saw me of course they shrank back. Now why were they there at that exact moment? I can only speculate that Huttenback told them that he was going to tell me that I had been defeated and that they were standing there to watch how I would take it. Of course I smiled and waved as gaily at them as if I were a Rose Queen, but I felt that it was a very shabby thing to have done. I think we should stop there.

ASPATURIAN: I'd like to ask one question at this point, and then we will stop. Had word of this broken open to the campus at large?

LA BELLE: It would the next week in the school paper, the *California Tech*.

JENIJOY LA BELLE**SESSION 5****April 5, 2008**

ASPATURIAN: When we left off last time, the IAC had split on the issue of whether or not to recommend you for tenure. Robert Huttenback had informed you that they were upholding the recommendation. And the news was about to come out the following week in the *California Tech*.

LA BELLE: That's right. We're now in January 1976. Exactly a year has elapsed since the original action of no tenure, and contrary to what Kent [Clark] had written earlier [See Session #4], Antigone was back in her cave, and Creon was alive and well and ruling Thebes. So I was finally tired and frustrated, and I just wanted to lie low for a while. But the February 6 edition of the *California Tech* had a front-page article stating I had again been denied tenure. And then the following week there was a much more upsetting article entitled "Tenure Affair Elucidated." That included a list of allegations from "an anonymous source," the implication being that I or one of my supporters was the source. I still do not know who the source for that was. You can tell if you read the article that it's not the faculty just because of the way it's written. [Reads from document:] "Allegation 6: Huttenback is out to rape over the lit department. Allegation 4: The decision to deny La Belle was made on the basis of her personality because she doesn't smoke cigars and swear."

I mean this is not Kent, Beach, Hallett, David Smith, Oscar, or me. I do not know. Nor do I know who wrote it. The byline, C. Y. Achmet, was not a student. I tried to think of who the source might have been. But it was upsetting. So there were all of these allegations and then the author of the article refutes each of them. Now Provost Christy and I had a verbal agreement that neither I nor the administration would comment publicly in any way about the matter. And I had not, and I had no desire to do so.

However, I was informed by a member of the *Tech* staff that their refutations to these allegations derived from an extensive interview with none other than Huttenback.

I'll give an example from the article: The allegation was that Huttenback fought like a "cornered mongoose" against a review of the tenure decision. And the response in the article, i.e. Huttenback's response, since he had given this interview, was that he "delayed the review only to inquire after the Institute policy on such matters."

This was simply false. He objected to any review of my case after the book had been accepted. And as Kent Clark put it in a note to Christy, [Reads from document:]

I don't know who wrote the article describing Bob Huttenback as a "cornered mongoose" and of course I don't know how a cornered mongoose behaves. But I can say that in the early stages of this crisis he gave a very good imitation of a cornered something-or-other.

And then he went on to say to Christy,

As you may remember, Huttenback told Jenijoy that her case could not be reconsidered—something, incidentally, he had already told Alan Sweezy, who was a professor of economics at the time. In the process of getting the case reconsidered, there was an appeal to the ombudsman, a conference with the chairman of the Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee, a formal appeal by the tenured English faculty, and, if I'm not mistaken, some pressure from some of the younger social science faculty. It was only after a great deal of agonized squirming on Huttenback's part that the case was actually brought before the administrative council.

Kent is saying that Huttenback told Alan Sweezy that he would not reconsider it, just to back up that it wasn't just my word saying he wouldn't. This was written February 19, 1976. He goes on. [Continues to read from document:]

I cannot say of course how Huttenback presented the case to you [Dr. Christy] or what pressures you may have brought to bear on the subject, but the implication that Huttenback was or ever has been a calm, disinterested advocate of abstract justice is something between outrageous and ludicrous. These falsehoods delivered as usual at the top of the lungs are so transparent to anyone familiar with the facts of the case that they seem almost to have been published to embarrass the administration and to illustrate my unified field theory on Huttenback.

At any rate I trust that the distortions help to convince you personally of my serious contention: The key to the whole Jenijoy affair lies in the bias and political manipulation of our division chairman. Whether or not Jenijoy's sex had anything to do with that bias, only a team of psychiatrists could say for sure. I suspect that if Bob ever knew, the case is so thoroughly scrambled in his mind and mixed with other considerations that he could not tell even if he were inclined to try. This case, I regret to say, is much too serious and complex to be tried in the newspapers.

He then says to Dr. Christy that we should all calm down.

ASPATURIAN: At this time had the tenure denial been upheld?

LA BELLE: Yes, I was in my last year at Caltech. I had until July 1, 1976. As I said earlier, I had agreed not to comment publicly on the tenure decision. But since a member of the administration, i.e. Huttenback, had broken the agreement, I felt I was no longer held to it. And I wrote a statement that took up the entire front page of the next issue of the *Tech*—which I think was on February 20. I said, [Reads from document:]

I must speak out in my own behalf not to dispute a *fait accompli*, but so that I may, with a measure of self-respect, leave Caltech. I at least want to give the impression that I'm a real person with my own point of view, rather than just an object or an embarrassing "situation" over which others argue.

And I then stated various facts about the case, dates, procedures, my publications, and how the tenure decision process had been taken almost completely out of the hands of the English faculty. And then this was followed by a discussion of the standards by which I was judged, as distinct from the methods by which they had been applied:

The standards are very high. Caltech should demand no less. It may be more than a little presumptuous to apply the requirements of high-powered graduate schools of English to the small Caltech literature staff, but presumption has often been the first step to excellence. Yet I feel I have failed to meet these standards not because they are high but because they are narrow. The powers that be in the Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences—that automatically excludes the tenured English staff—seem to have decided that only those literature scholars of one particular type are truly excellent. This species is characterized by strong theoretical interests and

expertise at speculative criticism of a philosophical cast, often couched in specialized and highly allusive rhetoric. This school of criticism is represented at its best by a small group of admittedly famous and sometimes brilliant professors on the East Coast and their former students.

I am of course referring to Harold Bloom, the man who wears the emperor's new clothes.

I lack both the personal and intellectual ties with this group now necessary for gaining tenure at Caltech. My own interests lie elsewhere. I've pursued historical research and criticism based on it. I've written on the visual arts as well as on literature, and I've even indulged in textual research at the Huntington Library and the British Museum. I should have known better. To the new hermeticists these are all sure signs of a second-rate intellect. The written opinions of my supporters both inside and outside of Caltech, some of whom are just as famous and brilliant as the other group, have been ignored because they too are not members of this single acceptable school of literary studies. The best universities of course try to achieve a balanced faculty representing a broad range of interests and approaches. Yet I must admit that if Caltech pursues its present narrow-door policy voraciously enough, in ten or fifteen years it may well acquire a reputation as a high-level specialist institute of literary theory. How well this will serve undergraduate non-majors, i.e., about 98 percent of our students, is another matter.

Curiously, the rigorous standards now set up for making tenure decisions have not affected hiring procedures. The English teachers hired in the last few years have to date not published anything of the approved persuasion. This would seem to insure a series of tenure hassles. Instead of a narrow door, Caltech will have a swinging door forever set in motion by rejected assistant professors. For its own peace of mind, the administration should force the humanities and social science division to get its hiring policy in line with its firing policy. This can be done either by employing only *bona fide* followers of the approved school of thought or by dramatically lowering the standards for tenure now that they have served their purpose.

I will just say that this did turn out to be true with practically all of our new hires. Randy Splitter, a Berkeley PhD, was denied tenure; Joyce Penn didn't make it; Martin Rubin, a University of Virginia PhD, didn't even make it past the third-year review. [Continues to read from document:]

One can of course find a great many opinions on both sides of this emotionally charged issue of tenure. Besides my scholarship, my teaching

record has been called into question. I can only refer readers to students who have taken my classes for an opinion on that matter. I've also been accused of being "invisible" and not contributing to Caltech. In light of the public debate over the tenure issue, I find this somewhat ironic. I am of course invisible to those who do not care to come to the public lectures and seminars I have given. It's also been said I have not participated in divisional and Institute committee work. I have worked on Institute committees, but since divisional committees are completely in the hands of the chairman, I've had no control over my participation in such committees. I have on numerous occasions accepted extra teaching loads at the last minute and have performed various committee services for the literature staff.

The article by C. Y. Achmet in the February 13 issue of the *Tech* offered a list of eight allegations, which the author refutes. These are not my allegations, and I have no idea who made them, although there is more than a little truth in some of them.

I will be leaving Caltech shortly. I do so with regret because I have made some very good friends, particularly on the literature staff, and because I've enjoyed teaching Caltech students. I very much hope that this will end the series of articles in the *Tech*. I have long since learned that neither side pays any heed to the arguments of the other, and further debate is thus useless. It seems that the divisional and university-wide administration has been unwilling to give me tenure under any circumstances and my attempts to fulfill requirements were thus futile. I have found myself in a highly-charged political atmosphere. I have not attempted to match political talents against those with much more experience in such matters. Rather I chose to do my work to the best of my ability and meet stated criteria for gaining tenure. Yet each time I met the requirements, they were immediately raised, or narrowed, just enough so that I could not meet them. Perhaps my failure to gain tenure has a great deal more to do with my inability to succeed at the political process than anything else. I think many women who embark upon an academic career are ill-prepared for the rigors of divisional infighting, and I admit my own weaknesses in that field.

My scholarly work has been well received by a great many people whose opinions I respect and by journals and publishers of universal renown. Last week I contracted to do another book with Dover Press, had a lengthy article accepted by *The London Book Collector*, and had one of my earlier articles nominated for a national award. I must now try to turn my attention to these positive achievements of my career and leave Caltech with a mingled measure of frustration and sorrow.

I think it was rare for Richard Feynman to write letters to the *Tech*, but in this instance, after my letter appeared, he did. This is his letter to the editor. [Reads from document:]

To the Editor of the *California Tech*:

I should like to commend the *Tech* for giving its entire first page to Professor La Belle to outline her complex view of a sorry situation and to complement a perfectly clear and transparent account of the matter in the previous edition. Miss La Belle need not have answered the other account. A colleague of mine showed your reporter's account to me and said, 'What a whitewash.' I had followed the situation as it developed and knew he was right, but he had not; how did he know? He smiled and reminded me he was an expert on judging evidence in difficult physics experiments. In physics the truth is rarely perfectly clear, and that is certainly universally the case in human affairs. Hence what is not surrounded by uncertainty cannot be the truth — unless it be written in Russian 'pravda.'

I have known Jenijoy ever since the very first decisions on her tenure, for she introduced me to literary research and the Huntington Library and the wonders of holding in one's hand an old book written by Newton. I could appreciate directly how much he knew and how much he didn't know and what expressions he used that we still use. I will be very sorry to see her leave. Caltech is the loser.

I know nothing of English literature and cannot judge that, but from the first I was surprised to learn that in the Humanities, here at Caltech, the criterion was 'publish or perish,' or, rather, 'publish in the most prodigious journals or perish,' or now, having published in the finest, it is 'perish anyway.' Why?

Most shocking of all for me was to see how the tenured English faculty were treated during the entire process. I'm glad Jenijoy, in her personal anguish, could make this situation public. Nobody paid attention to them, their opinions were not respected. They have done a great deal for us and our students to make this place livable and human, as the Department of Humanities is meant to. One purpose of this note is to get a chance to tell them that, though I ridicule their subject through ignorance—for I know, regretfully, less about their subject than they know about mine—I respect them and their contribution to our institution and to you students, and have felt sorrow and shame at how they have been treated.

Writing letters is dangerous—if you show an interest in a subject, those cornered mongeese making decisions are likely to put you on a committee. It is very hard to make decisions. Sincerely, Richard P. Feynman.

ASPATURIAN: Did you know he was planning to write this? Had you talked to him about the case?

LA BELLE: No.

ASPATURIAN: So during the year this was happening he had not heard from you about it.

LA BELLE: No, we really hadn't talked about it that year. I had talked to him the year before. Since the book had been accepted, I don't know that we had really talked. What I think is very interesting on this is that in the book of letters collected by his daughter, Michelle [*Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Track: The Letters of Richard P. Feynman*], they print the version of this letter that he gave to his secretary to type. In the original, he circles "mongeese," with a note to his secretary saying, "Leave as is. I want to prove I know no English." So he knew that the plural of mongoose was mongooses, but he left it on purpose. Which I just thought was such a nice little touch.

ASPATURIAN: What happened after these two letters were published in the *Tech*?

LA BELLE: Nothing else appeared in the *Tech* that I recall, but many of the professors wrote to me privately, ones that I didn't even know, after my statement appeared. I have a note from Wheeler North, who was a professor in environmental engineering. And I found this one very comforting. Because he said, [Reads from document:]

Dear Dr. La Belle, We probably do not know each other. I am a fellow Caltech faculty member. I read your statement on the front page of the *California Tech*. Your situation is very reminiscent of my own position some fourteen years ago at another university. I have great sympathy for the frustration and emotional stress you are experiencing. Your statement is restrained, beautifully written, and appears fair to all concerned. Unfortunately the academic mind is so tortuous that the real reasons for courses of action sometimes never surface. I have absolutely no familiarity with any facts of your situation beyond the contents of your statement. I did wish to convey my sentiments to you. I doubt if there is any way I could ever assist you but if at sometime I can be of help, please let me know. Sincerely, Wheeler North, Professor of Environmental Engineering.

ASPATURIAN: Who else did you hear from? Do you recall?

LA BELLE: I don't recall because this was one of the few that I saved. I even heard from people outside the school. I remember it was very comforting to hear from Marjorie Perloff, a fine

literary critic who later became the head of the Modern Language Association. She'd been turned down for tenure at Catholic University because she was told she had been "insubordinate." Of course both Wheeler North and Marjorie Perloff ended up teaching at much better places than where they had been; whereas one of my problems was that I'd started out at what I thought was the best school in the world, so where did I have to go? But it was still comforting to hear from people whom I admired that they had gone through tenure struggles and ended up back on their feet again.

ASPATURIAN: Had you been thinking at all at this point about alternative employment?

LA BELLE: Within the next month or two I was. At this point I was still responding to what had happened. I had also begun to think, what am I going to do next? Some months before all these articles appeared in the school paper—and by now both the *Star-News* and the *Los Angeles Times* had written articles based on the ones in the *Tech*—I had begun to pursue other avenues of recourse.

ASPATURIAN: Did these other papers come out and interview you or Huttenback?

LA BELLE: They didn't interview me—or him, as far as I know. I wasn't talking to anyone outside of the school publicly at that point because I had agreed that I wouldn't. They were fairly straightforward articles.

ASPATURIAN: For Richard Feynman, a man who was an iconic presence at Caltech and who made it a public policy to eschew political involvement of all types, to have written a letter commenting on university politics, must have caused some sort of stir. Were there specific reactions within the division?

LA BELLE: I don't recall, or maybe no one commented.

ASPATURIAN: In the Feynman biography, *Genius*, the author, James Gleick, comments at one point about the dismay of some of Feynman's colleagues when he supported you. Did you have any first-hand knowledge of that?

LA BELLE: Really? No. Colleagues in physics, you mean?

ASPATURIAN: No. Colleagues in general. I imagine he interviewed you for the book because he talks about the times that you spent introducing Feynman to poetry and then goes on to say that Feynman supported you in your tenure case to the dismay of some of his colleagues.

LA BELLE: So when I saw how the latest procedures had been going and how Huttenback was hopelessly snarling my promotion with Stuart Ende's, I went to the California Fair Employment Practice Commission, which is the FEPC, and signed a complaint. They suggested that I also file with the higher education branch—HEB. This was some months before January, so it would have been in the fall of '76, after the book was accepted.

ASPATURIAN: Were you advised finally to do this?

LA BELLE: No one told me to do it. I can't imagine who would have wanted me to do it. I just decided I would do it. I was supposed to file with the HEB of what was then the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare—HEW— so that it could be referred to the Office of the Federal Contract Compliance—OFCC—which could then be referred to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, EEOC. All of these initials, it was just crazy, the processes one had to go through. If I did all of that, then the compliance review could actually begin. But at this point I didn't have much faith in these abbreviations, and I wished they could shorten the process instead of just shortening the titles of all the various agencies into confusing initials. And I admit it was a hard decision for me to make to turn to outside sources.

I knew that CIT—to use more initials—would not like to be pressured. But I also knew that after starting a complaint, I could drop it at any time. I also interviewed several private attorneys who specialized in employment disputes and who had done work on bias cases in higher education, and I chose an attorney whom I didn't like. In fact, I chose him because I didn't like him. He was tough and pushing and aggressive, he was contentious, he was brash, he was perfect. His name was Stuart P. Herman, and he was very helpful not only to me but later to many other women whom I sent to him and who had been unfairly denied tenure or raises or advancement, some of them at Caltech, some not.

ASPATURIAN: I'd like to explore what you just said. You did not like him and yet you selected him. Why?

LA BELLE: Because I knew he could stand up to the Huttenbacks of the world. I had been so supported by gentlemen. Feynman's a gentleman, Kent, Hallett, David. These were gentlemen.

ASPATURIAN: You wanted a gutter fighter.

LA BELLE: I wanted a gutter fighter. When I walked into his office in Beverly Hills, there was a picture on his desk of Linda Carter. Before I could even open my mouth he said, "I'm dating her now. Linda Carter. You know she's Wonder Woman." As a side note, I actually came to like and admire him very much. He began his career in the civil rights division of the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. He litigated many cases to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He died of cancer in 2000 when he was only fifty-seven years old. It was very sad. I still often get notes or letters asking, who in the Caltech tenure case was your lawyer? And I'm always sorry to have to say that he died very young. He was tough. He was good.

ASPATURIAN: So you had confidence that despite your personal feelings about him, he would do justice to your case. Did all of the attorneys you talked to believe that you had a case?

LA BELLE: Yes. They all did. But he was also willing to take my case on a contingency basis and all I'd have to do is pay him for his time. And as one last-ditch internal attempt, at about the same time, I submitted my case to the Faculty Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, chaired at that time by Norman Brooks, an environmental engineer. He explained to me that the AFT committee—I mean I didn't even know what they did—doesn't sit as a hearing board, but is simply meant to provide assistance to faculty members in their disputes with the administration and to seek resolutions without legalistic proceedings. They don't evaluate the professional competence of a person, but they're interested in questions of procedure. I was invited to make a presentation to them in April of 1976, which I did.

