Dr. Arthur Olsen,

It was so nice just hearing your voice. I had almost given up finding you until Mike called. I can’t believe that you remembered us. Just talking with you was wonderful, except when you mentioned that you still had my Nietzsche paper! You said at one point in our conversation that you had wondered what happened to us. I don’t know about Mike, but I was lost for twenty years.

I want to thank you so much for supporting me during my time at Augustana and also say that your support has been important at the deepest level. I think “confirmation of otherness” is an appropriate term.

As Buber says, a person is “sent forth from the natural domain of species into the hazard of the solitary category, surrounded by the air of chaos . . . he watches for a Yes which allows him to be and which can come to him only from one human person to another.” I want to thank you most deeply for this. I was too young to fully appreciate it at the time.

I also wanted to thank you because you have been an important influence on my teaching. The situation is so different at SDSU. I teach four hundred students a semester and next semester I will be teaching eight hundred (one five hundred student class, the administration calls it the “Berkeley Model,” as if the power to name it will make it something which it clearly is not). I still feel that those of us who believe in teaching have not yet lost. And what I believe about all the aspects of teaching has been greatly influenced by you.

You mentioned something in our phone conversation to which I wanted to respond. You mentioned how we were persons of our time, the civil rights movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement. I agree. A student asked me what had changed most in my lifetime and I answered technology and told him about growing up with radio (it was almost as if he could not comprehend!), but I have been thinking about it since.

What made me think further about it was an incident a friend and colleague of mine told me about. His son attends an overcrowded school in L.A, all concrete, a “military recess” of over one hundred students and a fifteen minute lunch. Fifteen minutes to stand in line, get food, find a place to sit in an overcrowded cafeteria, and then eat. As my friend told it, after standing in line, a little girl dropped her tray. No one came to help her. My friend came over, picked up the tray, threw everything into the garbage, and asked for another tray. After a brief argument/discussion with lunch room personnel, about such things as lunch accounting procedures, and only because he is a sociology professor, the girl was grudgingly given another tray of food. That is what has changed most in my lifetime, the breakdown in the fabric of human solidarity, of caring for the other, of showing mercy to the helpless.

During the time I was at Augustana and later at Hartford Seminary, there seemed to be that solidarity. I don’t believe it was ever spoken; it was, to quote Buber again, the “order of being.” It was never as if any of us thought that we stood alone; we all stood together. Too often now, it feels like each of us is standing alone. Mercy, caring and solidarity have all too often been replaced by individualism, isolation and self-interest. I have not given up hope because the memories of our struggles have become part of me, as have the friends I made during those struggles. Thank you for being one of them.

I had planned on writing this letter much sooner, but I kept writing it in my head and then rewriting, and on and on. Then the semester began and I was swept into struggles within the department, with the university (on line courses) and then there were four hundred students (two hundred and fifty in one class). So I just told myself, “get on with it”!