Tributes to Stephen P. Witte

Last spring our profession lost one of its leading voices—Stephen P. Witte, Knight Professor of Rhetoric and Composition at Kent State University. Here, a few of his close friends and colleagues remember Steve and his many contributions to our field.

The death of Steve Witte has deprived us in an untimely manner of an outstanding scholar and mentor. Readers and contributors to this journal will remember Steve as a notable and award-winning researcher in the fields of writing research and rhetoric. Among his awards were the 1984 Braddock Award, and more recently, a 2002 NCTE best-article award for his 2001 study of professional writing with Chris Haas. Former students and also contributors to the journal *Written Communication* will remember his incisive, constructive, and knowledgeable commentary and suggestions for submitted texts and manuscripts.

But Steve was much more than just a scholar and teacher in the academy. As those who knew him well will attest, he lived his life to the fullest and on his own honest, forthright, and openly declared terms. And what a life it was, with interests and accomplishments in so many different areas. Early on, he was a varsity-level athlete in university. Later, he became an accomplished wood worker and furniture maker. He designed, made, and played marvelous board games. He served in his communities as both a sports coach and municipal commissioner (a park is named in his honor in Springwoods, Texas, just outside of Austin). His love and knowledge of the arts made him an authority on almost any topic in literature and music, and resulted in impressive collections of first edition books and first edition records—mainly folk, jazz, and country. And of course he was a terrific fisherman and fishing companion.

Such a full life results in many legacies; and I would like to comment on two. The first would be his intellectual rigor and work ethic, which of course resulted in his wonderful scholarship, supervision, and stewardship of *Written Communication*. His was a formidable intellect, and in truth, a fair number of scholars were leery about engaging that intellect. It has been said that he did not suffer fools gladly; but that is not quite accurate. Rather, he did not suffer gladly those fools who should know better. So prevaricators, the pretentious, and the intellectually lazy among the scholarly classes were always at risk when Steve was around. For students and colleagues who were willing to make the effort, however, working with Steve was an activity that was one of the most engaging and satisfying, full of

new revelations, fellowship, humor, and scholarly accomplishment. And of course all acknowledge his major contributions to the fields of rhetoric and writing research.

The second legacy that I would like to touch on is, I think, more important, and was most obvious to those of us who knew him personally. I am speaking now of his integrity and honesty in dealing with life's adversities. And certainly Steve had a full share of rough spots and ill fortune in his life, culminating in his final tragic illness. But what was remarkable, through all the bad times, was his level-headed appreciation of the various situations, and a calm optimism that with sufficient thought and work, problems could be dealt with and overcome, if not in one way, then in another. It was a Zen-like quality, a magnanimity with respect to the ups and downs of life that was all the more striking given his distinctive Oklahoma cowboy voice and physique. He never felt sorry for himself or complained about the hand that life had dealt him. This quality of character allowed him to be the most loyal of friends, always ready to help no matter what his current fortunes were. It also allowed him to continue his scholarship, editing, and supervision of students, particularly during his wilderness years between Stanford and Kent State. He was, indeed, the gold standard when it came to dealing with the vicissitudes of life, and he continues to serve as a reference point for all of us in this capacity.

As I mentioned above, his life was too short, and one source of our sorrow is that his lifetime only partly coincided with ours. However, it is certainly better to have known him than not to have known him. And in our knowledge of him, our lives have been and will continue to be both blessed and enriched.

—Robert Bracewell, McGill University

There are not too many opportunities in life to get to know a genius. I met Steve Witte in about 1986 at a national writing conference at one of those fancy Hilton hotels where such meetings are typically held. I knew Steve by reputation as an influential scholar, the recent founder of the journal *Written Communication*, and as the person who had just accepted my first scholarly article for publication. I spotted him, sitting on the floor outside of a chandeliered meeting room, and I got up the courage to introduce myself. He invited me to join him on the wall-to-wall carpeting. We began a conversation that was like the circumstances of that meeting—unpretentious and hard.