I felt bad about doing it, handing them such a vexed case, but I felt that it cried out for judicial review of some kind. And then after I submitted it, they had to decide whether they were willing to take it or not. It was a long statement. I'll just read a little. [Reads from document:]

In submitting my case, I hope to accomplish three things: First I hope the committee can ask the president and trustees to reverse what seems to me and many others, an unjust and grossly prejudiced decision. Second, I hope that a detailed examination of my case will prevent a repetition of the practices and (mistaken) policies that brought about the damaging and regrettable controversy. And finally I hope that whether or not I must leave Caltech, the faculty can profit from my case in refining and perhaps “standardizing” its tenure procedures, in protecting itself against arbitrary administrative powers, and in bringing closer and more effective communication between itself and the administrators who govern its affairs.

Before I begin listing the specific violations of what might be called sane “legal” procedure, the prejudicial errors on which I base my appeal to the tenure committee, I would like to make a few general observations on what I suppose to be the theory of Caltech administration. Caltech administrative practice is based on two fundamental assumptions about its division chairmen. In entrusting chairmen with a substantial amount of personal power and giving them a corresponding liberty to make good and fast decisions, Caltech assumes 1) that its chairmen are competent in the fields they administer. That if they cannot be experts in all areas of the fields under their command, they have at least a reasonable grounding in the area and enough knowledge to tell who some of the experts are, to solicit sound advice, and to evaluate evidence when they get it. Caltech also assumes 2) that its chairmen are men of the highest integrity, that within the obvious natural limits of human biases, they will be as fair and unprejudiced as possible, on guard against their own prepossessions and against any tendency to make ‘political’ decisions.

These qualities of competence and disinterested fairness are obviously important in all serious decisions, but in decisions on promotion and tenure they are of overwhelming importance. If a chairman is either incompetent or prejudiced or both, he can turn what should be an orderly evaluation process into something like a legal horror story. If he’s prejudiced against a candidate or if he does not know what he’s doing, or if he feels politically threatened, the case becomes an adversary procedure. The chairman becomes not an impartial judge but the prosecuting attorney at a trial in which the defendant has no legal safeguards, no right to appear, and, some argue, no right to know the evidence against her. The chairman-prosecutor not only appoints the jury but serves as its foreman. The jury moreover is quite literally in his pay, since he controls salary increases and other benefits. Furthermore and equally important, the chairman prosecutor as a link in the administrative chain of command is in a position to bias all normal review procedures. It is he who presents the case to the administration and his colleagues on the academic council, and he sits on the board that reviews his decisions. The appeals court in short gets the prosecution’s version of the case and is assisted in its

deliberations by the prosecuting attorney. It's hardly necessary to add that if the reviewing authority (in this case the administration) is furnished with bad information the "legal" situation becomes even more bizarre, since the administration is in effect the judge and jury of its own acts.

ASPATURIAN: Did you receive any assistance in writing this, since it contains a lot of legal terms?

LA BELLE: No. I didn't talk to anyone at all, and I don't think the attorney would have been interested in helping me with this. [Continues to read from document:]

In general then I will argue that Dr. Huttenback, chairman of HSS, has been put into a position in regard to my tenure decision where he's not competent to make a professional decision and where he has shown prejudice. Because of the way in which normal tenure decision procedures have been subverted, Dr. Huttenback had taken on extraordinary responsibility and in effect the decision to deny tenure has been, in spite of appearances to the contrary, his and his alone. When this decision was taken to higher levels of authority—the Office of the Provost, Dr. Christy—the preeminent advisor was of course Dr. Huttenback. The maintenance of the chain of command was important to the administrators' concern, and thus it was extremely difficult to get a clear hearing for any opinion contrary to that of the established authority, namely Dr. Huttenback. Neither Dr. Huttenback nor any higher administrators have any academic qualifications in my field.

And then to support these contentions I asked the committee to read all sorts of letters and reports and so on from outside people, and then I dumped the whole thing in their laps, which I felt bad about doing. They did decide to investigate the case. The members of this committee did a heck of a lot of work. Beside Norman Brooks, they were [Professor of Theoretical Physics] Leverett Davis, [Professor of Chemical Physics] Aron Kuppermann, [Professor of Geology] Bob Sharp, [Professor of Chemistry] Harry Gray, and [Professor of Chemistry] Norman Davidson. Harry Gray wasn't there for some of the early parts of this, but he did sign the final forms so he must have been on it. They inspected endless documents, prepared individual questionnaires that were sent to Huttenback and to people on various committees that judged this, and then they prepared more questionnaires—whole forests again disappeared as reams of paper were used. In May '76, they released the report to the chairman of

the faculty, Robbie Vogt, and I of course was sent a copy. I believe it's still considered a confidential document. I'm not sure. But the gist of it was the committee did find some "major deficiencies in the tenure review process" used in our division, and they recommended that these procedures be corrected. They also found that certain steps in the process were "ineptly" administered. But even though they felt that the existing procedures didn't provide adequate protection against the possible bias of the division chairman, they didn't find an adequate basis for my accusation that the prejudice of Huttenback controlled the decision. They did make important recommendations, such as that the division chair should not be a member of the promotion review committee, and that a division chair cannot afford to be an advocate or an adversary in the initial stages of a tenure case.

It's a long report, but basically the committee believed there were some elements of unfairness, but that they didn't provide a basis for reversing the negative tenure decision, which this committee couldn't have done anyway. In other words, it was just about what I expected. It took a middle course.

One other thing I did that was both internal and external to Caltech. Lew Wasserman was on the executive committee of the Board of Trustees. He was chairman and CEO of MCA, having also purchased Universal Studios and combined it with MCA so he's known as "The Last Mogul" because he controlled so much of Hollywood. He was one tough operator, and in the late '70s he was in his white-hot phase, and he sent out rays of power.

In the spring of '76, he came to our division as chair of the Trustees' Humanities and Social Sciences Advisory Committee. He met with a group of the untenured humanities faculty and at one point he asked us about our concerns. And much to the horror of my junior colleagues, I took advantage of the opportunity and briefly brought up my tenure case. He said he wished to know more and that I was to call his office and make an appointment.

ASPATURIAN: What did you say to him?

LA BELLE: At the meeting he just said something like, what are your concerns? I just said something like, I've been denied tenure and I think it was unfair. And everyone just looked at me, and he said, talk to me after this meeting.

I think my colleagues found it embarrassing, thinking I should make nice, but I didn't. I did call his office to make an appointment to meet with him in June. We talked, I told him I had filed with the EEOC, and he asked me to get in touch immediately when the government's official report on my case came in, if it ever did.

ASPATURIAN: What do you think motivated his interest?

LA BELLE: I think he wanted to protect the school, and I wanted to protect the school too. I think he immediately saw things in a wider perspective than anyone in the school had. He saw how this would look to the outside. And it would not look good because there was not a single tenured woman, and there were 208 men, and there was not a single associate professor or full professor who was female. I just think he saw that immediately, and he wanted to be able to help control it as much as possible, and I wanted him there so that he could let someone else see how this would look. So that's why I went to talk to him. Then he took me to the Universal commissary for a power lunch at his corner table, and it was such bliss, I can't tell you. So that was fun.

As of July 1, I was no longer on the faculty. I left Caltech and I left Pasadena. I knew people who had remained near the Institute and continued to come to campus after being terminated, and I did not want to be like them. I hate outstaying, and I didn't want to make my friends uncomfortable. I moved to the Wilshire Fairfax area. I don't even know why, but that's where I went, to a place near the La Brea Tar Pits. I liked to walk to the museum and study the saber-toothed cat attacking the giant sloth, and I liked looking at the wall of dire wolf skulls. It was strangely soothing.

That September, the chief of the higher education branch of HEW wrote to me at Caltech saying that they were not able to investigate my complaint and indeed were going to consider my case closed because I had not responded to their many letters. Of course because I was no longer at Caltech, I had not received their many letters.

ASPATURIAN: Why wasn't your mail being forwarded?

LA BELLE: I don't know, but it wasn't. I had certainly left a forwarding address. Fortunately this last letter had been sent by registered mail, and some alert and kind secretary called me, and I was able to respond just in time.

During the fall semester from early September to mid-December, I took a job as a part-time assistant professor of literature at Cal State Northridge, and it was a very different experience teaching there after being at Caltech. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I taught three composition courses in the morning, the first one starting at 8 a.m. I had an hour for lunch, during which I fielded phone calls for the two men I shared an office with. People did not have secretaries there. And then I taught a survey literature course in the afternoon.

What I remember most is that my hands and various items of my clothing were always purple from mimeograph ink. There was no Xerox machine, or if there was, I didn't have access to it. The students in the composition classes were not happy to be there and they didn't seem at all interested in the care and feeding of the semicolon, or other things that are dear to my heart. They were sweet students, but most of them were part-time and held down jobs. I vowed if I ever was able to return to Caltech, which I didn't think was likely, that I would never ever complain about Techers again, and I haven't. I spent weekends grading what seemed to be these endless essays, and then there were all those hours trying not to make any typos on the composition worksheets because, if you did, you'd have to start all over again, because they were on mimeograph.

ASPATURIAN: Were you in contact with anyone from campus at this point?

LA BELLE: Yes. The people in the literature faculty. My book came out that fall from Princeton University Press, so I could send it to Kent [Clark] and to other people and send them good reviews as they came out. It was well reviewed. In fact one of my favorite reviews by a very famous man—Charles Altieri—got my name wrong, calling me Jenni Belle LaJoy or something like that all the way through it. I was actually so happy about that, because I thought otherwise certain people would say I got this glowing review because we're best friends. The job at Northridge paid just slightly more than an unemployment check, but it kept me busy, it made me feel useful, and at least I was teaching. I had a long commute too—Wilshire Fairfax was kind of an interesting area to live in, but I did not like being there and I missed Pasadena so much. I was

living in a duplex. A woman and her daughter owned it, and they lived above me. They seemed very nice during the daytime, but at night the mother would shout terrible things at the daughter. The mother spoke German so I don't know what she was saying but the daughter would answer back in English, "I hate you! I hope you die of cancer!" They would shout this back and forth at each other, and I'm thinking, why am I here?

ASPATURIAN: It must have been a difficult time for you emotionally as well as professionally.

LA BELLE: Yes, that's why I wanted to be teaching somewhere and keep very, very busy. Just getting out to Northridge at eight o'clock every morning—I had barely learned to drive. I hadn't had to drive at Caltech, and now I had to get this car and drive and get places. But there were some wonderful people out there—the poet Ann Stanford and Richard Vogler, who was a Cruikshank collector and whom Bob Essick became very dear friends with. He knew all the antiquarian bookstores and all the antique shops, and really taught me how to pick out good old rugs. So that was wonderful.

I wasn't in contact with anyone from the EEOC during this time. They had warned me ahead of time that they had a very large backlog, and that it could be many months before there would even be an investigation. I did know that in the spring of 1976 before I left the Institute, Caltech had been statutorily advised by the EEOC that I had filed a charge of discrimination based on sex for the Institute's failure to grant tenure.

ASPATURIAN: Did you actually believe that the failure to grant tenure had anything to do with your gender?

LA BELLE: I don't know. I still don't know. It wasn't up to me to decide whether it was sex discrimination or not. For years before any of the tenure stuff started, my salary had been considerably less than that paid to an untenured male English professor with one year's less seniority. Some people have called this sex discrimination; some deny it. Two men with fewer publications than I already had recently been promoted. Was this discrimination? Maybe. Maybe not. I have now read the details of dozens of discrimination cases. University officials always contend that the denial of a tenure request has nothing to do with the candidate's being a woman but only with the quality of her research. That's what they say. Was it discrimination in

my case? Bias discrimination can be subtle, it's hard to distinguish, it's hard to define, it's hard to describe. It wasn't for me to decide. It was for the EEOC to investigate. That was the avenue open, so I took it.

Anyway to my total shock, in January 1977, exactly a year after I first filed, the EEOC issued a letter of “determination” in my favor. I later found out that there had been agents from the EEOC running around in Millikan studying employment files. It must have been quite interesting, but I had no idea. Suddenly this twelve or thirteen page letter of “determination,” dated January 18, 1977, was simply sent to me. It charged Caltech with discrimination against women in faculty employment. It said there was evidence that I was denied tenure leading to my dismissal because of my sex and that it was a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Other findings were that I was the first female hired by the university in a professorial role, and that the respondent, Caltech, employed no tenured female faculty members while employing 208 males with that status. They were very good with statistics. They even delved into the initial seven outside recommendations and found them generally positive, “despite the bias contained in five of the letters against women working in charging party’s field.”

I’m the charging party—I love that phrase, because I felt, you know, charged. For example, and I’m now quoting from the letter of determination, “The following comments were made, in the evaluators’ appraisals, of charging party’s qualifications for tenure: ‘I’ve looked over the work of [charging party] and find to my surprise that she’s a good girl. What the hell say I, there have been distinguished female professors of English.’”

These are comments in *positive* letters for me. I’d never seen these letters—it was still a positive letter, but really... There’s another from a professor from a “formerly all-male Eastern university,” who said he would vote a “reluctant no” and added, “On the other hand, were [charging party] being considered at Vassar—all female—which is where my wife teaches, I would strongly support [charging party].” Here’s another. I don’t even know what this one means: “She is a human who does not need to be a feminist.” The EEOC further notes an additional remark by one of the evaluators, who ended his letter by writing, “My best regards to the competing male.” It’s a reference to Stuart Ende, but they don’t call people by their names here.

As you may recall—we’ve talked endlessly about it—my work was at some point sent to three additional outside experts, on top of the original five; and a representative from the EEOC

actually had a discussion with one of them and found that he'd not been given all my work when he was asked to appraise me. This was even before things were left out of the one before. "He states that he did not have access to the major work she has done in the field." So I assume he never even got to see to the Roethke manuscript. When they get to the reconsideration and the matter of my work being judged alongside Stuart Ende's, the letter of determination states that the vice president, obviously Christy, states that the male's work was evaluated by this third group of experts, "in order that any conclusion would be, *on the face of it*, nondiscriminatory" and the EEOC added the emphasis to "on the face of it." The EEOC writes that, "It is impossible to determine to what extent respondent chose 'referees' that it knew would have adverse responses to charging party's work as it had done before since respondent refuses to identify this group of referees." So Caltech wouldn't even tell them who the last group was.

I'll read a little more from the EEOC letter; I'm on page six now. [Reads from document:]

The evidence indicates, however, that respondent included most if not all prior letters of recommendation in the packet of materials sent to the referees.

—that is, the referees the EEOC was never allowed to interview.

While all prior letters concerning the male's work were favorable, some of the prior letters concerning charging party were unfavorable due to the unique and "extra" step to which respondent had subjected charging party, by having the second group of referees whom respondent knew were adverse to her methodological approach evaluate her work. The comments of this third group of paid referees indicate that the prior letters did influence them, particularly those letters with negative evaluations of charging party. The third group of referees gave charging party a generally unfavorable recommendation, and on February 18, 1976 respondent reconfirmed denial of tenure for charging party. The competing male, who was recommended for tenure in accordance with respondent's normal procedures, was accorded tenure to become effective July 1, 1976, the effective date of charging party's termination.

ASPATURIAN: Were you struck by the rather extraordinary intellectual quality of this report?

LA BELLE: Yes, I really was. I thought they were really good. And here they go on [Continues to read from document:]

During the course of charging party's tenure consideration, the following persons were among some of those who objected to respondent's treatment of charging party and advocated her tenure: the former humanities division chairman, the convener of respondent's literature group, a professor emeritus of a major university, identified by respondent as a leading scholar in American literature,

—that would have been Claude Simpson—

the dean of graduate studies at the branch of a major university system,

—would have been Pearce—

all members of respondent's tenured English faculty.

Here's the conclusion:

The circumstances of charging party's tenure consideration were unique and distinctly different from those concerning male humanities division faculty members since charging party, the only female, has been the only candidate subjected to three groups of referees, student appraisals, an outside "arbitrator," and the "Princetonian standard." Accordingly, the record shows that respondent's procedures in evaluating charging party were different from those it has used in evaluating male candidates and entailed closer scrutiny of charging party's abilities; that the standards respondent required charging party to meet were higher than those required of her male counterparts and were repeatedly revised during the course of the tenure consideration each time respondent found that charging party could meet the new criteria; and that respondent's humanities and social sciences division chairman appears to have knowingly engaged in an elaborate effort to solicit negative information about charging party in order to "justify" his *a priori* decision to deny her tenure. Nevertheless, as shown above charging party's tenure rejection occurred despite the fact that she was able to meet each of the new and more stringent criteria.

As demonstrated above, we further note that in a context of total exclusion of females from tenured positions, respondent has treated no male in a similar fashion and that all actions taken regarding charging party's tenure were made by males using personal and subjective discretion in their

decisions. Based upon these circumstances and the record as a whole, the commission finds reasonable cause to believe that charging party was denied tenure, resulting in her termination, because of her sex in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended.

Promotion: With regard to charging party's allegation that because of her sex respondent failed to promote charging party to the position of associate professor without tenure while promoting a less senior male, the record shows that in the entire university there are presently five associate professors without tenure, all male. Respondent has never promoted a woman to the position of associate professor with or without tenure.

That's true, because of course Olga Todd went directly to full professor of mathematics from research associate, and of course she was *emeritus* by this time.

Respondent has no written or objective policies or practices with regard to the type of promotion at issue, and the record shows that decisions regarding such promotions are made by the same respondent officials who denied tenure to charging party. In charging party's division, four males were promoted to associate professor without tenure between '74 and '75. One of these was the male with whom charging party was ostensibly forced to "compete" for tenure. A comparison of charging party's background with that of the male reveals the following information.

And then they simply do a chart on both me and Stuart Ende. They go back and forth and show what I had in my record, and what he had. They made a mistake on me by saying only one book, though. They should have said two books, author of one, coauthor of the other, eleven articles, three reviews. He had one book, two articles, three reviews.

