

Happy hundred, Grace Lee Boggs

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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When I was a young seminarian, I was fascinated with Grace Lee Boggs' life and work. Then, I had a chance to go to an urban ministries conference in Chicago where she spoke and I dutifully took notes.

Now that it's been a couple of decades, what I remember from that day is how Dr. Boggs sat down next to me at lunch. I'm not one to be immediately chummy with people I admire. I was nervous. My head was racing. *What would I say to this amazing woman? How can I tell her how much appreciate her work and her struggle? What if I say something dumb in front of her?*

My internal fears didn't last long, because *she* started asking *me* questions. And I don't mean, "How are you" sort of questions. I mean that she knew more about me in five minutes than most people know after years. She wanted to know how I got from Moody Bible Institute, to seminary, to such a liberal gathering. She wanted to know why I was interested in urban ministry. She wanted to know how I became a feminist. She wanted to know what I planned to do. She wanted to know what philosophers interested me and why I loved them. She was like a dry sponge, soaking up everything she could about *me*.

There was a lunch speaker. In fact, it was [John Buchanan](#). Dr. Boggs still wanted to know more. She kept asking me questions, and I kept trying to be polite, answering her inquiries in a whisper.

She told me to speak up. She wanted to hear me.

Soon, a man in front of us scowled at her, and shushed us. (Can you imagine? I thought I would die.) I was melting in an apologetic puddle under the man's gaze, but before I had a chance to say anything, Boggs scowled at the man even harder, and immediately left the table.

Today is Grace Lee Bogg's 100th birthday. I thought about our exchange when I read [this piece on NPR](#):

Though many of the Boggs' ideas centered around revolution, her personal philosophies were guided more by human experience—and the individual's own ability to transform his or her world—than overthrowing a system.

I learned so much in that exchange. But, most of all, I learned how empowering and revolutionary it can be to actually listen to and care about someone's story.