Steve was somebody who knew how to be a best friend and a best critic at the same time. He could pick you up and dust you off when you thought you couldn't keep going and then rip through your work with a precision that made you know how far it was you really had to go. On the phone he could talk your ear off about a translation of his favorite Russian psychologist and then talk your other ear off, with equal intensity, about all the children in his family. Steve's intellectual energy

was formidable, and when you were lucky to have it shine on your work, you went in better directions and reached deeper insights. Sometimes he would tell me things I didn't understand or notice things about my work I couldn't see. Six months later, I'd be working along on something and it would hit me: So that's what Witte meant.

When discerning historians write the history of the field of writing studies, they will detect Steve's influence everywhere, in the ways that the important questions of the field were framed as well as in the margins and matters of some of our most foundational research. As one of his co-editors for a while at *Written Communication,* I learned first hand how Steve worked literally to compose and sustain a field. To see his efforts as an editor was to see a model of discipline-building, as he paid attention to every element: the balance of the editorial board, the selection of readers for a manuscript, the crisp detail of his legendary responses to authors, even in the way he would sequence articles in an issue in a manner that would spark debate within the mind of the reader.

Shortly after Steve became Knight Professor at Kent State, he invited me there to give a talk. At the time, he was conducting research at the Yours Truly restaurant, just a few blocks from his home, observing the writing done by the waitresses there. He was in the midst of reading three or four new books while teaching a cadre of graduate students how to conduct good empirical research. And when the official part of my visit was over, he drove me around northeastern Ohio in his Chevy truck, stopping at antique stores in search of Fiestaware and downing what had to have been a 3,000-calorie breakfast at a rural diner. It was all done with gusto.

With the amazing help of his wife, Chris Haas, Steve made peace with his illness. When I saw him last summer he had turned his mind to a new field of colleagues, fellow cancer patients, and was in deep and nurturing conversations with them. Steve was always way ahead of us in the mysteries, and so he is now. May he rest in peace.

—Deborah Brandt, University of Wisconsin

Whenever I think of Steve, I see a Texas cyclone, a powerful force that blew through my life, shook up my thinking, and dropped me into the academic life equipped with many of the intellectual skills and tools needed for survival.

I first met Steve at Stanford at the beginning of my second year as a doctoral student in Education. I had grown disillusioned with academia and had serious doubts about whether I would ever finish my program, much less write a dissertation. Steve did more than advise me on my dissertation; he reshaped my entire vision of written composition and helped me develop a coherent view of the then (as now) fragmented field of literacy studies. One of the key ideas that we hashed

through was the function of representational tools in composing. I remember days spent looking at and talking about seemingly mundane items like shopping lists, diagrams, or menus (we spent more time than I'd like to admit eating pancakes or eggs late at night in local diners).

I used to chafe at his requirement to draw my ideas on paper. I'm not much of an artist, and the idea of using figures and diagrams to nail down my thinking frightened me. I spent much of that first year retreating to my comfortable world of text and writing long memos to him. But he persisted, and eventually I came to understand how I had constrained my own thinking by limiting myself to a narrow range of representational tools.

Steve was always generous with his time and attention to grad students. At that time, there were several of us at Stanford who were interested in studying writing, but there was no one who shared out interest until Steve arrived. I remember how much time he spent with each of us. It was rare to find him alone in his office working; there was a continuous stream of doctoral and master's level students who would talk with Steve about their ideas. (I often had to camp out in Steve's office while working as the editorial assistant for *Written Communication* at that time, and left whenever another student showed up. Sometimes it made for disjointed work days.) He treated us all like colleagues rather than students or low-paid workers on projects. We were encouraged to play with ideas, argue with him. Although I often felt keenly how little I knew about what we discussed, he never let me believe that I could fail to understand those ideas. I remember in particular the long, sometimes heated (on my side at least) arguments about the social and cultural dimensions of writing. It was like being hammered by a modern-day Socrates who spoke with a Texas twang and threw in references to rock and roll.