We further note that when the male was placed in competition with charging party for purposes of outside evaluations regarding the tenure decision, his status of associate professor alone, as compared to charging party's, implied that he was the more "valuable" of the two. This male received his promotion to the higher status, higher paying position during the early stages of charging party's tenure dispute, but before outside referees were asked to choose between the two of them. The commission notes that, based upon any tangible criteria, charging party's qualifications appear to exceed the male's. We additionally note the value to respondent of using the male's associate professor's status as a device relating to the justification of its tenure decision. The commission has held that a subjective promotion system

of this kind, with no written guidelines, can serve as a ready mechanism for discrimination, much of which can be concealed. Accordingly, based upon this information and the record as a whole, we credit charging party's assertion that respondent failed to promote her to associate professor without tenure based on her sex within the meaning of Title VII.

Other violations. Underlying charging party's individual charge of discrimination based on her sex is respondent's exclusion of females as a class from its higher level faculty positions. Respondent's current employment statistics show that out of 481 faculty members, there are 35 women.

Then they include a Table 2—and there are all these wonderful tables—showing how women are clustered in the lower-level positions.

Further, no females are represented in the two highest job levels of full professor and associate professor, although 213 males work at those levels. Women are represented in only five of the forty positions at the next highest levels of assistant professor and instructor. In contrast, females are most heavily concentrated in the faculty category of "other," e.g. research associate, research assistant, with seventy-seven percent of all women working at that level.

So they clearly had gone through endless records.

As would be expected, respondent's salary statistics, based most heavily upon faculty job status, reflect disparities between the earnings of female and male faculty members. The record shows that the category with the most female faculty members is the lowest paying, while the majority of men are in the highest pay category. More than thirty-three percent of the women earn less than \$10,000 a year, while only nine percent of the males are paid less than \$10,000. Only two women (less than 0.5 percent of the total faculty) earn more than \$25,000, while 190 men, forty-three percent of the faculty, are paid in excess of \$25,000 a year. A related issue, though not specifically raised in charging party's charge...

—see, they're getting ready to do a whole class action suit here, regardless of what I do—

is that of respondent's almost total exclusion of blacks from its professorial ranks. Despite the fact that blacks receive approximately four percent of all PhDs granted by institutions of higher learning, respondent employed only two black faculty members out of 446 during the period of '73-'76. As of

April 1976, the only black with faculty status is a female research fellow in the lowest faculty salary category —under \$10,000. The commission has held that the use of statistical evidence to infer the existence of a pattern or practice of discrimination is appropriate under Title VII. Based upon this information and the record as a whole, the commission finds reasonable cause to believe that respondent excludes women and blacks from other than low level faculty classifications because of their sex and/or race, in violation of Title VII. Having determined there is reasonable cause to believe the charge is true, the commission now invites the parties to join with it in a collective effort toward a just resolution of this matter.

And then they include all of these charts.

ASPATURIAN: How lucky you were in your investigators.

LA BELLE: I really was—they were amazing. So as soon as I received this report and almost before I had finished reading it, I sent it special delivery to Lew Wasserman and to my attorney. Wasserman had offered to act as an arbitrator in this case, and I hoped that he could help both Caltech and me toward a reasonable disposition. As we said, here was a man who was not an academic, who had a different perspective, who had been in an industry where for years he had dealt with difficult personnel decisions. He knew the art of compromise. And I hoped that he could help prevent this matter from going to court as the EEOC investigator believed it otherwise would. Plus the EEOC thought that the case could be litigated with excellent prospects for victory.

ASPATURIAN: What was the role of your attorney at this point?

LA BELLE: He had done nothing except write letters to Caltech saying he represented me as an individual and anytime they wanted to contact him to do so. That's all he had done at this point. And that ends this episode of *The Perils of Pauline*. [Laughter] What will happen in the next episode? How will Pauline evade attempts on her tenure next week?

ASPATURIAN: You're stopping are you? ... It's a logical stopping point.

LA BELLE: I want to look over my notes of what Wasserman and I then said to each other at that first meeting because I wanted to be very careful with him. I knew better than to ask for a reversal of my tenure decision. I knew I could not ask for tenure. The question was—what would I do next? I didn't want to overstep at this point. I'd tried to be so careful so far.

ASPATURIAN: Why did you know you couldn't ask for a reversal?

LA BELLE: Because in some discussion with Lew Wasserman, he told me that if you took it to court, the law will never give you anything you didn't already have and I didn't have tenure. I don't know if that was true. It sounded as though it could well be because the court has no right to tell a school to give someone tenure. So I wanted to be careful.

ASPATURIAN: Okay. These proceedings are closed.

JENIJOY LA BELLE**SESSION 6****April 27, 2008**

ASPATURIAN: We left off just as you and the Institute had received the EEOC report that found evidence of “sex and/or race discrimination” in Caltech’s hiring and tenure policies.

LA BELLE: So that was near the end of January 1977. And I was also informed through a phone call from the EEOC litigation center in San Francisco that they might well be interested in the case. That is to say, they would be interested in suing Caltech if conciliation failed. And then articles came out in the *Pasadena Star-News* and the *Los Angeles Times* emphasizing that the U.S. Commission was accusing Caltech of a hiring bias. I didn’t comment to any of the papers except to say that I just wanted to be back teaching again. As I mentioned last time, I then sent the EEOC findings to Lew Wasserman, who I think I told you was chairing the Trustees’ Humanities and Social Sciences Advisory Committee. I think that probably turned later into the trustees’ visiting committee, which sounds more friendly—academics don’t like to be advised—but visiting sounds like we just get together for a little chat.

Anyway I met with him the first week of February in his office at Universal Studios. He already had the report, and I, like everyone else, realized that he was a genius at compromise. Having been an agent for years, he knew how to discover what both parties in a dispute or a deal wanted and to see what he could do about it. He told me that I couldn’t demand tenure, and I said that I wasn’t demanding anything. I was only asking for a fair tenure consideration and I had no wish to involve the Institute in litigation if it could possibly be avoided. And I think he was pleased with that response. And a few days after that he met with Stan Avery, who was then the chairman of the Board of Trustees, and Dr. Christy, and I believe that the Institute lawyers were also present.

ASPATURIAN: How about your lawyer?

LA BELLE: No. Mine just kept writing letters informing people that he was representing me individually in this to make sure that we didn’t get lost in the vastness. Poor beleaguered Dr.

Christy at this time. He'd become Caltech's acting president a few weeks earlier because of course Jimmy Carter became president of the United States on January 20, at which point they called Harold Brown for duty [as secretary of defense]. Christy had become acting president, and the Caltech presidential search committee, which had just been set up, was already controversial. Some professors were already asking why the head of JPL was on the search committee and that sort of thing. Dr. [Robert] Sinsheimer, who was chair of biology, was leaving to become chancellor of Santa Cruz and so there was also a search for a new chairman there. No doubt various faculty members and administrators also wished to replace Harold Brown themselves as the new president of Caltech.

So on top of all this, and no telling what else, poor Dr. Christy had me back in his office again. I think it must have been an extremely fraught time for him. I assume that the Wasserman-Christy meeting was that morning because on the afternoon of that same day [February 14, 1977], there was a faculty board meeting, with Dr. Robbie Vogt presiding as faculty chair. It was an absolutely fascinating meeting. I have the minutes of that meeting taken by David Elliot. It would be interesting sometime to compare minutes as they were taken then with how they're taken now because they record everything, but then it was sort of up to how the board secretary chose to present them.

There were some brilliant, brilliant moments in them. It always says at the bottom that they're for Institute release only, but this is the Institute and it has been over thirty years. Christy, who is called AP throughout these minutes, which means acting president, brought up what he called "a matter of interest and indeed concern," which is of course the petition that I had filed. And then he reveals something that I didn't know which is that, as early as the spring of 1976, clearly long before the EEOC reported its findings, the Institute lawyers were troubled about Caltech's becoming involved in such a matter and had advocated some sort of settlement out of court. But, he goes on to say, no basis for a settlement could be found, and the subject was dropped.

ASPATURIAN: No basis for a settlement. What does that mean?

LA BELLE: I don't know. I know I wasn't talked to.

ASPATURIAN: That Huttenback wouldn't play, probably.

LA BELLE: That may well have been it. But now, according to Christy, after the EEOC findings that my case could indeed provide grounds for a class action suit, the Institute lawyers were not just concerned but “disturbed”—that was the new word. And they urged a settlement of the case. According to Christy, and now I am reading from the minutes, they urged a settlement of the case “in view of the time and expense which would be involved in fighting a court action and because of the adverse publicity which might easily flow from these protracted proceedings. It’s hard for the Institute to debate a matter of this sort in the newspapers. It should be pointed out that Dr. La Belle has also tried to prevent material from appearing in the newspapers as she is no doubt as disturbed as we are by the press coverage, which has nevertheless taken place.” He then goes on to talk about some of the history of the case.

ASPATURIAN: Was Huttenback present at this meeting?

LA BELLE: Yes the chairmen of all the divisions are supposed to be there and he was. [GPS Division Chair] Barclay Kamb was there, and [Professor of Biology] Ray Owen too, because he was dean of students, [Biology Chair] Sinsheimer also, because he hadn’t left yet and so on. [Professor Biology] Max Delbrück, [Professor of Chemistry] Harry Gray, [Professor of Environmental Engineering] Jim Morgan—it was a well-attended meeting. A lot of heavy hitters. Although I don’t know if in those days they were given an agenda ahead of time. So Christy then talks about my meeting with Wasserman and so on, and he finally says that Wasserman had met with the Board of Trustees and with Stan Avery, and that they are much concerned about developments. Christy then says, “I’ve concluded that we should offer Dr. La Belle a three-year appointment as associate professor without tenure and without prejudice. To make that a valid conclusion upon which we can act, it must have the concurrence, if not the wholehearted support, of relevant groups in the Humanities and Social Sciences Division.”

ASPATURIAN: What a masterpiece of pointed diplomacy!

LA BELLE: Yes. Isn’t it nice? “We have to have that, and in the faculty generally,” he says. “I hope that this will be forthcoming because I believe the proposed course of action is in the best interests of the Institute. We may feel that we have been right but the rest of the world may not see our actions in quite the same light as we do ourselves. It will be recalled [that] the only

independent group which has studied this case”—namely the Faculty Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure—“upheld the original decision in Dr. La Belle’s case. I am very well aware, however, that it questioned some of the procedures that were followed.”

ASPATURIAN: Point of interest. How is it that the Caltech internal faculty group was an independent entity whereas the EEOC was not?

LA BELLE: That’s interesting. I’m not sure how to respond. To continue: “Because of this weakness, some at least of the members of this committee [AFTC] feel that the matter ought not to go to court. They also believe that in this case it might be reasonable to extend a pre-tenure period beyond the usual seven years. Thus they agree with our lawyers. I am therefore trying to recommend this proposal to the faculty groups involved, even though I realize it may create difficult precedents.” And then in calling for discussion, the faculty chairman, Robbie Vogt, reminded the board that this was a personnel matter, and he asked members to be “tender” of the personal reputations of all of the people involved. So that was nice.

And so then we get this very lengthy discussion. The first person to speak—and it’s interesting, the only woman there—was Assistant Professor of English Joyce Penn. She asked, if this proposal were to be carried through, would it have any effect on the possible class action suit, and Christy says the lawyers think it would improve Caltech’s chances. Then [Professor of Environmental Studies, now emeritus] John List says, does this proposal not violate the AAUP [American Association of University Professors] rules of tenure?

In my opinion, the AAUP—I of course was a member—would probably have been very pleased because they are trying to protect professors—but Christy says, “That’s the least of our problems. The AAUP won’t blacklist us if the faculty do not ask for it. As I suggested, I believe that the Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee will be prepared to consider such a proposal if we make it. It should also be borne in mind that other universities have now changed their own rules regarding the pre-tenure period. Some for example have extended it to ten years.”

So the proposal to give me another three years would fall within that time frame. Then we have more questions, not all of them interesting. One is what would be the manner of the future tenure review, and Christy says, “It would be done in an unassailable manner. We are in

fact going to have to make sure that our decisions cannot be challenged because of faulty procedures. I hope that this can be discussed in the faculty.”

[Professor of Chemical Engineering] Sheldon Friedlander says, “Does this mean that you will overrule the committee that made the original recommendation?”

Christy: “It’s unwise to make appointments without faculty concurrence. I hope that the faculty bodies concerned will come to see that these procedures are appropriate and do not necessarily involve them in admitting error or anything like that. We are in fact in serious trouble.”

ASPATURIAN: One can imagine how a silence fell over the room after that.

LA BELLE: [Professor of Aeronautics and Applied Mechanics, now deceased] Charles Babcock says, “Are we not delaying a decision which must be made in three years? Are we currently negotiating the manner in which tenure will be decided upon then?” Christy: [Continues to read from document:]

We are not negotiating these procedures at this time except to say that they will be unassailable. I should say that I believe that Dr. La Belle will accept the proposal I have made as it stands. We have of course not had any action by the Board of Trustees. So far, the people concerned have been the chairman of the board and the lawyers of the Institute and Mr. Wasserman. It is unlikely, however, that the trustees would do other than give their approval if faculty support is forthcoming. For my part, I have this morning started discussions with the Humanities and Social Science Promotion Review Committee and with as many English people as possible. I believe the English staff will support the proposition, but I’m not at all sure at this stage of the support of the divisional review committee. Groups, like individuals, are a little loath to change course. They become perhaps victims of their own argument and find it hard to take a different point of view.

Now finally Huttenback speaks: “I promised not to oppose the AP,” he says. I find that interesting. “I promised”? So had he had a discussion with Christy, saying so?

It goes on: “I promised not to—but I must state the position of the divisional review committee. The committee as of now thinks the proposal is wrong, and I don’t believe it will

change its mind. You may have to impose a settlement, but I doubt that the committee will come around.”

So he acts as if there’s this thing—I won’t be saying anything—but the committee might oppose it. However, he is on the committee. He appointed it and is the chairman of it.

ASPATURIAN: He is in other words maintaining that he has now become a helpless pawn of his own handpicked committee.

LA BELLE: So Christy says, “If the rest of the faculty were to support the proposal and if your committee would rather have the decision thrust upon them, then we might just have to do that, although reluctantly.” I love the little reference to *Twelfth Night* in there—“thrust upon them.” Christy goes on: “At the present moment, time is of the essence. We have in a sense a gun to our head. The EEOC has given us until five o’clock tomorrow to reply to them, or else. What the ‘or else’ is, we don’t know. The government might possibly seek an injunction to prevent Professor Huttenback making further appointments.”

I love it because of course Christy doesn’t care if Huttenback can or cannot make appointments. He is thinking of a potential cutoff of federal money. He is thinking of protecting programs. What I think is interesting is that this is the elephant in the Millikan Board Room, but no one is coming out and saying it. They’re facing the threat of, goodbye, deep-space program for the United States. But, you know, he doesn’t say that.

Professor List says, “Would this not be a new appointment?” Acting president says, “I do not believe the English faculty would wish to regard it as such,” which they wouldn’t.

Huttenback: “I am as anxious as anyone to get out of this difficulty, but I do want to say this. We must not consider ourselves so special that we fail to realize that how we act affects the entire nationwide academic community. Many major universities are now fighting cases just like this because they deem such a policy correct and moral. This particular wolf is going to be at our door for a very long time.”

And Dr. Christy says, “Then let’s choose our own moment for letting it in.” Nice image.

ASPATURIAN: Smart man. Very fast on his feet.

LA BELLE: So Jim Morgan says that he's concerned about reversing a decision that was reviewed at great length by a faculty committee and finally upheld, and asks what a representative from the academic tenure committee has to say. Harry Gray says that it was an extremely complicated case and it's impossible to summarize.

Christy says, "The AFT committee interviewed all parties; I myself have read all of the documents, but they've gone far beyond that." Robbie Vogt says, "I received the Academic Freedom and Tenure Report, and all who had a need to know were given access, subject to the joint approval of the chairman of the faculty and the chairman of the Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee."

And then Ray Owen says something very good. He says, "I would like to record support for Professor Christy in this difficult position. Perhaps we need not regard this as a reversal of a tenure decision at all, but as a new appointment which extends the tenure period. That I should think would not be too difficult for anyone to swallow. But I should like to ask to what extent does the review committee act with power?"

Huttenback says it acts with power unless there's a disagreement with the department. John List says that "since there were irregularities, the administration can reasonably rule not on the validity of the decision itself but on the basis of those irregularities. It would then be appropriate to extend the tenure period."

Christy thanks everyone. The chairman, Robbie Vogt, says it was a responsible discussion, and he takes over because he says that Christy might like a respite. I think it's very interesting. I love the part about the wolf at the door and all of those things. And again, what's most interesting is that no one really talks about the very real threat that the government could suspend the federal money that goes to the school. And if the EEOC sued and happened to end up with a friendly judge, they could put a hold on funding.

ASPATURIAN: Not to mention the horrendous publicity that would accrue in the wake of all this.

LA BELLE: Well after that, articles came out in the *Tech* on February 18. One was simply a recap of the whole tenure case and one was about the charges of the EEOC. Christy refused to comment except to say that negotiations were at a very sensitive stage. Dr. Vogt said that Caltech was "facing a very serious situation" and that he was preparing a consensus report of the

entire faculty and had appointed a committee, yet another committee, to help prepare the report and all this was supposed to be done by February 22. And this was the 18th. I didn't know about this consensus report. I read it in the paper the way everyone else read it.

ASPATURIAN: Are you back in Pasadena at this point?

LA BELLE: No, I'm still living out in the La Brea Tar Pits, but I was no longer teaching. I had taught that one semester at Northridge, and now I was devoting my entire time to my case. Vogt said that he thought Caltech would come out the better for all of this. Which was good. He called it "a problem of dealing with a former colleague that must be treated with extreme sensitivity." He also said in the paper that he thought I acted with "admirable tact" throughout the entire case. It was a kind remark that I appreciated a good deal. It was like soft rain after a long drought to have someone say that.

