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Margaret Mead

(1901–1978)



Margaret Mead at mid-career, 1948. (Courtesy of Lotte Jacobi)

... everything that happens ... becomes data once the event has been noted, written up, photographed or tape recorded.

... I have lived through all the improvements from pencil and notebook and still photography to videotape.

She told me that Boas had told her that films could be an aid to, but no substitute for, discipline, intelligence, and memory. And I remember, too, the evening she and one of her godchildren, my daughter (a tiny child), pulled over a stepladder to reach the peanut butter on a high shelf: "Your genes are only the *final* limit to your power." And I can't forget the night she called to say she was sending me a stenotype machine to help me record body motion. And when it was of little help, we shared the insight that machines such as this or typewriters or computers contained no science or poetry—but were prostheses no better than the knowledge, the skill, and the precisions involved in their use.

She respected tools and believed that they were to be used whenever they were nonintrusive extensions of ourselves. A talented and devoted archivist, she never permitted a film or a tape (or a book) to be a final product. She sacrificed to send cameras and film to students in the field and spent long and precious hours with their films when they returned. She never forgot that she was an anthropologist and a teacher. Not "what are they" but "what are they about" was her demand.

She was a teacher—and a student—and a human. As she sat and talked with children, with students, with the elderly, and with her colleagues, she filled notebook after notebook with data, hunches, and arguments to be saved, thought about, reviewed, and sometimes published (with credit) later. Although often independent and at times seemingly solitary, Margaret Mead was never alone. She collected and appreciated other humans. She learned from, taught, and worked with others, for Margaret Mead was a very social scientist.

Ray L. Birdwhistell