Steve's classes were always interesting and mind-bending. We sometimes enacted the ideas we discussed. I remember two activities specifically. Those of you who have played his invented game (the one with the wooden tiles on the Scrabble-like board) might remember how difficult it was to remember all the rules. He used that game to help the class understand how language in its many forms scaffolded learning. He would make us play without knowing any of the rules. We would discover them as he told us what were legal and illegal moves. Some of us had to remain silent observers; others could discuss with a partner; others would write notes; while others got the full-blown complement of oral and written supports. He also demonstrated the functions of schemas in an eight-week-long pegboard activity. Each week Steve would come in with words from the readings on little slips of paper. We would spend part of the class pinning them to a peg-board, arranging them in some pattern to show the relationships among ideas. Each week we would have to rearrange them based upon what we had learned. Eventually, we progressed to tying string to the pins to show the linkages among ideas. It wasn't

until the end of the course, or maybe long after that (I can be a slow learner), that I finally understood what that activity had taught me about schema theory.

Steve continued to work with me as my dissertation advisor when he was in Oklahoma. While this was not the best of circumstances, he managed to get me through the dissertation process intact and helped launch me on my academic career. Throughout those first few years, we stayed in touch often, sometimes working on conference papers together and having long conversations and, again, arguments over the phone about our ideas. Heated debates were the hallmark of my relationship with Steve. I'm so sorry that I can never have another one of those wide-ranging, intellectually challenging arguments with him ever again.

But beneath what sometimes seemed like plain orneriness in Steve was a kind and gentle soul who was loyal to his friends and supported many of us through difficult personal times. I owe him many debts that can never be fully repaid. I feel honored to have been counted as one of his students and friends.

—Elaine Chin, California State University, San Luis Obispo

Far too many years ago, Maxine Hairston hosted a party in Austin, Texas. For some unremembered reason, Maxine invited me, a young assistant professor of communication, to attend. Walking into the party, Maxine gently grabbed me and said, in her wonderful way, that I "just must meet" a young faculty member in the English Department by the name of Steve Witte. She said he did the same sort of research I did, meaning, I think, empirically oriented studies of writing. A few years before, while graduate students, a colleague and I had devised an instrument to assess what we labeled writing apprehension. In the process of trying to validate that measure I had sought Maxine's advice more than once.

Steve and I hit it off immediately. He was intellectually both curious and challenging and, at the same time, wonderfully normal—a compliment (to be sure) for an academic. Too much of his native Oklahoma stayed in him to ever make him haughty or supercilious. We met for lunch and talked for a long time, then we met again, and soon we were discussing studies we might conduct and interesting questions we might probe.

A year or two later, Steve, along with Lester Faigley, James Kinneavy, and myself, received what was then a sizable grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). After some arduous negotiation, the College of Liberal Arts loaned us a couple of windowless offices in the bowels of the Geography Building on campus. There, Steve hosted a running seminar for graduate students and colleagues. He would sit at an old wooden desk while people would pop in. A question would be raised or a comment made, and off the discussion would go. Hours later, seldom was anything resolved, but the lessons learned were immense. That grant office quickly became the central location at Texas for dis-

cussions about the study of writing. It was the breeding ground that resulted in studies, concepts, and a journal called *Written Communication.*

My intellectual pedigree is neither English nor composition. Instead, I come from the field of communication. A major academic publisher in communication in the eighties was SAGE Publications. Sara McCune (the SA of SAGE) ran the company at that time (George, the GE of SAGE, was slowly retiring). In 1983, I had completed a book on shyness for SAGE. At a communication convention, Sarah McCune and I were chatting about the field, publishers, and potential opportunities. She saw new journals as an excellent source of continuing revenue for SAGE (as well as, for sure, a way of contributing to the intellectual discourse of a discipline). I mentioned, as I recollect, the idea of a journal on research on writing. It would fit, I suggested, a broader definition of the field of communication. She was intrigued. Returning to Austin, I mentioned the notion to Steve. At first, he was a tad hesitant. He understood our relationship was one where too often he ended up with all the work. But after some very modest efforts at persuasion on my part, he bought into the idea of the journal and began to sculpt what would become *Written Communication.* Within a week, we (mostly he) had crafted a proposal to SAGE. Soon, we were co-editors of a spiffy new journal. Of course, we had no articles, no editorial board, nothing. But with the energy and confidence of young professors, all of that seemed quite minor. Steve set to work. Partly because of his contacts and ideas, and partly because of his innate sense of responsibility, Steve's prediction about the division of labor was right on target. He labored much more on the journal than I. We desperately needed some important authors for the first few issues. Steve worked the phone like a door-to-door salesperson, asking many of his academic colleagues to author the first few articles. Just as importantly, he made a bevy of cold calls to people neither of us knew. "Can we do that?" I would ask. "Why not!" he would say, with a crooked grin. "What do we have to lose?" So call he did, and soon we had authors for the first few issues. Looking back, I am still impressed by the quality of authors Steve was able to cajole into submitting pieces. Were it not for their willingness to take a risk on a new publication, *Written Communication* would never have prospered. But even more so, without Steve's commitment to the periodical, nothing would have happened in the first place.