In the meantime I had sent my attorney a list of goals for the hoped-for agreement with Caltech. I had just a few fixed requirements. I wanted a three-year contract, with a tenure consideration at the beginning of the second year. I desired a carefully worked out document on how the tenure decision would be handled, including—and this was essential—no involvement in any way by Robert A. Huttenback. I also listed other conditions, but if they were impossible to obtain, it wouldn't prevent the agreement from going through, at least on my part. For example, I asked not to be denied service on divisional committees anymore. I asked that I not be given only freshman literature courses, but be permitted to teach the upper-division Shakespeare and Renaissance courses that I had taught before, on an equitable basis with the rest of the English faculty. I considered asking if I could have an office other than the one that Huttenback had assigned me, which was one of only two offices in all of Baxter next to a men's room, so that it wouldn't be filling my ears with flushing all day but then I thought better of that. [Laughter]

So on February 21, the report of this ad hoc faculty committee that Dr. Vogt had set up was presented to the acting president, the Board of Trustees, and to all the members of the voting faculty. There were a dozen members on this faculty committee and they must have been dog-tired. They should have been given medals for meritorious service. They had been in virtually continuous sessions from February 16 through February 21, and that included meeting

throughout a weekend and a holiday because it was Washington's birthday. So I thought that was sort of amazing. During this time they consulted with Institute trustees, including Wasserman, but I believe there were some others as well as legal counsel.

And at this time also, all the divisional chairs were asked to contact everyone on their faculties and tell them they could make input to this committee or raise questions with individual committee members, and this did indeed occur—obviously during their free moments, whenever those were. So it all sounded extremely intense. [Rustling papers] I have the report of the committee, with all the people's signatures. Some of them look a little weary, but here they all are. The report itself went on for six pages, but the bottom line was that the “committee, having reviewed available evidence, believes that the best course of action is for the administration to conduct negotiations with Dr. La Belle on the terms of a three year non-tenured appointment to associate professor in the humanities and social sciences division, with tenure review to occur in the second year of the appointment.”

ASPATURIAN: May I see? A lot of heavy hitters are again on this committee.

LA BELLE: He seems to have chosen a couple of people from every different division, so that was good. The committee understood that my case had become an institutional matter, not just a divisional one, and that lightning rapidity was required to minimize the possibility of court action. They believed that the charge of sexual discrimination was unfounded, but they did admit that there were “possible flaws in the execution of tenure evaluation procedures that made the Institute vulnerable to an outside charge of unfairness.”

ASPATURIAN: They also must have realized as good scientists that whatever the real basis for the tenure decision, the quantitative data were simply stacked against Caltech insofar as a charge of gender discrimination was concerned.

LA BELLE: Yes, especially with the comparison to the competing male. They also said that putting aside all considerations of the specific case, the present is not a good time for the Institute to engage in litigation. “Caltech needs time to regularize its personnel procedures and recordkeeping practices and to strengthen its position as an equal rights employer.”

ASPATURIAN: Was there any—although I don't know whether you would have been privy to this—*sub rosa* commentary to the effect that Huttenback should have been able to do a better, more equitable job? He did not at some point come under criticism for the way he handled this thing?

LA BELLE: Here's what bothered me so much during the whole case. I never thought the school was to blame, and I still don't. I always thought it was one man and a few of his coterie. But I couldn't get anyone else to acknowledge this. Awful as what happened to Huttenback in Santa Barbara was, I hope it showed that I was not paranoid. That he played fast and loose and violated rules and sometimes went beyond violation and into criminal activities. But I think people just didn't see that at the time, and he was the one who presented most of the material. Although in those last faculty board minutes that I read from, you can see that Christy at least is starting to get annoyed. The next day the trustees met and I knew that was the big meeting. I spent the day pulling weeds in my yard because I couldn't concentrate on anything else. Wasserman called me in the evening and said that I would absolutely be offered a three-year appointment as associate professor and that Dr. Christy would call me the next morning, which he did. I met with Dr. Christy that day, and that began a long series of meetings between the two of us where we tried to figure out a tenure procedure that would be acceptable to everyone, or at least to almost everyone, or to at least a couple of people. [Laughter]

ASPATURIAN: These were just held between the two of you. There were no lawyers present.

LA BELLE: Occasionally Dr. Vogt would come in. Sometimes Kent Clark joined us. I don't ever remember that a lawyer came into them. That was on Tuesday and then we met on Wednesday, and then we met on Friday, and we met the next Tuesday. We were practically inseparable.

That same week Shirley Hufstедler called and asked me to meet with her on Saturday. She was on the Board of Trustees and she wanted me to meet her at the United States Court House. I knew of course that she was a trustee, but I also knew that she was one of the first women on the federal bench, having been appointed by President Johnson to be judge of the U.S. Appeals Court for the Ninth Circuit. So I thought that she as a woman who had been a pioneer in her field would be somewhat supportive of me, but that was not the case. It was a lunch

meeting, and I certainly didn't take notes at a lunch meeting, but my recollection was that she told me not to continue the fight and to move on with my life. That I would always feel uncomfortable at Caltech, that I would never be accepted as a genuine member of the faculty if I returned. So I listened respectfully and thanked her for lunch and for inviting me and went back to my tête-à-têtes with Dr. Christy.

ASPATURIAN: Do you suppose she was acting as a free agent or representing a group within the trustees?

LA BELLE: Possibly a group within the trustees who thought perhaps I could just be embarrassed into going away. I don't know. I was surprised because I knew that she had been through a lot of struggles herself. She later did become secretary of education. I think she very much would have liked at some point to have been appointed to the Supreme Court, but once Reagan came in, well... Then she went back to private life in 1981 and that chance didn't come round again. She's still on the Caltech Board of Trustees to this day.

So as I say I just kept meeting with Christy. I wrote draft proposals of what I wanted, and would give them to Christy, and someone else would revise them. Whenever they came back, the versions always began with the tenure committee being chosen by the division chair, and that was the sticking point. One of the findings of the Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee in their thoughtful report—and now we're going back to May 1976—was that the HSS chairman “was too directly and dominantly involved in the evaluation procedures for La Belle (and other faculty members as well) by serving as chairman of the promotion review committee after having selected its members, by being the primary selector of outside referees, and by functioning as the principal spokesman on all aspects of the case within the division. The AFT committee believes this style of operation doesn't provide adequate insulation against possible bias, intentional or unintentional, pro or con, on the part of the division chair.” So this kept going back to that. So there were more meetings. And then on March 30—“O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!” [from *Jabberwocky*, by Lewis Carroll, ed.]—Christy called to tell me that Huttenback would be leaving Caltech. I was not told where he was going and, frankly, I didn't care. It was not until a few weeks later that I learned that he might be chancellor at the

University of California Santa Barbara. No doubt some people already knew that, but because it hadn't yet been approved by the UC Board of Regents, it wasn't spoken about.

ASPATURIAN: It is frankly amazing to me that with the issues he had gotten Caltech into that UCSB wanted to recruit him as its chancellor. Did they not know?

LA BELLE: They must have. I mean I'm sure that in retrospect they wished they had paid more attention. [Laughter] I'm sure he interviewed well, and he'd certainly done a lot to improve the social science part of our division. Anyway the instant Christy said that Huttenback would no longer be chairing the division, I said I was prepared to sign an agreement and a release document, and that within seven days after I and Caltech signed it, I would request that the EEOC dismiss all charges of discrimination. Since the threat of court action stemming from the investigation might still be pending even after I signed off, I also agreed I would sign something to say that I would not join in any action that the EEOC might bring against the Institute, although they still could if they wanted to.

ASPATURIAN: Did that give you pause? Did you think seriously about whether or not to sign that particular provision?

LA BELLE: No because I didn't really think that the EEOC would proceed without me because they needed somebody. They needed the individual there to do it. It seemed to me that Caltech had been scared enough that they were going to start doing things differently. I mean the first time the word discrimination even came up, they started putting big ads in the *California Tech*, saying we are an equal opportunity employer.

ASPATURIAN: The damage control began very early.

LA BELLE: Yes. So this all moved quickly. Caltech's outside legal counsel, O'Melveny & Myers sent the agreement for me to sign by messenger—a young man, you know, who stood there—and on April 1, 1977, both Dr. Christy, as acting president, and I assented to it. Then there were news stories on the radio and articles in the *Star-News* and the *LA Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, all stating that I would be returned to my teaching position, I'd

be promoted, and that I would even be granted some back pay. Plus the agreement I finally signed was for a four- not a three-year contract. So I could have the tenure review in either the second or third year and still have another year to search for a job.

The back pay included additional salary to make up for the difference between the amount I was paid as an assistant professor and what a man would have received, and indeed did receive, in a similar position . And the papers reported that Dr. Christy said that Caltech officials were looking forward to my return to campus in the fall.

I do want to acknowledge again how very fair both Dr. Christy and Dr. Vogt were in working out the agreement, and of course my appreciation for Wasserman and his amazing abilities was unbounded. I think that without his initial interest in the situation and his insistence that a solution be found, we'd probably still today be in a muddle of courts and lawyers. I've read Dickens' *Bleak House* many times and I understand the trap. And I knew that O'Melveny & Myers could have procrastinated until the case resembled Jarndyce and Jarndyce, dragging on its dreary length for decades, and I would be that little mad old woman in a squeezed bonnet who is always in court, from its sitting to its rising, always expecting some incomprehensible judgment to be given in her favor.

ASPATURIAN: You never found out who in the depths of the EEOC produced that amazingly incisive and definitive and thorough report about the situation?

LA BELLE: No, although I know that it was a group of investigators. I received letters, signed by various people. There was a Jules Gordon, I know. You got the feeling that there were all these young men who were out of law school who had just studied all this and never had a chance to—and now they got to come to Caltech and ruffle through all of these papers. They finally got to do something. Whoever they are I'm very grateful. I hoped most people would be, if not happy, then at least content with the agreement, but many were not. It turns out that on March 30, two days before I signed, Christy had met with a large group of tenured faculty in my division to discuss the tenure-review procedure. It was almost a two-hour discussion—a few members approved of it, but most were opposed. They claimed that their objections were not about me as an individual, and they probably weren't, but about matters such as procedure and precedent. They felt the choice of who would be on a tenure-review committee was being taken out of the

hands of the division, which was a departure from existing precedent, and various people started writing memos about it because of course that's what academics do.

Now actually I had the option of either going through the ordinary tenure review procedure or this special ad hoc process that had been specifically designed for my case, in which the committee would have been appointed by someone other than the chair of the division. It was very complicated and then the individuals who were appointed would have to be approved by the faculty. But once I knew that Huttenback would be gone and thus not be the person to appoint the committee and perhaps be on it, I was perfectly willing—in fact eager—to go through the standard process, which I said at the time I intended to go through and which indeed I did do. But of course that didn't stop people from wanting to write about how it was being taken out of their hands.

So Lance Davis, Jim Quirk, Robert Rosenstone, and [Professor of History] Dan Kevles all got together and wrote this memorandum for distribution to the entire Caltech faculty. Plus they asked the tenured members of humanities and social sciences to join with them and sign a paper that they all agreed that “the agreement with Dr. La Belle jeopardizes the right of every division on campus to determine its own membership.” I did understand what they were saying and I even agreed with part of it but no one was trying to take the choice of who should be on the tenure committee out of the hands of the faculty. We were trying to take it out of the hands of Huttenback.

By May I'd hoped things were quieting down. I had paid my attorney for services rendered. He had spent forty-two hours and forty-five minutes on my case. He was charging \$75 per hour—which I thought was terrible at the time, and now it sounds like the bargain of the century—for a grand total of three-thousand-two hundred-and-six-dollars and seventy-five cents. I remember saying to the lawyer, it still sounded like a lot. He said, “Well ask the school to pay for it. Ask Christy.” I said, “No, that would be awful. No I can't do that.” He said, “Go ahead. What have you got to lose?” And I thought that's a lot of money, so I said, “Dr. Christy, I hate to ask you this but there's this \$3,000.” And he said, “Fine fine. Just tell me what it is, we'll pay it.” That was so easy! I couldn't believe it because to me that was a big thing. So also in May, the search for a new chairman of our division started. Literature wasn't represented terribly well on the search committee. It was made up of the ten professors, only two of whom were in literature—Angus Fletcher, who had only been at Caltech since October, and Holly Jackson, who

had been hired to replace me, and was only an assistant professor in her second year. And who was gone by the next year. And perhaps in response to my charges against Caltech, some of the members of the committee were especially asked to pay attention to the possibility of women and minority candidates. As with earlier and, I might add, later searches, everyone thought it was very unlikely that the chair would be chosen from someone within the division, but it always is. This time it was going to be Roger Noll, who was an economist and who had been an undergraduate here in 1962 and assistant professor and associate professor and professor. But he wouldn't come in until of course the next year. There were a couple of other important developments that May: First, every single division chair distributed guidelines as to policies concerning appointment and promotion to tenure in his division, and that was really good.

Then at the May 16 faculty board meeting, Dan Kevles passed out a document on the implications of my tenure-review process, stating that many members of the faculty wanted to make it clear they wished the administration to fight against future challenges administratively or in court if the charge of discrimination was unwarranted. And then he proceeded to read this very lengthy document; and then this was wonderful—one of Dr. Christy's great moments. He didn't know that Dan had been going to read this statement, and also hand it out to everyone. He responded by pointing out the unfairness of expecting him to respond in an impromptu manner to a prepared statement that also was going to be included verbatim in the minutes.

Christy says, [Reads from document:]

My own remarks will not be recorded verbatim. And if they were, they would pale in comparison with the rhetoric of a professor of humanities. In addition I do not think the minutes are appropriately used to display written arguments representing a single point of view since there is no possibility of presenting to the board a carefully prepared response. With that caveat I would like to make three points: First, there appears to be sometimes unfortunately a conflict between legality and fair treatment. In this case, it has been suggested that the principal legal weakness in the Institute's position appeared as a result of ad hoc review procedures that were invoked in an attempt to be fair to Dr. La Belle. Legally we might have been on cleaner ground if no review had been given after the first action. However, I would be less comfortable in an institution which was unwilling to reconsider a decision when a significant basis, such as publishing a book, existed for reconsideration. We can indeed learn from experience, but I hope we don't have to act entirely according to legal rules and procedures.

Second, the reason for deviating from normal Institute procedure in the tenure review agreement was simply that it is and has been Dr. La Belle's belief that the division chairman was prejudiced against her, not necessarily on the basis of her sex. Under those circumstances there was no possibility of reaching an agreement where the tenure review committee was, as is normal, appointed by the division chair.

Third, I would like to comment on the question of consultation with the division. I started the negotiations by keeping the division chairman fully informed and by inviting his comment. He made it clear to me that he was personally opposed to an accommodation with Dr. Labelle, but I hoped to be able to proceed in spite of that. Later I became convinced, perhaps erroneously, that he was actively organizing opposition in the division. At this point I so informed him, and said that I would henceforth proceed without discussing anything with him. Since it was quite impractical for me to go around him to the divisional faculty and involve them directly in the negotiations, I had to proceed without further consultation with the division. I did explain the final agreement to the divisional faculty before it was signed, and I hoped to convince them that it was reasonable. I was not notably successful in that effort.

Dr. Vogt then says that,

The acting president is entitled to an explanation. I fully expected an oral statement from Professor Quirk—this had previously been agreed to at the steering committee—but did not know in advance that Professor Kevles would read a prepared detailed statement. Since feelings in this matter have been running high, however, I did not want to suppress it. Let me say, however, that I sympathize with the acting president's dilemma and hope that this will close off the discussion of the case of Dr. La Belle once and for all. We should learn from it and improve our procedures for the future, but we need no longer dwell on it with pathological concentration.

However, the discussion still goes on for a good long time. So the controversy and the strife continued. When I rejoined the faculty in the fall of '77, things had quieted down.

ASPATURIAN: Huttenback was gone?

LA BELLE: Not quite gone. We had an acting chair—Rod Paul—but Huttenback was still around. He didn't actually go until January of 1978. There were a few months left. So an unsettled air still hung over the campus. Our division didn't have a permanent chair, which

made it difficult for everyone. Our new president, [Marvin “Murph”] Goldberger, didn’t arrive until the spring of ’78, though I am pleased to report that the very moment he arrived he made it known that he was concerned with affirmative action. And in December of 1978 he asked all the divisional chairmen to make lists identifying ten of the most important women in each of the disciplines for which they were responsible, an act that resulted in our getting some very fine women professors who are here to this day. Mary Kennedy and Judy Cohen came in with that first group. Now some fields like ours didn’t have to get assistant professors. Our division got Eleanor Searle, who was already a full professor of history at UCLA. So that was a bold thing to do. In some ways it wasn’t always successful because it was going to be a “free” woman, in effect, that the divisions didn’t have to pay for—the funding came directly from the Institute. And sometimes people acted rather hastily and got someone who didn’t quite fit in to their program and that caused problems later. Anyway what President Goldberger said at the December 1978 faculty board meeting, when he announced this plan, “Zero is a very nasty number. You can’t multiply it without disastrous results. That however is the exact number of tenured women at Caltech.”

So my first year back, 1977–78, was one of the happiest years of my life. It was. I was no longer out in the cold. I was back, and besides teaching and writing, I threw myself into Caltech activities. I went to Freshman Camp again in Catalina; I carved and served turkey at the Thanksgiving dinner for the student houses, along with Ricardo Gomez, who always had a little too much to drink, which made the carving very exciting. [Laughter]

ASPATURIAN: What sort of reception did you receive back on campus?

LA BELLE: It was wonderful. Nobody said anything negative.

ASPATURIAN: Did anyone come up to you privately and say, I’m glad you did what you did?

LA BELLE: Many people did. Several professors came up to me and said to me, meaning to be perfectly kind, “That was really great what you did. You really have balls.” [Laughter] I never knew quite what to say. I knew they meant it as a compliment but it was still such a phallogocentric point of view. And as I’ve said, there also must have been people who didn’t feel

that way, but as Kent Clark always said, “You have had enemies you can be proud of.” And I really thought that was true. And Huttenback and I just sort of kept our distance.

ASPATURIAN: What do you suppose would have happened, had Huttenback not received that offer from UC Santa Barbara?

LA BELLE: I would have had to go through a special tenure process and that would have been very hard. I think there would have been people annoyed. I don’t know what would have happened. I would have seen how things went for a couple of years. I mean, they had to judge my entire output of publications; they couldn’t stop and say, okay now you have to have a different book than the one that Princeton published. But I made sure that I had a lot of new things either accepted and/or published by then. I don’t know what would have happened. Nor will I ever know if someone behind the scenes provided a certain help to Huttenback getting the UCSB job. It’s not outside the realm of possibility, but I honestly don’t know.

