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Composting a Life by Mary Catherine Bateson,
Grove Press, 1989

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The faculty and staff of Butler University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences presents

Recommended Readings



Composing a Life

by Mary Catherine Bateson, Grove Press, 1989 (2001)

Reviewed by Terri Carney

Mary Catherine Bateson's book might be over 20 years old, but the stories and lessons contained within are more relevant than ever, given our longer lifespans and the attendant disjunctures and complexities that now define them. Her book explores the friendships and connections between and among five professional women who must negotiate career demands with gendered expectations in homemaking, nurturing, and caregiving, and who manage to do so in ways that enrich all spheres of their lives.

The women profiled here include a CEO, a university president, a dancer, an electrical engineer, and a psychiatrist, but none are merely defined by their profession: success is defined not as a single trajectory of professional, individual achievement, but rather as a symphony of purposeful work, shared humanity, and healthy doses of serendipity. Bateson notes that women are generally good at ambiguity and dividedness, given their traditional roles and socialization, and argues that these talents are useful in today's complex and ambiguous world. Women face choices between empathy and achievement. Women are torn by multiple commitments, but isn't this capacity for multi-tasking precisely the skill we need in the 21st century? Bateson asks us to consider the condition of dividedness as "higher wisdom." She then connects this celebration of dividedness to the value of the humanities, to the Liberal Arts as an antidote to the corporate model of narrow focus. Bateson's follow up book, *Composing a Further Life*, was published in 2010.

-Terri Carney is Associate Professor of Spanish at Butler University.