As the journal progressed over time, more unsolicited articles crossed our transom. Some were extraordinary pieces of work. A few were, for lack of better words, desperate ones that we immediately dismissed after a review. Most fell in-between. Every so often, Steve would discover a diamond in the proverbial rough of editorial submissions. An author would submit a manuscript and the reviews might not be stellar, but under Steve's tutelage, many of these articles saw the light of day in the journal. Steve always felt it his responsibility to carefully read every submission, especially from young authors, even if it meant that some mornings

he would come into the office tired from staying up all night writing a long review. He was extraordinarily generous with his time and ideas. He line-edited manuscripts to the point that sometimes the final piece was more his than the author's. But important ideas were published, and more than one person today has a career at some university because of Steve's dedication to their work.

As is true in many Universities, Texas is a political institution. For reasons that matter not at all now, Steve's promotion to Associate Professor was, at first, denied by top administrators of the university. Following an outcry that resulted in a bevy of letters of protest from colleagues from around the world, the decision was quickly rescinded.

Steve was always a person who believed deeply in fairness. The promotion process he had experienced deeply offended him. It took something out of him. It shattered a basic belief he had in the righteousness of the academic world. Steve had always been involved in local politics and understood how politics operated (indeed, in Austin, a small park is named after Steve for his work on behalf of the neighborhood he lived in). But the university, in Steve's mind, shouldn't be political: Talent should be recognized and rewarded even if you don't play silly games. Steve could be irascible, and even proudly iconoclastic, at times. But, like a cactus—tough on the outside, soft on the inside—he was able to survive only so long in the parched atmosphere of academic units that valued too little what he had to contribute. In the end he needed to leave.

Steve opted to leave without a job. He wasn't sure that he even wanted another academic position. He decided to stay in Austin and do consulting and training on writing skills. The market was questionable, but he dutifully leased office space and set up an office he shared with a data-base consultant—a fellow whose name, I believe, was Charles. He and Charles were made for each other. Both were great storytellers. Even a brief visit to that office was an invitation to stay for hours listening to tales of life and living. Less work got done, but the conversation was never better. The journal, as well, moved to that office suite, and daily Steve toiled in his role as editor. Manuscripts still needed to be read and reviewed. The seminar that started years before in the Geography Building, it seemed, had moved to an office suite next to a highway.

A few years later Steve was seduced into leaving Austin. It was my loss and his gain. He moved back into an academic world and to a place that conferred on him the respect he so mightily deserved. When Steve left, my attachment to the journal soon faded. The journal moved with Steve, and he maintained it in the years since. Others began to share the editing role with Steve. But the one constant was always Steve's devotion, not to the journal *per se*, but to what it created. It continues to be one of the best journals focused on the academic study of writing in the world. In many ways, the journal helped to shape the study of writing. It legitimized certain kinds of scholarship that had been relegated to the backwaters of composition. It

set standards for quality. It provided the empirical case for academic publishers to enter the field of writing as a social scientific endeavor. It published, for the first time, many of the important scholars of today in the study of writing. Credit for all of this rests solely with Steve. And to think it was something he wasn't so sure of doing in the first place.

I remember our last extended conversation. We were driving some place in Austin and spied model planes zooming overhead. Curious, we parked the car and gazed upward. We watched them land and take off. Standing there, like so many guys, we found a perfect excuse to talk about the past and future. Both of our lives were changing. Our times at Texas had been good. The future, we both predicted, would be better. It was a good talk.