Anyway there was so much going on. Caltech Theater Arts put on *Fiorello!* that year. It was a wonderful musical. Seventy people were in it. Feynman was a gangster, and Dr. Christy played a radio announcer. [Professor of Geography] Ned Munger was in it and Harry Gray and [Professor of Mathematics] Charlie DiPrima. David Morrisroe, the vice president of finance, played a crook [laughter], and I was a chorus girl and got to relearn to tap dance, which I hadn’t done since I was five or six. And [Theater Arts director] Shirley [Marneus] was absolutely in her element. I was still living on the LA Westside then, but in April, exactly 30 years ago today, Bob [Essick] and I moved into an old Spanish house up in Altadena. In June we had this huge cocktail party for eighty people, and I invited all my friends and all my enemies and it was a ravishing evening. Everyone came including Huttenback and his wife, Freda, and it was all fun and feasting, and there were live Maine lobsters that walked around on the ice, and my darling parents came from Washington to be there with us.

ASPATURIAN: What happened to the live lobsters?

LA BELLE: We did have lobster, but the live lobsters were just there to be cute. We didn’t eat them. Trust me. They just looked so cute, walking around. And then they put them in water and took them away somewhere.

JENIJOY LA BELLE

SESSION 7

May 11, 2008

ASPATURIAN: When we left off last time, you had returned to Caltech, bought a new home, and celebrated it all with a kind of lobster quadrille. When did you officially become a tenured member of the faculty?

LA BELLE: In the fall of 1978, I went through the standard evaluative tenure procedure with the new HSS division chair, Roger Noll. I informed everyone that I didn't want to know anything until it was all over. And in May 1979 I was given a positive recommendation for tenure by all the faculty committees designated to decide tenure cases and approved by the provost, the president, and the Board of Trustees. At that time I was the only tenured woman on the Caltech faculty.

ASPATURIAN: Olga Todd having retired as professor emerita by that time?

LA BELLE: Yes. She was on the active faculty as a full professor for just a year or two. Then she retired, so I was the only tenured female on the faculty. So, victory at last.

ASPATURIAN: And as we talked about last time, your book had come out to good reviews by then.

LA BELLE: Yes, it had come out the year before while I was teaching at Cal State Northridge. So let me fast-forward and move beyond my tenure case to a very different case—that of Robert A. Huttenback as chancellor of UC Santa Barbara. It may seem irrelevant to my career, but I want to discuss that sad misadventure for one important reason, and that is that his chancellorship at UCSB speaks volumes about his character, his real character, not the hail-fellow-well-met one that most people encountered. During my tenure case I insisted all along

that the problem was not with the profession or with the division or with Caltech, but with one man. And I think what he did after leaving Caltech shows why he was the issue.

So he assumed the chancellorship at Santa Barbara in January 1978. I didn't pay much attention to what was going on in Santa Barbara, although I did hear that there was some wrangle in 1980 when he fired one professor from his position as, surprise, surprise, chairman of the English department quite soon after he got there. This resulted in an investigation by the AAUP—the American Association of University Professors—but I never heard that anything came of it. In 1981 he fired a professor of religious studies from his job as director of the Center of Democratic Institutions. Maybe in both cases this was a wonderful thing to do. Then in 1982, someone sent me a clipping from the *Santa Barbara News and Review*, from a column that sounded more like gossip than news. But it simply began: “Even in UCSB circles familiar with Chancellor Robert Huttenback’s perquisites of power, the situation has caused comment. Why do university cars and drivers transport Freda Huttenback, his better half, on personal business? Campus employees, from maintenance to clerical workers, tell us of receiving a Xeroxed map to the Huttenbacks’ home and directions to chauffeur her wherever she asks. These trips have reportedly included visits to a Ventura chiropractor.

“Huttenback defends the practice by calling his wife a consultant to the university on interior design matters, saying that she occasionally needs a university car and driver for decorating business. Huttenback first denied he or his wife ever used the car for personal errands: ‘Whoever told you that must be someone I fired,’ was his reply.”

I just find that such an interesting reply. The ramifications of it are very interesting. Then—this is still from the article—he reconsidered: “If we have [used university cars], we’ve given compensation. Anyone who thinks that we’re ripping off the university at all is wrong and you can quote me.”

The columnist went on to say the employees he contacted would say little about the arrangement for fear of their jobs, but he promised to keep his ears open. This may have been idle talk or just rumors. As someone says in *Twelfth Night*: “What great ones do, the less will prattle of.” But it was interesting.

Then a few years later in 1985 I read something more serious in the *LA Times* about a literary scholar that I had admired for years, Professor Marvin Mudrick. He had been dismissed

from his position as provost of the College of Creative Studies, which had been established in the late sixties at UCSB. I believe it was actually Mudrick who had created that college.

ASPATURIAN: He wrote a wonderful critical study of Jane Austen [*Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*] I think it was one of the first.

LA BELLE: It was an amazing study that he did very early in his career. It was the first book in which Jane Austen studies were no longer tame. He really revolutionized the field. He wrote it in '52, I think. But, he had been removed as provost of this college. The Academic Senate Committee on Privilege and Tenure at UCSB reported that the procedure by which Mudrick was fired was improper and was in fact a violation of a UC Board of Regents' standing order requiring that any UC chancellor consult with an appropriate committee of the faculty on the campus before dismissing a provost. This committee in handing down its opinion noted that Huttenback might have acted in good faith, thinking that he could terminate a provost at will and at any time with or without cause, but that in fact he could not. Still, the committee stopped short of demanding that Professor Mudrick be reinstated. Then a separate group of professors investigated the case and determined that there was insufficient cause for Mudrick's dismissal.

ASPATURIAN: At any point in this, did anyone get in touch with you?

LA BELLE: No. But Huttenback let the firing stand and the UC administrators backed him. And it all sounded painfully familiar to me because everyone was always saying when Huttenback did something rash or improper that he acted in good faith. I had heard that phrase so many times. So I wrote to Marvin Mudrick.

ASPATURIAN: You knew him?

LA BELLE: No, but I was huge fan of his various books. I just wrote him and said I had read the article about his being unprovosted, if there is such a verb, and I told him that Huttenback had denied me tenure; that in my case, also, there had been various violations of university procedure, and I just hoped that he would continue to cry out against his dismissal.

He wrote back a charming letter, saying he would keep protesting not because he had any hope of reinstatement but because he enjoyed doing his “modest bit”—that was his phrase, I loved it—“toward making such people uncomfortable,” meaning such people as Huttenback. He finally did sue the university, Mudrick did, contending his firing was done improperly and without cause. I don’t know what might have happened to his suit because he “died tragically” the next year.

ASPATURIAN: What happened to him?

LA BELLE: I do not know what “died tragically” means. I only found this out in getting ready to talk to you today. His death didn’t make the papers at the time, and the only thing I could find about it was a wonderful tribute to him from his memorial service at UC, where this phrase was used.

ASPATURIAN: He committed suicide?

LA BELLE: It seems to me that that must have been what it meant because if he had been hit by a truck, it would have been a terrible accident but they would not have said he died tragically. I imagine that is what happened. I don’t know what would have happened with his suit because of course the legal action stops if you die. He had created this creative studies center—obviously it had been his life.

Slowly other stories started to emerge about Huttenback. In 1982 a complaint to the regents asserted that he improperly used faculty funds for his own research projects. It was alleged that he gave himself at least \$100,000. And remember, in today’s money, you’ve got to double or even triple the value of these amounts given the dates that we are talking about. The complaint said that he had used the money for continuing research on a book he coauthored, *Mammon and the Pursuit of Empire*.

ASPATURIAN: How funny. That title’s very ironic.

LA BELLE: The book was written with his friend [Professor of Economics] Lance Davis, here at Caltech. He was obviously impressive in his own defense, and I don’t know what went on.

Anyway, the investigation didn't find that he had violated state law or university regulations. The auditor did question the propriety of a UC chancellor using research money normally reserved for full-time faculty, but what was propriety to Huttenback? He did not seem deeply devoted to it. But as you say, the book title was appropriate. He did seem to be a builder of his own academic empires through money deals of Mammonic proportions.

In his oral history, [Professor of History] Bob Oliver said that when Huttenback was at Caltech, he redirected a great deal of research money away from the Humanities people and to his own work with Lance Davis on this same book. Oliver actually uses the word “embezzled” for it: “He embezzled funds from our division and used them for his personal research.” Anyway, after this episode, other stories started coming out at various times in the papers. A faculty member reported to the police that Huttenback drove into him and a student while they were at a rally protesting UC investments with companies that did business with racially segregated South Africa. But no one was injured, and Huttenback said he just barely touched them with his car. He also came under fire from students who claimed he disregarded their interests. The UCSB student body president and two other student officers met with him and suggested he resign—rather bold for students to say. They claimed that he formed his own student advisory council to bypass the regular student government.

ASPATURIAN: So he had a puppet student government?

LA BELLE: Then in 1986, the UCSB student body—those who voted—gave Huttenback a no-confidence vote by a three-to-one margin. That same year, a popular vice chancellor resigned, citing differences of opinion with Huttenback on some proposed energy plant. A little later, nine professors sent a letter to the University of California president David Gardner saying that it would be in the best interest of UCSB if Huttenback stepped down.

Still at the same time there were many positive stories about him coming out. Under his chancellorship, millions in private donations came to the school that had not come in before. He hired prestigious faculty members and garnered six new endowed chairs. Student enrollment went up, and he helped attract funding for the Institute for Theoretical Physics. That was under way well before he arrived, but he gets credit for it. And for a long time I thought he was like Shakespeare's Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*—that his “taints and honors waged equal in

him,” that somehow they were evenly matched. Yes, he was rash and brash and brazen, but he had vitality. He was shamelessly self-assertive, sometimes even to the point of arrogance, but he got things done and had success.

But eventually the taints seemed to be spreading over the honors and it was in 1986 when the university began investigating whether Huttenback had misused university funds to refurbish his kitchen.

ASPATURIAN: It’s a little bit like the flounder in the sea fairy tale—a parable of overreaching. So all was not well with his kitchen.

LA BELLE: It started with the kitchen. When he first moved to Santa Barbara he lived in Isla Vista in a three-bedroom house with a study and a view of the lagoon that the former chancellor had lived in for thirteen years. Chancellors are of course provided with housing and this house was at the edge of the campus. But the Huttenbacks soon found it unsuitable even though they had already spent more than \$100,000 of university funds to renovate it. All of that of course was permitted. So he was authorized to purchase a home of his own, off-campus in Santa Barbara. The UCSB foundation, an independent money-raising arm of the university, made him a small, short-term loan to help cover the expenses of buying it, and he was given an annual housing allowance and an administrative fund to defray maintenance and repair costs.

When the possible misuse of university funds for household expenses first came up, Huttenback said he was prepared to repay the university because some of the money was his “own responsibility.” He didn’t say how much he’d spent, but a university source said the amount exceeded \$25,000. That was in late April of 1986. By early May the amount he’d spent was reported to have exceeded more than \$120,000, which included \$40,000 paid to a contractor to renovate the kitchen. As it turned out later, the kitchen was remodeled three times and the money went up. Plus he’d repeatedly used university personnel to perform maintenance and repair work on his home. Huttenback said all the expenditures were justified because he often used his home for university purposes. He said, “We’ve been remarkably open; we’ve hidden nothing. There’s been no attempt to deceive.” In May it was also reported that his housing allowance had been raised from \$26,000 to \$37,000 a year and that he also received a stipend of \$21,000 annually for entertainment and operating expenses.

ASPATURIAN: So he had a \$60,000 discretionary fund in connection with his private residence?

LA BELLE: Yes, not really counting regular maintenance. And a carpenter foreman, who was not afraid to speak because he was retired and therefore wasn't going to lose his job, said that university personnel worked on the house extensively and charged the cost to the chancellor's on-campus residence rather than to Huttenback's own Santa Barbara home. But Huttenback of course said that he knew nothing about the time and labor being charged to other accounts. Now by June the amount that Huttenback had to pay back had jumped to over \$174,000. The audit found that the expenditures were "inappropriate and unauthorized" but still concluded that there was no intentional wrongdoing on Huttenback's part. Again he'd behaved in good faith—that same wonderful phrase came up so often.

Newspaper reports on the audit and the expenses began to bring up a number of the controversies from the past, including what the *Santa Barbara News-Press* called "the most notorious"—my tenure case at Caltech. They also reported on what Huttenback himself called the "great bloodletting" at the beginning of his chancellorship at UC Santa Barbara, where, within a few months of his arrival, three top administrators had decided to call it quits, two of them pointing to a difference in management style with Huttenback.

But back to the spring of '86. After three UCSB senate committee reports raised concerns about the chancellor's administrative efficiency and style, the next step was for UC President Gardner to get involved. He agreed to do a comprehensive review of UCSB operations under Huttenback's command as soon as possible. As part of the probe, three top UC vice presidents from Berkeley were to conduct interviews with faculty, administrators, and students.

Huttenback with his usual modesty said that he welcomed the review. "I hope the review will say I'm terrific, which I am." Now, reviews generally are considered confidential. But a UC spokesman said that the results of this one would be released. Meanwhile in a related matter, the UC central administration sequestered all of the records of the UC Santa Barbara Foundation, this independent money-raising organization connected with the university. This was the foundation that had loaned money to Huttenback in 1982 [in connection with the purchase of his home], and there was some question as to the propriety of the payback arrangement. Also, it was later shown that Huttenback financed trips to Italy with foundation funds. During all of this, Huttenback never mentioned stepping down from his post, but as Gardner's review was

concluding, there was speculation that his days as chancellor were numbered. And on July 11, 1986, he did resign. "I decided to step down to end the petty conflict and argument on the campus," he said. Because he resigned, the results of the review by the president were never released.

The resignation was not effective until December 31, but he took a paid leave of absence from the post from September until July 31 of 1987. He was also eligible to return to the university as a tenured history professor. And all was very quiet for awhile. And then in November 1986, the Santa Barbara grand jury, along with the sheriff's department, initiated a criminal investigation.

ASPATURIAN: What prompted that?

LA BELLE: I think it was just the financial activities that the auditors had gone into—the California Office of the Auditor General also began conducting a separate audit. According to the newspapers, one investigation team came to Caltech and discovered that Huttenback had been accused of spending large sums of Caltech funds on the home he lived in when he was dean of undergraduate students. The Institute provided this home, and the result was that Caltech administrators had asked him to move off campus.

ASPATURIAN: So he'd been dean of undergraduate students before becoming HSS chair?

LA BELLE: Yes. He'd been soccer coach, master of student houses, dean of undergraduate students, and then HSS division chairman. So essentially, he went from violating the rules at a private university to breaking the law at a public one, as he went up the ladder of both power and vice. So, in March of '87, Huttenback and his wife, Freda, were arrested on suspicion of insurance fraud, embezzlement, and tax evasion. They hadn't been declaring any of this money that they'd been using. Tax evasion is the scary one to do, because the IRS never lets go. Altogether there were twelve criminal charges.

There was also the question of insurance fraud. At one point the Huttenbacks had reported that \$12,000 worth of antique silverware had been stolen from their home and that they wanted reimbursement right away for a trip that they were taking to Italy. The insurance company paid them \$8,000. Later the silverware was found under a sofa by the cleaning lady,

but they never reported that to the insurance company. They claimed that they had and that they had phone records of an eleven-minute phone call to show that they did. But supposedly they did not. Later on, when they had given all the money back, someone came to investigate the house one day and found twelve more silver knives in a hidden drawer in a desk in the master bedroom. Who knows? It's so petty.

After the arrests, Huttenback said the accusations were “a complete obscenity and outrage” and that there were people in the district attorney's office who thought they were going to further their own careers by persecuting him. He said that he was being “victimized” by people who were out to get him. It was hard to see Huttenback as a victim except perhaps of his own ambition. He said he'd done one “hell of a good job” when he was chancellor: “That's a great university now and it certainly wasn't before I came. If I'm guilty of anything it's not covering my own rear end.”

Huttenback still had many wealthy friends, and they formed a committee in hopes of raising half a million dollars to pay for his defense. I don't know how much they raised—it turned out that the contributions were not tax deductible so perhaps they didn't raise very much. After that it became like a Victorian novel published in monthly parts, because every month something new would come out. Some late Trollope novel—*The Way We Live Now*, if I had to name one.

In June the Huttenbacks sued all the members of the UC Board of Regents and eighty unnamed persons, charging them with defamation. Things became really crazy in September '87 when the hearings started.

For instance there was a former housekeeper of the Huttenbacks named Ernie Eaglesong—I'm not making this name up. She testified that Mrs. Huttenback constantly said she hated the university and that she thought her husband was worth a lot more than he was being paid and that she vowed “she would get all the services she could” at university expense.

Eaglesong also said that Mrs. Huttenback had a black box that emitted sparks that she got from a hypnotist in Los Angeles. She asked the housekeeper to use it to help her get rid of ghosts. Maybe this Ernie Eaglesong was crazy and made all this up; I don't know. Reading the papers you'd sit there and shake your head.

A university maintenance supervisor said that on many occasions he had driven Mrs. Huttenback in a university van to a nursery in Pasadena to pick up rose plants for her yard.

Meanwhile Huttenback had been scheduled to teach a UCSB history class that fall, but in October a judge determined that the Huttenbacks must stand trial on the charges. The trial didn't start until May of 1988.

To add to the drama, in June, the new Santa Barbara chancellor, Barbara Uehling, who was getting ready for her ceremonial inauguration in a couple of weeks, was arrested for drunken driving. [Laughter] I felt so bad, because she and the new chancellor of UC Riverside were UC's first women chancellors, and I suspect everyone was hoping you'd have these quiet, elegant tea parties. In the end she went through the inauguration, and after that everything was okay. So the Huttenback trial included a hundred witnesses and went on until mid July, at which time he was convicted of embezzling more than a quarter of a million dollars of university funds and of five counts of income-tax evasion.

ASPATURIAN: Did you attend any of the trial?

LA BELLE: I did. I went twice. It was in Santa Maria, in northern Santa Barbara County. The first day I went, it was cancelled because someone was sick. By chance the second time that I went was the final day so I got to hear both the prosecution and the defense summations. It was interesting. I stayed very far in the back—the back row. He was facing up to eight years in prison. The prosecutor said it was simply not a defense that he was a good historian or a good chancellor or that he raised a lot of money. His wife, Freda, was also found guilty of embezzlement but was acquitted on the other counts. She was facing up to five years. The Huttenbacks of course appealed the conviction.

Next there was a column in the *Santa Barbara News-Press* pointing out that the ex-chancellor had just been given a generous pay raise and had been receiving his full salary for months. Even though Huttenback was no longer chancellor, he was still a tenured professor in the above-scale category reserved for the best teachers. This columnist wrote, who says crime doesn't pay? Shortly thereafter the university said they were beginning a disciplinary review that could lead to Huttenback's dismissal from the university. The question was, did his conviction violate the faculty code of conduct? In September Huttenback and his wife were each sentenced to five years of probation and combined fines of \$70,300.

ASPATURIAN: They got off rather easily.

LA BELLE: They did, because another man who was involved in the case was imprisoned for five or six years. Additionally Huttenback was ordered to perform a thousand hours of community service. The next day, the university announced that Huttenback had been suspended with pay pending the outcome of the review. In January of '89 the review was still ongoing and Huttenback was still receiving his teaching salary of \$81,000 a year, although of course he wasn't teaching. Your tax dollars at work. So far he had paid \$400 of his fine.

In May of '89 the university announced that the committee hearings on Huttenback would begin in June, at which time his salary would be increased to \$84,000. The review process, which to date had been going on for eight months, had only been about resolving procedural issues, such as where should the review be held. Well—what about any available meeting room? [Laughter] The chairman of the Academic Senate said that he couldn't estimate how long it would take. Also, and this was a serious issue, how would they find a panel of professors at UCSB who had no bias for or against Huttenback?

In late July he was stripped of his salary and suspended from the faculty, pending his appeal. Huttenback contended that the regents caved in to pressure from taxpayers and politicians, and he denied any wrongdoing, repeating that he had never violated any university rules and he filed a lawsuit against UC.

ASPATURIAN: How old was he?

LA BELLE: He would have been in his early sixties. Finally sometime that summer the faculty discipline process began. Five UCSB professors were on the committee undertaking a task that was without precedent in the history of the University of California. No tenured UC faculty member had ever been dismissed outright from university service, and the dismissal of Huttenback was one of the options that the committee had before it. Of course some faculty members in the past had resigned but that's different. After hearing testimony, including testimony from Huttenback and his attorney, and having deliberated, the committee concluded, and this is a quote, "That a faculty member's criminal betrayal of the university trust, in addition to other crimes, suffices to render that person unfit for further service in the university."

This is an excerpt from the final report of the UC Santa Barbara faculty hearing committee, and it was made part of the public record as a result of the lawsuit that Huttenback

had filed against the university. If he hadn't filed a lawsuit, it wouldn't have become public. The committee members agreed unanimously that he should be dismissed. The current chancellor agreed, as did UC President Gardner. In the end however, the regents rejected these conclusions and decided to keep Huttenback on the faculty pending the outcome of the appeal of his criminal convictions. If his convictions were upheld, then the regents would dismiss him. If the convictions were overturned then the regents would consider his case again. In November of '91 more than three years after the trial ended, the court of appeal upheld the embezzlement conviction of Huttenback but overturned his wife's. The court pointed out that Freda was not a university employee, was not entrusted with university funds, and that there was no evidence that she knew university funds could not be spent on home improvements.

In April of '92, Huttenback was finally fired by the University of California after the California Supreme Court declined to review his felony convictions. He thus became only the second tenured faculty member to be dismissed in UC's [then] 124-year history. Just a few months before, an associate professor at Berkeley had been dismissed. It was all kept secret but supposedly it was a dozen or so counts of sexual harassment charges. Thus I conclude this De Casibus tragicomedy. A De Casibus tragedy is one where there is a fall of a man who has risen. But unlike a Shakespearean tragedy, it is not about self-knowledge that the tragic protagonist has gained. It is simply a lesson for the rest of us. So I sort of see this as more of a De Casibus because I don't know what impact it actually had on Huttenback. Character is destiny, as Heraclitus said many years ago, and sometimes destiny can lead to justice. But you don't even have to be highly noble to be a De Casibus protagonist; you just have to rise high and fall.

ASPATURIAN: While all of this was going on was there any reaction on the Caltech campus that came your way?

LA BELLE: Yes, people went through some various stages. At first it was kind of merriment because we didn't take it seriously. I want to say that I and the English professors had not been delusional; that the man was capable of playing fast and loose behind the scenes, but I think we all thought that nothing would really happen because we figured he could have gotten out of it. If he had said immediately, "Oh, my gosh; I've been so busy I didn't know. I'll pay it all back. Let me help with the audit," that might have put an end to it. It was his attitude of, we have done

nothing wrong, I haven't violated anything that kept it going. Now I don't like to see anyone have to drink from the cup of his own disgrace. I don't, so finally—it was sad.

ASPATURIAN: Did you have anyone come up to you and say; now I understand what you meant?

LA BELLE: No, I don't think anyone said that. And yet it did seem clear that he had established a pattern here that was not fully revealed. That he kept being protected because, in both cases, he did very good things for the schools—Caltech and UCSB. But finally I think that we should all heave a sigh of relief that he didn't stay at Caltech. And I still think a lot about that moment—how perfect the timing was that at the very moment that I needed him not to be here, the school needed him not to be here. I sometimes wonder if some of his really strong supporters—and there must have been some powerful supporters of his on the Board of Trustees—said he's been maligned at Caltech by this woman, so let's find him a really good job he deserves. He's a mover and shaker and maybe that's what happened. If it did, it was good for him, it was good for me, it was good for the school, and good for the Board of Trustees. But then it went wrong. But it didn't need to. And as far as I know he's been unmoored from the profession.

ASPATURIAN: Where is he now?

LA BELLE: He lives in Camarillo, near Santa Barbara. He has not kept up his writing that I know of, or received another position. I also never found out what he did with his thousand hours of community service. Certainly many people in Santa Barbara wrote in suggestions.

JENIJOY LA BELLE**SESSION 8****April 18, 2009**

ASPATURIAN: We're going to be talking more today about your research, among other things.

LA BELLE: I'd like to spend some time talking about how valuable the Huntington Library has been to my research. It's been great to just be able to run over there for an hour or so. As we talked about before, I've worked on William Blake for many years and of course the Huntington has one of the world's great Blake collections. I've worked on many projects there, some lengthy some brief, but all of them projects that could only be done at the Huntington. For example, years ago one of the Huntington preparators, someone who mats drawings and prints, decided that one of Blake's drawings should be removed from the highly acidic mat board that it was firmly pasted to. That was because the mat board could stain the drawing eventually. So when the drawing—a sketch of one of Blake's illustrations to Dante—was removed, a pencil sketch of a standing woman was found on the verso. I happened to be at the library that day, and, as a Blake scholar, that sketch was shown to me. I immediately thought that the qualities of the draftsmanship indicated it might be by Blake, and I asked if I could write an article on it since it had been totally unknown until then. And I determined it was likely a sketch from the period 1824 to 1827, in which Blake was working on the Dante designs, and that it was probably an early version of one of the female figures in Blake's watercolor "Beatrice Addressing Dante From the Car." I love that name—it always sounds as if she's waving at him from a BMW or something. Although in those days, "car" just meant "chariot." But I do love the title. It turns out that the Huntington is really a good place for discovering previously unknown drawings by Blake. In 1982, a Blake sketch was discovered in a pile of uncatalogued drawings that had been languishing in the library's Rare Book stacks for years. When one goes over there, one never knows.

I spoke earlier about the two books that Bob Essick and I coauthored on Flaxman and Blake, and in both cases the Huntington owned the original prints that we were reproducing to make those books. And we made use of them in our studies, so that was very useful too. The

Huntington was even useful in book reviews. At one point, I was asked to review a newly published facsimile copy of Lavater's 1788 *Aphorisms on Man*, with Blake's extensive annotations—The Huntington owns the original book with Blake's handwriting in it. So I was able to compare the facsimile with the original and to discover that there were many disturbing problems in the facsimile that you couldn't possibly know about if you didn't have the original book in your hand. These included such things as cutting off margins that included some of Blake's annotations. I know that sounds very minor, but as Blake wrote in *Jerusalem*, "He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars." He always capitalizes "minute particulars" when he uses it. I like that. So in spite of all the reproductions and facsimiles that we have of Blake today, nothing quite beats going back to the originals. And it's also just thrilling to hold in your hands a book that Blake held and wrote in, and that he scribbled his own little remarks in.

ASPATURIAN: You mentioned in an earlier interview that you also used the Huntington materials for some of your earlier poetry studies.

LA BELLE: Yes. Another project at the Huntington started with this strange little leather-bound manuscript. One day Hallett Smith took me into the Rare Book Room and handed me this small volume and said, "Here, figure this out." It contained about sixty-five poems, and I pored over them for several hours every day for about a month. It was a very strange group—there were sonnets and elegies, lyrics, epistles—a very odd assortment—and I could see that the same hand had written almost all of them out, although the handwriting wasn't always easy to read until I got used to it. I recognized a poem by Ben Jonson, so I knew the volume would have to be post-Jonson but I didn't know what period it preceded. About half of the poems had no indication of authorship, and the authors of the rest were indicated only by initials or in a half-dozen cases by this very strange cipher that I couldn't make any sense of.

I did recognize some of the poems by famous people like Henry King or well-known writers such as Thomas Cary or Richard Fanshawe. So I went back to Hallett and said I thought the book was compiled in the early seventeenth century and probably by a woman, simply because it seemed like a group of verses a woman would gather together, whatever that means. I said I'd been able to attribute quite a few of the works to their authors, but that there were at least

three dozen poems that seemed unique to this manuscript—poems that didn't appear in the Bodleian first-line index of English poetry from 1500 to 1800. You can look everything up in there by the first line, and these weren't there.

So then Hallett revealed to me what he knew about the manuscript, which was that the Huntington had acquired it in 1925 and no one knew what to make of it. And then sometime in the 1930s they sent a Rotograph copy to B. H. Newdigate, a well-known scholar-printer, who determined it was compiled in the 1630s by the youngest daughter of Lord Aston.

This would be the Caroline Period, under the reigns of Charles I. At this point I was still guessing. These were turbulent times in Britain for the Catholics, and this was a Catholic family. Newdigate figured it was compiled by the youngest daughter of Lord Aston, whose family seat was at Tixall in Staffordshire. Anyway her name was Constance Aston, and I figured she would have been about eighteen at the time she put this manuscript together. It turns out that Newdigate had commented briefly on this manuscript in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1940 and suggested that it offered very tempting grounds for research but that was about all he said. He didn't know whom these others poems were by. His theory was that it was put together by Constance, and that it had somehow become separated from the other Aston papers. Because two hundred years earlier, an antiquarian scholar named Arthur Clifford unlocked a huge trunk in Tixall and discovered this rich reserve of seventeenth-century poems and letters written by three generations of the Aston family. This volume somehow wasn't in there, although almost everything else was. The most notable member of that family was Walter 1st Lord Aston, 1584–1639, who was England's ambassador to Spain and was also the patron of the poet Michael Drayton. So you can tell the family was interested in literature. But for whatever reason, this little manuscript was not in the family trunk and it ended up ultimately at the Huntington. So once I knew something about the family, I then went back to studying all these poems and especially seven poems that had a strange cipher at the end. I began calling the unknown author of these poems "the Pretzel Poet" because this very curious cipher looks surprisingly like a pretzel with salt on it. But after staring at it for hours, I realized the key to the figure was not to be found in the pretzel shape but in the interstices between the intersections where Constance had woven together the initials HA and the word "God." "God" was written twice to form a cross of five letters, so that the letters G and D are constructed so that they can be read interchangeably depending on the way the cipher's turned. Thus, the word "God" can be

found four times in the cipher of five letters. I've never figured out the salt on the pretzel except it might indicate that the device was once intended as a needlepoint pattern. She might have used it for that.

ASPATURIAN: It was a sort of personal cryptogram?

LA BELLE: Yes, which I eventually did decipher. Since the papers from the Aston family trunk had eventually ended up in the British Museum [now Library], I went there and I was able to find the letters of Constance Aston, including those to her brother whose name was Herbert. So I was beginning to see that the HA that was woven into the cipher might well be her brother. These letters were written from 1635 to 1638 when Herbert was in Madrid with their father, and they reveal that Constance adored her brother and that while he was away from home she was attempting to arrange a marriage between him and her dearest friend, Katherine Thimelby. And her letters are like a mini-epistulary novel—like a little miniature Richardson novel. Her brother had apparently begun to woo Katherine before he left England, and Constance's letters are full of constant attempts to keep him alternating between jealousy and anxiety on the one hand and hope and desire on the other. She delights in playing elaborate verbal games.

ASPATURIAN: It almost sounds like *Emma* nearly two hundred years later. A very bright young woman with too much time on her hands, and not nearly enough to do.

LA BELLE: Yes, it is! What's also interesting is that during this whole period 1580 to 1650, not many women's letters have been preserved, and those that were tended to be about household affairs—sick children, preserving fruit, that sort of thing—and you don't get a sense of personality in them. But that's not the case with Constance. You have a real sense of this person. In these letters in the British Museum library, she also repeatedly begs her brother to send her his poems for her personal anthology, and especially to send poems of his own composition. So this started making a lot of sense. The scholar who had found and read all of these Aston materials in the 1800s believed that all the poems of Herbert Aston had perished, but now I had found them. Because clearly the anonymous poems in the Huntington manuscript bearing the pretzel cipher with the HA initials are Henry's heretofore unrecorded poems, and this pretzel device was Constance's own private secret way of identifying her brother's poems, which

clearly meant so much to her. And the linking of Herbert's initials with the word God further shows the sort of worshipful respect in which she held these poems and their author. So we see how human and heavenly love get bound together in Constance's love knot, as they are frequently intertwined in metaphysical poetry.

ASPATURIAN: Did you have the sense that she identified with her brother partly because he had so many opportunities that were simply denied to her? That she was sort of living through him by proxy?

LA BELLE: Yes, and having her own adventure via the love relationship was within the sphere where she could operate. Yes, that's good. And I was finally even able to confirm this discovery by finally finding a little tiny drawing with one of the same ciphers that were in the Huntington manuscript in one of her letters. They had simply misidentified it, calling it something like a woman in a hoop skirt. How they came up with that, I don't know.

ASPATURIAN: I wonder if you ever thought of doing a psychological analysis of all this—writers and literary scholars are in their own way psychologists.

LA BELLE: Well I ended up writing two very lengthy articles on the manuscripts, and one was primarily very dull but it's proven to be very valuable to many students of seventeenth-century poetry in their research on any of the thirty poets who are in the manuscript. The other is about what you are saying: it's a mostly interpretive critical essay about the history of the family and the love story of Constance and her brother.

ASPATURIAN: What happened to Constance?

LA BELLE: Even though she was only eighteen, she was married at the time that she was doing this. She never mentions the husband, whose last name was apparently Fowler, and we don't hear from her again. The brother came back, he did marry Katherine Thimelby, and there wasn't anything exciting to write about anymore, and maybe she started a new journal that we don't have.

Anyway I worked on this project in the mid 1970s, and it was wonderful to escape to the Huntington Library and not think about the tenure case and to live in the 1630s and become immersed in that period. I'm also not saying that Herbert Aston's poems are masterpieces or that I discovered another John Donne, but they do exhibit interesting facets of seventeenth-century poetic sensibility and therefore I was able to add another chapter to the extraordinary history of poetry written by amateurs in that century and to study the interplay between social and literary forms in that remarkable age. Because some of Constance's letters are almost like poems in the puns and the wordplay. For instance, she constantly plays on her name—"constance." Anyway, those articles were finally published in *The London Book Collector* and then in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*.

ASPATURIAN: I believe you've also done quite a bit work on the Shakespearean sonnets and some of the plays?

LA BELLE: I used Huntington sources extensively in an article about Lady Macbeth. I was working on *Macbeth* and there is a very well known speech of Lady Macbeth's—"unsex me here." The Huntington collection is vast, and what makes it particularly attractive to researchers is that it's not limited to literary texts. And for this project, I was able to use the Renaissance medical books, which were really of great value to me.

I had never read an analysis of that speech that I found satisfying. It comes very early in the play when she is steeling herself to participate in the killing of King Duncan. The soliloquy partly says "Unsex me here... That no compunctious visitings of nature/Shake my fell purpose." I never accepted any of the standard interpretations of those lines. One commentator said the "visitings of nature" are natural feelings of compassion. Another said they are conscientious scruples and so on, but I kept wondering whether the phrase might have a biological meaning because she says "of nature" and I thought perhaps these visitings were occurrences of menstruation. Lady Macbeth wants to be unsexed, and more than any other natural and usually unavoidable event in a woman's life, it is menstruation that repeatedly reminds her of her sex.

Anyway I was able by studying these texts at the Huntington—sixteenth and seventeenth century medical treatises and medical directives for midwives—to write an article on the stoppage of Lady Macbeth's menstrual cycle and its results, and therefore I was able to elucidate

the physiological dimensions of her speech. Its metaphorical significance had long been understood, but the literal meaning hadn't previously been recognized.

ASPATURIAN: What did you say about that?

LA BELLE: I won't go into all the medical texts, but they talk about ways in which somehow women could supposedly make their periods stop and what the consequences of that were thought to be. Of course today we know that can happen if you get anorexic and that things like stress can also interfere with the menstrual cycle. According to these texts, stopping menstrual flow would sometimes cause you to sleepwalk, and it could cause madness and suicidal thoughts, and those are all things that happen to Lady Macbeth.

They also believed in that period that pregnancy turned the menstrual blood into milk, which went up your system and came out the breasts, and you know the line, "Take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers," and it's as if she's calling down satanic curses on herself. But it's highly, highly physical, and it works with all the good and bad blood imagery. The menstrual blood is good because it shows that you have a possibility of getting pregnant and so on, but to stop it unnaturally makes it part of the bad blood imagery of the play. Also when you stop the menstrual periods, according to these texts, you can grow a beard, and so in a sense she becomes one of the witches who have beards and are also possessed.