Steve Witte was a very good and very kind man. I will miss him.

—John Daly, University of Texas, Austin

Shortly before he died, Steve talked to me about wanting to take one last fishing trip to Canada. We joked about his personal smoke screen against the black fly. He was, at the same time, still collecting data on his progressive loss of language skill—something he said had rarely been documented. That was the same Steve that I got to know in Austin, Texas, back in 1982—raising tough questions, getting the data, and thinking of fishing. As a consultant on his FIPSE grant, I first got to know this guy who argued for the (revolutionary) idea of designing writing assessments tailored to what individual writing programs intended to teach. He had figured out how to use the University of Texas computing capacity (intended for the scientists) well before the rest of his college, and was exploring what you could do with data, way ahead of the rest of composition.

Working with him, you plowed new ground by day, but for fun you got up at 4:00 in the morning to go fishing, plowing through the dark in a small outboard, hoping the little light you were given to hold up would pick out the island in the fog before the prow did. The last time I visited him in Texas, he was breaking ground once again, leaving, on principle, the University administration that had given him tenure only after a national outcry. And he was starting his own writing/consulting business. For Steve, it all seemed seamlessly interconnected—constructing professional documents in the workplace, creating research and theory about writing or assessment or semiotics, or imagining and editing *Written Communication*. Steve was a risk taker, and in the years that followed he kept setting off on new journeys in his life and career. But whatever he turned to seemed to draw out of him the same sort of rigorous, skeptical thinking about the underlying issues—big thinking, which was wedded to a persistent, irascible, loving attention to detail and the data. Maybe that was why he caught bass that morning and,

before I could pull my line out of the way, I was snagged by a gar. Steve always put his mind and his heart into the work.

—Linda Flower, Carnegie Mellon University

On Thanksgiving Day, 2002, my cousin's twenty-five-year-old son died of a brain tumor, one year after his diagnosis. Soon after his funeral, I learned that my good friend Steve Witte had just been diagnosed with the same type of brain tumor. I was devastated by the news. But Steve was strong, and he faced his disease with bravery and dignity. During his last year, Steve lived his life in the committed and forthright way that he always had. He followed his passions. He kept teaching long beyond the time most of us would have given up; he edited *Written Communication* even when he needed helpers to be able to read the manuscripts; he spent time with family and friends. He even studied the process of his own language loss. In many ways, Steve broke the rules for dying just as he broke the rules for living. He often did not follow conventional social rules; he always followed his passions and his conscience.

I had the gift of Steve's presence in my life for 30 years, more or less. As I think about Steve, he is the one person I have known who never ever did anything that went against his basic principles, even if he put himself in danger. For the past few years I have been working in Rwanda and the ex-Yugoslavia, places where genocides occurred because many, many people violated basic human values, because most people yielded to pressures to act in ways that went against their consciences. There are few people brave enough to be real heroes in these situations, but if Steve had been in either part of the world, I am confident that he would have been one of the heroes. Steve was never afraid to say what was on his mind, he never worried about going along with the group, he was not swayed by propaganda or fancy rhetoric, he always did what he thought was right and ethical and just. He was willing to go through periods of unemployment and underemployment in order to uphold his values. He also was willing to lose friendships if keeping them meant going against his basic values. Steve would have put his life on the line had that been necessary to stick to his principles. He truly set a model for what integrity means. At times in his life, he also suffered the consequences of his uncompromising behavior.

I will miss Steve Witte terribly. I will miss our professional conversations; I will miss the new articles and books he would have written; I will miss our personal conversations; I will miss his support and his wise counsel; I will miss our deep friendship; I will miss the important contributions he would have made to the field of composition studies; I will miss his dignity and his integrity. I will treasure all that we did have and the many contributions he made. It is very hard

to write about Steve in the past tense because he remains so present—and because of his greatness as a person and a scholar, he will remain present for many years to come.

—Sarah Warshauer Freedman, University of California, Berkeley

As I began to put pen on paper, to summarize the profound ways Steve Witte influenced our profession, the difficulty of this task became clear. It is impossible to separate Steve, the scholar and thinker, from Steve the principled and outspoken friend. His strength and courage did not come at the end, as he fought for his life; these were personal traits evident from our first encounters with Steve at CCCC, in his writings, and in the long conversations in which he would engage with us. He would push us to rethink, rewrite, reconsider, and even change the course of our work. And in the end, it made us all a little bit better. Early on, when you were a peripheral participant in the stimulating and sometimes heated debates that occurred at late-night discussions at the bar at the CCCC meetings, Steve had a way of pulling you in, including you and challenging you at the same time to step up to the plate. No skulking allowed.

I had the opportunity to reminisce with him a bit recently, to have a hardy laugh about how his stubborn, yet fiercely principled ways sometimes got us into difficult positions. About ten years ago, Steve and I were recruited to serve as evaluators of a well-known testing program. We did our site visit and, not surprisingly, found so many areas of concern. And Steve was quick to provide an immediate, although thoughtful and meticulously well-documented appraisal. While our evaluation was still in progress, we received a call that our services were no longer needed, that we were being replaced. The agency wanted a more compliant, more "tactful" team. Characteristically, Steve could not be bullied into providing an assessment that was less than honest. It was an influencing moment in my then fledgling career, and there are countless similar accounts that so many who knew Steve could share.

In my last conversations with Steve, we talked about our membership in a new community of practice, the cancer club. I share my uneasiness about talking about my own ordeal, as it paled in comparison to his. In typical Steve fashion, he was there to lend an ear, his expertise, his unfailing support. He had found such profound ways of reframing the whole experience with humor, reflection, and scholarship, and it was clear that he made as much of a difference in this new community and its support groups as he did in our community and our lives. His influence will linger for some time.

—Kris Gutierrez, University of California, Los Angeles

Sheltering my grandmother's house in rural Mississippi was a gigantic, gnarled oak tree. It stood behind and over that "dog-run" structure, and it partially draped the broad hallway that ran from front to back. I spent countless summertime hours on the screened and shaded back porch as well as in the tree itself, hiding from adults among leafy, thick branches, content to be alone in that special, private world of children. The tree was ageless and protective, and I always felt safe there. Not too many years ago, on one of my increasingly infrequent trips home, I visited my grandmother's house, then long abandoned, and I was dismayed, even distraught, to see the old oak tree in ruins, no leaves on its limbs, tilting oddly. Maybe it was struck by lightning, I thought, not an uncommon thing in those parts. I stood there looking up at it and trying to fathom the enormous sense of emptiness and sadness I felt. I remember recalling lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem, "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child":

> MÁRGARÉT, áre you gríeving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving?
> Leáves, líke the things of man, you
> With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

Like Margaret, I seemed to be grieving over-much for a tree, but it, of course, was the loss of that old sense of safety, protection, and childhood faith that I was mourning for.

Steve Witte was for our profession that huge, gnarled, protective oak tree, and those who knew him well feel a sense of loss at his passing that is keen and deep and almost past understanding. From my earliest memories of the academy, there was Steve, first as a scholar on the page, whose vision for research and writing I could only vaguely and yearningly aspire to. Quickly, though, and remarkably so, he became known to me as a mentor, a friend, a colleague, and a kindred spirit. I remember Steve in images: alone in a narrow chair outside a crowded session at 4C's, finishing a brilliant early talk on coherence and cohesion; laughing loudly with a group of colleagues as they listened and thumped their feet to zydeco in a New Orleans bar post-AERA; talking seriously with me as a newly minted Ph.D. on a snowy night at the University of Pittsburgh, giving me the benefit of his stern wisdom about the politics that would await me at a new job in Bezerkeley. Over the years, almost without my noticing, Steve Witte became an anchoring force for me and, I know, for many other colleagues. He had a moral compass, and it always pointed him (and you) in an ethical direction, though certainly not always toward the easiest path. I trusted his instincts and I believed his advice and I admired his courage and his intellect. Thinking of his not being an easy telephone call away, an always convincible collaborator for a conference panel or a project, ever the sound-

ing board, genuinely interested in one's latest ideas, irreverent, irascible, loveable—catches me in the pit of my stomach and brings me back to the sight of that ruined oak and the gravest realization of loss.