Anyway the Folger Library published that analysis, and it's recently been printed in a new source book devoted to *Macbeth*. I think it's pretty much the accepted interpretation now. It turns out there was another woman writing on the same topic at almost the same time, but she didn't have access to the same books that I did. Sometimes when I talk about this with my students, they say, well would Shakespeare have read medical texts? Well, one of his daughters was married to a doctor. And just as all of us today know common "truths" about health and pregnancy and menstruation, so did people in Shakespeare's time. And it's obvious he had an incredibly broad range of interests and was able to make absolute use of everything that he knew and picked up.

Later I wrote an article for *English Language Notes* on Touchstone's dial speech in *As You Like It*, also making use of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century medical texts. It's the famous passage on ripening and rotting. In the play, he draws a small sundial—that is, a watch—from

his poke, or pocket. Touchstone doesn't give the speech himself. It's Jacques who says, "I met a fool in the forest... He drew a dial from his poke, and looking on it with lack-lustre eye says very wisely, 'It is ten o'clock. Thus we may see how the world wags. 'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine. And after one hour more 'twill be eleven. And so from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe. And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot. And thereby hangs a tale.' "

Now everyone has always assumed that there's some double-entendre in the line. But they always assume that what Jacques saw Touchstone doing was taking a timepiece out of his pocket and then philosophizing on time and decay. But what I figured out by reading these medical texts is that there's a much bawdier interpretation, which explains why Jacques laughs uproariously for an hour after he hears this speech. Touchstone is performing a urological, not a horological, examination. He is actually of course taking his phallus from his poke. Obviously the poke is the pocket or bag in which one keeps one's valuables and then when you start thinking about the angle of declension and so on and the language itself and of course lines like "the prick of noon" in *Romeo and Juliet*, it all fits together. So from hour to hour we ripe and ripe—from ten to twelve the man grows more and more sexually alert and then he rots of course with venereal disease, and there are various references to venereal disease in the play. One of the ways they thought at the time that you could get rid of venereal disease was to marry a virgin, and maybe that's why Touchstone is so eager to marry the poor little country girl Audrey, who is not very bright but at least pure. This gives the whole passage a very dark side, which I think is something that Shakespeare's audience would have got immediately, and you can imagine the hand gestures they would have given it. Anyway the Huntington has all these wonderful treatises from the 1580s on venereal disease, and a wonderful book called *The Anatomy of the Bodie of Man*. So once again, I wrote a long article about all this, and it was a lot of fun.

ASPATURIAN: Which of your pieces has engendered the most amount of controversy or debate? I mean literary critics are notorious for having their own strongly and passionately held points of view.

LA BELLE: I think there were probably some people who attacked the *Macbeth* one. I don't remember there being as much of a response to the Touchstone one. Possibly because people had already assumed metaphorically that that's the way it worked.

I'd like to say one more thing on the Huntington, and that is I was also on the Huntington-NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] fellowship selection committee at various times. And that was fun, and in that way, one could have a little control over whether people might come in who would be interested in working on things in the seventeenth century and so on.

ASPATURIAN: Was the Huntington in general a big draw to get humanities people to Caltech?

LA BELLE: I don't think it was as much as it should have been because we didn't always choose that kind of person. At the time, theoreticians were getting hot, and they can spin their theories anywhere. I tried very hard in my early years here to make more connections between the Huntington and Caltech, and eventually I just sort of gave up. Now it's become the hot thing to do again, and I think we are making good connections. Someone who was very interested in that was the historian Bill Deverell, and he unfortunately went to USC because he was not promoted here, which I think was a big loss. Historically, humanists have not had a lot of input around here.

ASPATURIAN: For a long time the field of literary criticism was largely dominated by men, with some notable exceptions like Mrs. Humphrey Ward, and quite a bit later Dorothy Van Ghent. But I would think you came of age academically and professionally just as this was beginning to change, with more women beginning to get advanced degrees in literature and entering academia. Was there a certain amount of resistance that you encountered, and to what extent do you think women's participation has affected the field of literary criticism?

LA BELLE: Very early on, of course, there was also Virginia Woolf, who was a great critic and also a great writer. Women writers have certainly become much more a part of the accepted literary canon than they ever were. There's really been a tremendous change there. In the past you don't find many women poets included in the anthologies, and now whenever they can find one they put her in. The thing is, I worked on dead white males mostly at first until I got to the mirror book [*Herself Beheld*, Cornell University Press]. That I suppose would be more of a feminist book, although the feminists in that case hated it because they did not want to think that women judge themselves by their mirror reflections. And I was saying that many women do

that—not that it's good or bad, but that many women do. So I did get attacked on that score. But I didn't write that book 'til I was safe, sort of, and tenured. These things keep going around in circles all the time. There is certainly more attention being paid nowadays to everything women write; and there's a lot of interest in going back into history and studying women writers who up to now have been largely ignored. I mean for instance every five years there seems to be a new book—yesterday I just saw another one—on Dorothy Wordsworth, on either the *Grasmere Journals* or analyzing her poetry. I mean she's certainly not her brother but I think she is now seen in the light of the valuable contribution she made both to his and Coleridge's poetry. She doesn't really say that much in the *Grasmere Journals* [laughter]; people get to read everything and anything they want into them. I've already ordered the new book. I'm curious to see what it will say.

I wasn't going to talk about *Herself Beheld* really, because the Archives already has both my Watson lecture and my KPCC AirTalk interview about it on audiocassettes. So maybe we can move on to my work on committees. Blessedly I've forgotten most of them so that's the good news. I remember the titles like Membership and Bylaws, and I've no idea what we did on that. I also served on Academic Freedom and Tenure, which meets only when it's needed and we didn't have any cases the years that I was on it, 1987 through 1989. So we spent our time rewriting the guidelines. Always exciting. I recently chaired the Nominating Committee for the Faculty Board, and that of course involved a lot of strong-arming of one's colleagues to get them to volunteer to run. Always, anyone who runs is elected, and so then you want to make sure that they actually go on to serve. I've been on the Committee on Performing and Creative Arts for years, but we still don't have a theater where we can put on plays. One committee that I did serve on for many years—first as a member and then as the chair—was the Convocation Committee, which plans and supervises commencement; and that was fun. I served under Bob Oliver and then [Professor of Mechanical Engineering] Chris Brennen and then Kent Clark before becoming chairman myself. They were all wonderful, and I learned a lot. I remember pushing very hard when Bob Oliver was chair to have a female commencement speaker because Caltech had never had one and I thought it was about time. So we asked Dixy Lee Ray to give the address for 1980. She was the first woman governor of Washington, trained as a marine biologist, very interested in environmental issues, and supposed to be a very skilled speaker. She

accepted, and then at the last moment a really huge environmental issue prevented her from being our speaker.

ASPATURIAN: Mount St. Helens. Who took her place?

LA BELLE: President Goldberger. It didn't actually blow up that day. It actually erupted in May, and she said she would still come. But then on June 12, the day before our graduation ceremony, the mountain exploded again. Poor President Goldberger. He had to step in and deliver this set speech that they keep for such emergencies. And it's a speech of nothing but statistics: 179 students are receiving their bachelor's degree. Twenty percent of the graduating class is originally from the East Coast. Four percent of commencement speakers do not show up. But the next year, we did have our first woman speaker. Shirley Hufstедler, who was Secretary of Education at the time, so that was good. I was chair from '86 to '89, and the difficulty for the committee is that the students always believe, in the innocence of their youth, that it's their graduation and that they should choose the speaker and have the speaker they want. And they only seem vaguely aware that Caltech doesn't give honorary degrees and that it doesn't pay a speaker's fee.

ASPATURIAN: And doesn't offer honorary membership in the Alumni Association or a named asteroid.

LA BELLE: So every year we would get all of these brochures from firms that offer famous-name speakers and the students would get all excited. You could call the agency to find out the price. In 1988 I remember you could purchase Nelson Mandela's daughter or the columnist Ellen Goodman or Arthur Schlesinger or George Plimpton. At the time, they were hot. And even though there were student representatives on the committee, usually the senior-class president and a graduate student, they never seemed to grasp that our function was not to choose the speaker but to advise the president on the choice of speaker. It was ultimately his decision. And we'd often start the process as soon as the last commencement was over—in June or July. I still have for some reason the list of preferred speakers that the students put together for 1986: Bill Murray, Bill Cosby, David Letterman, and Gary Trudeau. Burke Breathed, George Lucas, the Laker girls. And thirty others.

ASPATURIAN: [Looking at the list] I'd like to get some more of these names into the record. Alan Alda—well, he did ultimately speak. Donald Duck! Leonard Nimoy—that would have been interesting. Julio Iglesias. Luciano Pavarotti. Bob Guccione—oh my, my! Gary Kasparov—also an interesting choice.

LA BELLE: These would appear over and over, year after year. And in 1986, Arnold Beckman was the speaker.

ASPATURIAN: Well, they came close.

LA BELLE: Of course the students had tremendous respect for Beckman so that was not a bad decision. I don't think they were disappointed when Beckman spoke or Feynman spoke or Harry Gray or Max Delbrück.

The next fall when I was still chair, the first choice, based on a survey, was Bill Cosby, but President Goldberger didn't think it was a good idea. And as it turned out Bill Cosby did agree to speak at Stanford that year. Then when he found out that it was against their university policy to grant him an honorary degree, he claimed he had a scheduling conflict and he just didn't show up. The other speaker the students wanted was Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley, and the administration objected to him. I was never told why. And Goldberger suggested David Hamburg, the president of Carnegie, and he was the speaker. In the fall of 1987, Tom Everhart was president and he was actually very good about trying to choose a speaker the students wanted. It was going to be Willy Fowler, who had won the Nobel Prize in Physics five years earlier, but for some reason he had to decline at the last minute. Robert Sinsheimer took his place, and he was a very good speaker too. He was through being chancellor at UC Santa Cruz and was currently a visiting professor at Caltech so that worked out.

That spring was a very busy one for our committee because we were also responsible for planning and carrying out of the inauguration of President Everhart in April. What I remember best about the inauguration is that his daughter Jan, a minister, gave the invocation. We sent out some 5,000 invitations for that event.

Tom tried his hardest the next year on the commencement speaker. The students in the senior class really wanted someone outside of the Caltech community. Sally Ride was a very strong candidate, followed by Isaac Asimov and Neil Armstrong. Tom wrote persuasively to

each of them, starting with Sally Ride. She turned us down by phone, and Isaac Asimov declined but wrote a charming note, which I still have. He says, “Dear President Everhart: I am very honored that you and the faculty and the student body express such an interest in hearing me. I would give much to be able to oblige you. The problem is however that I am one of those people who in this Air Age never fly”—and he capitalizes ‘air age.’ “And the task of reaching California and returning by any other form of transportation is one which I cannot face. Please forgive me. The loss is far more mine than yours.”

ASPATURIAN: He doesn’t fly? The guru of science fiction, and he doesn’t fly?

LA BELLE: I know. Isn’t that great? And it’s written on an old typewriter—he’s made mistakes and gone over them. Neil Armstrong also wrote us a nice note but he declined too. So Tom finally selected James Duderstadt, who was the president of the University of Michigan and who had a PhD from Caltech. The next year the students’ ranking order was Kurt Vonnegut followed by Ray Bradbury followed by the industrialist Simon Ramo, and the speaker was Frank Rhodes, the president of Cornell, who had spoken at Tom’s inauguration and was a very dynamic speaker. That was my last year, I’m happy to say because the next year, 1991, President George Herbert Walker Bush was the speaker and the planning must have been complicated, and I’m glad that [Professor of Mathematics] David Wales was the new chair. Anyway it was great fun being the chair. It was wonderful being chief marshal and walking in the front—I always say that was to make up for never being a bride. And I’ve always preferred wearing black to white. I think all Caltech commencements have gone off smoothly, and it’s only thanks to massive help from everyone on campus. One of the things I worry about this year is what effect all those personnel cuts are going to have. One of the reasons all of our Caltech commencements have gone off so smoothly is thanks to massive help from the Bookstore, Physical Plant, Security, and the Office of Public Events, and now so many of those employees have been laid off. I mean the Caltech Bookstore—we couldn’t even put on our hoods without them, and they’d bring over safety pins and suntan lotion. I remember how complicated it was—getting all those white chairs properly aligned, coordinating security, safety, arrangements with the registrar, the rain plan, and I don’t know what else. Jerry Willis headed Public Events for years until he died, and he was indispensable. Nobody took a step until you got a signal from Jerry and he also did so

much to bring great performing arts to campus. Everyone thinks it's wonderful, not realizing it takes thousands of hours of work. I mean the quality of support we've had in the past for all activities at Caltech has just been astounding. I used to have a janitor named Hans who would occasionally write a few cogent comments and corrections on student papers left outside my office. He was great. He spoke several languages too. I had a secretary for eighteen years, Mary Ellis Arnett. She never misspelled a word.

ASPATURIAN: She was quite legendary. She died of Alzheimer's, I believe?

LA BELLE: Yes, it was tragic. As I said, she never misspelled a word and then one day she did. It was "despair," and she spelled it with an "i" instead of an "e." We sort of laughed about it at the time, and within nine months—I've never seen Alzheimer's go so fast. It was terribly sad.

The other thing I wanted to talk about is teaching Shakespeare at Caltech and teaching the Shakespeare class with [Caltech theater arts director] Shirley Marneus.

I think I've already mentioned that in my early teaching days I wasn't very good. I was just fresh out of graduate school and so well-crammed with facts from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, some of which I clearly have forgotten, that I wanted to share everything. I was so eager to impart everything I knew that I didn't really allow the students to talk very much. I fear I was what Benedick called Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, a parrot teacher. Or perhaps I was a pedant. "Pedant" was actually a term that Shakespeare coined to describe schoolteachers, which I just love. I get the feeling that there was not a lot of love between Shakespeare and his schoolmasters because none of them come out very well in any of his plays. The worst thing was that I didn't even have the foresight to teach the right plays when I was first here. I don't remember what Shakespeare play I taught in 1969 but I know it wasn't the best choice because if I'd had any sense at all in 1969 I would have had the students read *Love's Labour's Lost*. Because it centers on a group of bright young men who decide to form a little academy. They call it a little academe and for the next few years they're going to do nothing but study astronomy and other sciences, and they vow to fast, to sleep only three hours a night, and to allow no women to enter their school. A play written in 1595 about Caltech pre-1970, and reading that play in that year would have helped our students prepare for a parallel invasion—undergraduate women were coming in the next year. They could have learned a great deal from

the mistakes the young men make when the women come, and if I'd taught the play that early, I could have seen my own pretensions in the pretensions of the play's schoolmaster, Holofernes, who was everything a teacher shouldn't be—verbose, full of Latin phrases. Here's the line that sums him up: He is “fed of the dainties bred in a book and hath eaten paper and drunk ink.”

And at that point I'd eaten a lot of paper and drunk a lot of ink. So in teaching this play I might have realized that I had not digested what I had eaten, but instead as one character says, I had been at a great feast of languages and stolen the scraps. The students and I both could have profited from reading that work. Instead I don't know what I taught but I know it wasn't that. Eventually it was one of the plays we put on years later and it was very successful. In my initial years I was only able to teach Shakespeare plays as part of survey courses because, up until 1975, Hallett was still teaching the class, which was wonderful. But when he retired I was given the opportunity to take over the Shakespeare classes and my aim was and still is to encourage the students to be good close readers of the text and to help them become comfortable with the rhythms of the language. I never wanted to do a survey class, teaching three-dozen or so plays a quarter, like Hotspur killing six or seven Scots before breakfast. I've always preferred the idea of a skills class and the notion that if you learn to read a few plays deeply, intensely, creatively, you can then go on to read other Shakespeare work on your own.

One winter term I think I went too far. I devoted all ten weeks to *King Lear*. I thought it would be wonderful. It was a huge mistake. The Polish critic Jan Kott has remarked that *King Lear* gives one the impression of a tall mountain that everybody admires but that nobody wants to climb. I thought we should scale it. I would be the Shakespeare Sherpa, the expert guide, and we would attain the dread summit together—into thin air, into *King Lear*. As you know the tragedy is profoundly pessimistic and filled with torture and despair. And just as King Lear's fool disappears totally by the middle of the play so did most of the students. By the end of the quarter, at the top of that extreme verge, just a few of us remained, surrounded by dead bodies.

ASPATURIAN: How many years do you think you spent developing what turned out to be the most successful approach, and what are the plays you now teach generally?

LA BELLE: Well, once I started teaching with Shirley, I would teach primarily the play that TACIT was going to put on, and also whatever plays worked best around the main stage play.

Before that, well, I learned you don't teach one terribly depressing play for one whole quarter, that you have to balance that with a cloudless comedy. I also started to let the students choose at the beginning of the course. I always ordered the Riverside edition of the plays because that was the edition that Caltech's greatest Elizabethan scholar [Hallett Smith] was one of the editors of, and then I let them choose the ones they wanted and also the ones they didn't want. In earlier years they would often say, we read *Julius Caesar* in high school. We don't want to read it again. Nowadays that doesn't turn out to be true. They haven't read *Julius Caesar*. So I would often leave it up to them. That worked because they felt I was taking their interests into account. But as I say, that changed once I started teaching the class with Shirley.

ASPATURIAN: Which Shakespeare plays resonate best with Caltech students?

LA BELLE: I've had wonderful luck with *Othello*. Also *Measure for Measure*. It is so modern. It's so dark. It's so ambiguous. It's so open-ended. But you know, different classes want different things. Sometimes they ask for something I haven't thought of.

ASPATURIAN: How do they react to the classic comedies—*Much Ado*, *Twelfth Night*.

LA BELLE: Those go over well.

ASPATURIAN: How did you happen to start teaching the class with Shirley?