—Glynda Hull, University of California, Berkeley

I am looking at photographs of Steve that I took at his house in Hudson, Ohio. In one, in the background, there are rows of record albums, blues mostly. In another snapshot, a coffee table he was building in his basement workshop. Luisa, his step-daughter, would accompany him there, for she was interested in learning how to use tools, how to make things. Steve is smiling in the snapshots, looking into the camera. He had just been playing Mississippi John Hurt for me; earlier, he was explaining the design of the table, no metal fasteners, the delicate inlays of oak. He would send me things from these moments. A full ninety-minute tape of Hurt's music with a typed list of all the songs, and two other tapes as well, also with song lists: Son House, Leadbelly, Etta Baker. And then a letter mentioning books and articles on manual work I might want to read, a letter with references, thoughts, connections to Gregory Bateson, some Soviet philosophers, and carpenters he knew on a construction crew when he was an adolescent apprentice.

There was always talk of books and ideas with Steve, strong opinions—he had 'em—on theories and methods, on politics and culture, movies and music. I'm sure he pissed off more than a few people. Nothing in half-measure. Steve pushed. He got me going, inspired me, helped me write whatever it was that I was struggling to write. I wrote in that house in Ohio, Steve listening to what I wrote, and I continued with him afterward, after the snapshots and the music, talking by phone, that deep, smart voice, always there. I depended on his intelligence.

In one of the last conversations I had with Steve—the cancer was progressing again—we talked about old movies and memories: *The Last Picture Show*, a theater in his boyhood town in Emporia, Kansas, *Fellini's 8 1/2*, the scene at the end where the director summons all the figures in his real and imagined life together in a circus promenade. It was a lovely, meandering conversation, rich in courage and tenderness, and I am going to miss the likes of it so much.

—Mike Rose, University of California, Los Angeles

In the fall of 1990, I arrived at the University of Oklahoma as a new assistant professor of English education, ready to change the world. I learned shortly after I'd arrived on campus that Steve Witte was at OU as a visiting professor in the Department of English that year, and I immediately made contact and arranged a visit. I had known Steve through his research and as an editor, and had briefly met

him at an AERA Writing SIG party back when the SIG was as much a social group as a program space. I looked forward to getting to know Steve at OU as someone who had founded one of my favorite journals and who had established a big presence in the field, and with luck, someone who could help mentor me as I entered and made my way in the profession.

Shortly after we got together, Steve started quizzing me on my current interests and plans. I told him that I hoped to start some kind of research center, with Vanderbilt's Cognitive and Technology Group as my model. Steve told me that this was a stupid idea, that cognitive studies were outdated, and that if I wanted to start a cutting-edge center, it should focus on socially situated cognition, not cognition and technology. He also grilled me about my reading, which he also found entirely inadequate to the problems facing the field, and gave me a reading list: Vygotsky, Wertsch, Bakhtin, and others whose work was providing the impetus for what, I soon grew to realize, was the foundation for the field's emerging interest in the social and cultural basis for cognitive growth. I also described a research project that I was considering, something about studying small, group processes. Steve's response? That my approach was unethical (I forget exactly why).

Based on these early experiences, Steve and I became pretty good friends, though I could easily see why he also left a lot of people grumbling. Steve could be somewhere between difficult and impossible, but was always provocative, always challenging. If you could take the heat of his intensity, you found yourself with a loyal friend who was a great critic but also a strong supporter. You could also be privy to his emerging ideas; he was drafting his landmark essay, "Text, Context, Intertext: Toward a Constructivist Semiotic of Writing," during his year at OU, and I talked with him a lot as he was working on it, and even presented a version of the paper at AERA when he could not attend. Such experiences were very important to me as I was getting my career off the ground: stimulating, broadening, and instructive.

In their most recent *RTE* editorial, Anne and Melanie refer to writing as "The Neglected R." If writing's been neglected, it's through no fault of Steve Witte. I'll miss him as a friend and scholar of the first rank, and the field will miss him for his visionary leadership. Thanks, Steve, for all you've done for us. Rest in peace, good friend.

—Peter Smagorinsky, University of Georgia