LA BELLE: It started as an experiment. She was planning to have TACT put on *Henry V* in the winter of '98, and so I invited her to team-teach the Shakespeare course with me—this would have been the fall of '97. The plan was to combine my literary scholarship with Shirley's wealth of theatrical experience. And so we built the class around *Henry V*, which of course meant that we had the students read both parts of *Henry IV* first, so that they would have a sense of the historical context. The course was primarily devoted to a detailed, scholarly critique of the texts, but the students had the chance, if they wanted, to participate in the production, to attend rehearsals, to attend performances where they could see finally how a director, cast, and crew bring the text to life. It was very exhilarating. For me too—to help the students move from page to stage, to move from wordplay to swordplay. And I also began to see the plays differently, not

as dramatic poems, but as poetic dramas. That was something I hadn't done before. For example if I was teaching a play and there was a character in a scene who didn't speak, I never mentioned him. But when you're treating the play as a performance, you start to think, why would Shakespeare have that character on stage? Obviously Shakespeare has him there to do something. What is it that he does? And these things, which you wouldn't think about when you're just reading it, have become fascinating. I had taught *Othello* many times, and of course I knew that at the end Othello kills himself with some kind of knife or dagger. But until I taught *Othello* with Shirley, I had never thought, Where does he get his weapon? He's already had five swords taken away from him. Where has he hidden this one? Or who gives it to him if he doesn't have it? And what does that mean, if someone gives it to him? It suddenly became fascinating. Does he have it hidden under his sleeve; does he have it in a bracelet? It was actually the actor playing Cassio in our TACIT production who thought of what to do. Cassio slips it, as his last devoted act, to his beloved general for whom he knows life has become meaningless with Desdemona dead. It was a very moving thing. I had never read about another production doing that. I just thought it was quite wonderful.

Starting with that first year, I think we all learned so much. One of the problems with putting on a play like *Henry V* is there never seems to be enough soldiers on the stage before the great battle of Agincourt. We were so lucky because our King Henry was James Gleeson, an Irish graduate student in applied math. And he was captain of the Caltech rugby team and he drew all of his team players into the play and, since he was used to leading them against a tough adversary, it was easy for him to urge his troops before the walls of Harfleur. And then the Caltech fencing team and the diving team also supplied us with more English and French warriors. You already know that TACIT productions have a long, rich history of not just undergraduates and graduate students but also faculty, staff, alumni, and other members of the Caltech community such as JPL employees. So in our *Henry V* the part of Mistress Quickly was played by Donna Shirley, who ran the Mars Pathfinder program that year. The Duke of Bedford and The Duke of Bourbon were Caltech freshmen, Princess Katherine of France was a sophomore, the ambassador to England was an alum from the class of 1975, and the Earl of Westmoreland was on the faculty.

Also *Henry V* has approximately forty-four characters. On the Elizabethan stage, that would typically be played by about fourteen or fifteen actors because there would be a great deal

of doubling and tripling of parts. But we had so many people come out for our production that ultimately we had a cast of about fifty, and even then we had quadrupling of parts. There were more people on the stage than in the audience so I don't know how popular it was. But Shirley and I thought that the experiment was a real success, and so for a decade we continued to integrate the critical and theatrical dimensions of Shakespeare's work.

ASPATURIAN: How did you choose the plays?

LA BELLE: It was always difficult to decide which play TACIT would produce and therefore which play the literature class would focus on. One issue is that although quite a few women wished to be on the boards, so to speak, there are so many more parts for men. *Julius Caesar* for instance requires thirty-six men, not even counting the senators and messengers, and has two women. *Henry V* has forty roles for men, four for women. Also what's interesting, and what I don't think people always realize, is that the men get to talk a lot more than the women. They are considerably longer-winded. King Henry V has over 1,000 lines—Iago, Richard III, and of course Hamlet are the only ones who have more. The only women who even come close have only about half as many lines. Witty Rosalind has the most. She has close to 700, followed by Cleopatra and Portia, who have about 600; Juliet and Imogen, 500. But Petruchio rants more than Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*, and Benedick outbanters Beatrice. So to compensate, Shirley would sometimes assign a male role to a female. For example, in the TACIT production of *Twelfth Night*, Feste the clown was played by a woman. Since that's one of the cross-dressing plays where gender boundaries are fluid, it worked very well. Another way around the problem of scant female parts is that our ingenious director often divided up a role, so that in our production of *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia didn't have one waiting gentlewoman but three, and likewise the Princess Katherine in *Henry V* had four ladies to fuss over her instead of only one. Of course Shirley also knows when to leave well enough alone. In *Macbeth* we had three witches, not nine “secret, black and midnight hags.”

Also the students quickly realize when they're putting on these plays that in a Shakespeare play even a small part can be very important and that even silent roles are of consequence. Shirley was able to make sure that every actor, even those without speeches, knew who he was and what his function was in the scene.

I had a really interesting experience a couple of years ago with a rather shy student who was in *As You Like It*, but didn't utter a single syllable. He was just one of the lesser lords attending on the Duke in the Forest of Arden. But at the end of the term when I read his answers to the essay questions on the final exam, he was no longer lineless. He clearly had learned most of the play by heart. So one of the rewards for students of being in the play, even if you just have a minor role, is that you end up with dozens of passages committed to memory. As long as memory holds a seat in your distracted globe, as Hamlet says, you've got it.

ASPATURIAN: Speaking of which, how do students, with or without Shirley, react to *Hamlet*?

LA BELLE: I've only taught it a couple of times, and we never staged it. It's not one that students request—I don't know why. It's so fascinating and good to teach. It's one I would have liked to teach more, and it's finally not a play I know as well as some of the others. Sometimes when I brought it up, they would groan. Maybe they had had to study it too many times—you know, here's the *quarto*, here's the other *quarto*—and they thought they knew it, which really they don't.

To digress just for a minute, a couple of years ago I learned that the American Council of Trustees and Alumni had released a report called *The Vanishing Shakespeare*. And it turns out that of the universities that are always ranked among the top twenty-five by *U.S. News & World Report*, only four have a Shakespeare requirement for English majors: Berkeley, Harvard, Stanford, and Caltech. And I'm sorry now that I've learned that as of this year, we have dropped our requirement. They don't want to have a course on the books that can't always be taught, but I'm still hoping I can hang in there and teach it a long time.

ASPATURIAN: How did you and Shirley choose the play that would be performed each year?

LA BELLE: Part of it depended on Shirley finding out whether or not she had someone who could play certain roles. She had to have a Macbeth or two or three people that she at least thought could play the role before she could decide to stage the play.

ASPATURIAN: How would she know that though before the class was constituted?

LA BELLE: Because they don't have to come from the class. I mean, ideally you would like that and many times people from the class would have leading roles. But you need to know that you have the right people for key parts. So there were certain plays that we never got to do that I really wanted to put on, *Antony and Cleopatra* for one. But you have to have Antony and you have to have Cleopatra—at the same time. One year I thought we almost had Cleopatra but we didn't have Antony. Other years, we did have some men who could have done Antony, but then we didn't have Cleopatra. So that was one big factor in how it was determined. Also we wanted to vary the type of play from year to year. If we did a history play one year, then we didn't really want to do another history play the next.

ASPATURIAN: For the record, which were the plays you and Shirley did together?

LA BELLE: We started with *Henry V* in 1998, and *Richard III* in 1999. Because the same young man wanted to play Richard III; and even though—I believe this is a true story—he could have had his doctorate in '98, he said he wanted to work some more on it, because really he wanted to play Richard, and make his dissertation even better. Then we did *Merchant of Venice*, then *Othello*. That was the year various cast members got the mumps. Then we did *Love's Labour's Lost*, which was so delightful. And then *Twelfth Night*; then *Macbeth* in 2004. And *Measure for Measure* in 2005—not our most successful production, because it's tough, but fascinating for the class and the students who were in it. Then *As You Like It*, and the last one was *The Winter's Tale*. Many of our students never seem to get enough of Shakespeare. In the spring of 2004, three Techers who had been in one of our classes were the ones who organized the Shakespeare Read-a-thon for twenty-four straight hours. We had 80 students, staff, and faculty, and JPLers, and any friends and relatives who could be beguiled into participating. They read all thirty-eight plays and 154 sonnets and the narrative poems. They were read in five sessions co-instantaneously—I've always wanted to use that word; this is my one chance—in order to fit everything into the allotted time. It was a party of “wild and whirling words” to quote Hamlet. And the event was repeated the next year. So it was amazing. But read-a-thons and productions of plays disappear, so what remains are those little bits of ink on paper and that's what keeps Shakespeare alive. Also every production of a Shakespeare play is in effect an interpretation of a text; but when you read a play on your own, that's where you can create the “real” Hamlet or

Antony or Portia—in your imagination. And that’s why we have to keep reading them ourselves. The theater of the mind is the most capacious stage, and it’s the one inhabited by the “true” semblances of Shakespeare’s words.

ASPATURIAN: So you did not do *The Taming of the Shrew* with Shirley?

LA BELLE: No. Also there were plays we didn’t do because she had put them on earlier before we were teaching together: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Julius Caesar*—they had all already been done. What I wanted most I guess out of the class was to make the students independent of me. And also of course that’s what I wanted the least. Part of me still wants them to need my guidance through the winding passages and the secret corners of the text, but my better part is happier that they’ve acquired the skills to read Shakespeare without my or anyone’s help. What I think is interesting is how much I learned from the students. I learned so much from their comments in classes, from their arguments, from their questions.

ASPATURIAN: Do they approach the plays differently than students whose natural bent and inclination would be closer to the liberal arts to start with?

LA BELLE: Yes. I think they do. Well one thing they do because they are Teachers—and therefore such jokesters and punsters—is that instead of groaning at the puns they tend to really relish them, even the awful ones; but then they really love those puns that sometimes lead us into the very heart of a play. Also because they are not English majors, they have a kind of freedom from cant and from “professional” over-seriousness. They’re not afraid of Shakespeare either, which some English majors are. They’re never intimidated by the imposing reputation of The Bard. They don’t reverently bow down before him. In fact they welcome the richness and complexity of the poetry, and I think they really get what [Nathaniel] Hawthorne once said about Shakespeare: that he has surface beneath surface to an immeasurable depth.

ASPATURIAN: So they really understood the subtext.

LA BELLE: Yes they really did. When we were doing *Winter’s Tale* last year there was one passage, which, as I think I said in an earlier interview, I consider the hardest passage in all of

Shakespeare. It's the one where Leontes' jealousy flares and he's trying to describe where it comes from. The language is so crabbed. What's going on? That's the one they wanted to write on. They all wanted to work on it. What I think is interesting is that there are a couple of very well-known Shakespeare scholars Steven Urkowitz and Richard Knowles, who were originally physics majors before becoming Shakespeareans, but at Caltech we have brilliant students who are studying both subjects at the same time—Willy Fowler and Willy Shakespeare, Richard Feynman and *Richard III*. And we've even had students majoring in physics while playing major roles onstage in Shakespeare. I don't know that you get that anywhere else.

ASPATURIAN: Although I suppose students who discover early on that literature is their true calling may end up transferring out?

LA BELLE: If they decide they want to major purely in literature, that's usually what happens. It happened just this week. We give the Hallett Smith Prize every year for the best essay on Shakespeare. Although I was told when I was retired that I didn't have to run these writing contests anymore, I did end up having to run the Shakespeare one again this year, but I was glad I did. The winning essay was by a sophomore named Hillary Walker, who wrote what was called "The Language of Splendor." And it was an analysis of the barge passage in *Antony and Cleopatra* and of the relationship between Shakespeare's poetry and North's Elizabethan translation of *Plutarch's Lives* on which Shakespeare's version is based. I was just thrilled with it. And I sent her congratulations, and I wrote to [Professor of Physics] Tom Tombrello saying, "I just wanted you to know that your advisee won this year," and he said, "Yes, and I'm sorry she's transferring." I haven't talked to her, but obviously she was one of those who realized that literature, not science, was going to be her life. Which makes me both happy and sad, because those students are also the ones that you want to stay. Or hope that they can be among those who do a double major. If she had wanted to, I'm sure she could have. I didn't want to say, "give me back the prize" but it was hard to lose her because I had hoped that I would get her again in another Shakespeare class. Since the plays are different each year, people can and sometimes do take the class twice. I often wish I could start the teaching of Shakespeare all over again, take the students again to Belmont [*Merchant of Venice*], and Illyria [*Twelfth Night*] and the Blasted

Heath [*Macbeth*], this time doing a better job of leading them to the realms of gold and then getting out of their way.

ASPATURIAN: Have there been any plays you haven't taught that in retrospect you wish you had?

LA BELLE: Probably. But I think it works more the other way, with plays I didn't originally think that much of turning out to be very interesting. I mean *Comedy of Errors* is not a great play but once we started reading it, it was very enjoyable. It's also interesting to try to decide what else to teach with the play. With *Winter's Tale* I thought, well what else should I teach? Should I teach other late romances? Then I thought that I should really pair it with *Othello* because of the jealousy theme and to see how *Othello* could end happily, where he doesn't kill his wife. In the end she's still alive. And it's almost as if Shakespeare couldn't bear anymore to have Desdemona dead forever, and said, let's see what happens. Let's rewrite it. And he does. He never repeats himself but he revisits. And we see the same characters appear. In *Winter's Tale*, Perdita and Florizel are every other set of young lovers that we have elsewhere in Shakespeare. They're sort of the essence of them and therefore not the most interesting characters. Now Prospero in *The Tempest* is a schoolteacher who finally—for Shakespeare—is in some ways a very good teacher, except that his best pupil is his daughter whom he has trained for twelve years, and even she falls asleep during his PowerPoint presentation in scene one. And then his only other student is Caliban, who is a disaster, saying, "You have taught me language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse." So you can't win. But at least in Prospero we've got a better teacher than Shakespeare's others. Schoolteachers and lawyers come out poorly in his plays.

What made me happy is something I just received the other day from the Institute of Literary Studies at the National Humanities Center. It says that they're putting on a program in July 2009, run by Marjorie Garber, a well-known Shakespeare scholar. I just love it because it's called "Shakespeare in Slow Motion," and it's so exciting. They're going to do something "brand new"—they're going to close-read a play. It's not brand new, but it hasn't been done for so long it might as well be. For decades, literary scholars have been doing political, social, religious, and cultural history, and no one has just said, let's close-read a play. That's why I love what we do in our class. We just start going through the text word by word.

ASPATURIAN: Which play are they going to read?

LA BELLE: You know, it doesn't say. It just says, "Participants will read a single play by Shakespeare—an act a day—focusing on what de Man called 'the way meaning is conveyed rather than on meaning itself.'"

ASPATURIAN: I think my choice would be *Merchant of Venice* because it poses such an interesting set of problems. What would you choose?

LA BELLE: *Measure for Measure*. *Merchant of Venice* would be great though, too. I'd be happy with any one and to have Marjorie Garber. I guess I'd like something later rather than really early just because the language gets so much more dense.

ASPATURIAN: You're not going to do *Henry VI*, for example.

LA BELLE: No, although there are some great lines at the end of *Henry VI Part Three*. It's the first time we meet the Duke of Gloucester, who of course is going to become Richard III. He gives this great speech about how he is going to get the crown. He says that he could teach Machiavelli a thing or two and after he describes all of the things that stand in the way of his getting the crown, he says that even "if it were further off I'd pluck it down." I think that Laurence Olivier uses that speech in his *Richard III* movie as the preamble. I'm sure he did that in stage versions of the play long before he did the movie. You know in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they took all sorts of things and threw them in. "Now Richard is himself again," is not a line that appears in Shakespeare.

ASPATURIAN: Anything else?

LA BELLE: I think that pretty much wraps up Shakespeare.

ASPATURIAN: You mentioned just before we got started today that you might want to put something into the record about the Robert Huttenback oral history?

LA BELLE: That's right. I only stumbled upon it in the Archives a couple of months ago, and this was several months after we finished our interview sessions last spring about my tenure case. My first impulse was not to read it because I knew he would comment on my tenure case and on my colleagues. And although I told myself I didn't care even a fraction of a straw what he thought of me, I knew it still might be upsetting. But of course I ended up reading it. His opinion of me did not come as any surprise. Nor was I astonished to find that he still believes that the division agreed with him that I should be denied tenure. I mean of course some of them did, but not all. The only thing that really hurt was his really dismissive remarks about Hallett Smith, especially when one compares the arcs of their careers and when one compares their characters. Also at one point Huttenback calls Richard Feynman "a fraud." It's in the context of talking about my case, but it then carries on beyond that. He talks about a time when Feynman came into his office to talk about my case.

ASPATURIAN: Did you in fact know that Feynman had done this?

LA BELLE: Yes. Here it is: He's talking about how Feynman came into his office. And one of the things Feynman was saying was that he wouldn't have been introduced to the Huntington Library if it wasn't for Jenijoy La Belle. And now I'm quoting Huttenback: "So I said, 'That's incredible. Here you live a couple of miles from a major intellectual cultural institute and you haven't been there yet. You have to get some young lady who teaches here to take you there.' I said, 'That's no great praise of her. It's a great condemnation of you.'" Of course that wasn't the point. Feynman had been many times to the Huntington. It was just that it was the first time he'd actually gotten the reader's card that allows you to sit and read the manuscripts of science texts that he wanted to see. So after that, Shirley Cohen, who was interviewing Huttenback, said, "I don't think Feynman would have liked that." Huttenback said, "Oh. I'm sure he didn't. I don't think he liked me and I didn't like him. I think he was a great man. That's different. But I thought he was a fraud. He had this fake persona that he trotted out that was not the real him. There was somebody else there."

So, all I want to say is if that's what he thinks of Feynman, then I feel honored by his negative assessment of me.

ASPATURIAN: Of course, who knows if that's really what he said to Feynman, or if it was just a case of *esprit d'escalier*.

LA BELLE: Who knows? I will just say that Huttenback had many gifts, and I'm sorry he didn't make better use of all of them. He does say at one point in his oral history that he perhaps should have stayed at Caltech because he says, "As you know I had difficulties at Santa Barbara." This is my new favorite specimen of meiosis, which is the employing of understatement. Enough said.

ASPATURIAN: One other question I'd like to ask. You've been on campus with how many—five presidents? I wondered if you had any thoughts or comments you'd like to make about them.

LA BELLE: Well, DuBridge left shortly after I arrived, and as for the others—well, they were all so different. As I was just saying, I liked Tom [Everhart] so much, because he was so good about commencements; he took the students' choices seriously even if things didn't always work out. Goldberger, as I think we talked about earlier, pushed very hard for women's issues as soon as he came: I think that was good. I never really knew Harold Brown—well, actually, there is a letter somewhere where he says, with regard to my tenure case, that it would be "indefensible" for me ever to be a tenured member of the Caltech faculty. "Indefensible," and then he went on to be Secretary of Defense, so I liked that. But I didn't know him well. But I think we've been lucky; they've all been remarkable and very different in the way that they've served. A Baltimore is very different from a Jean-Lou [Chameau]. I think they've been a series of amazing men. I've admired every one of them.