

Dear Susan,

Circumstances beyond my control prevented me from saying these words publically at the memorial service for Don. He already knows them. You probably suspect them.

Love,

Craig



WORDS FOR ROSALIND/
A MEMORIAL FOR DON FINKEL

I met Don in the spring in the early 1970s. He and Susan were looking for housing in Olympia, and Christine and I were trying to sell our house on Cooper Point Road. They came to look, and he and I drifted off to sit in the lawn while the women made the big decisions.

The day was bright and clear. The big crabapple was cascading in blossom. The whole yard was a riot of color and smell. We were young, then, and beginning.

I loved Don immediately. We talked about rhododendrons, and that bee that loved him better than me and why that was (it was all over him, this bee, and I decided he was full of sugar, which he denied), and women. He said he decided early on to marry a smart woman and let her make the key decisions about where they would live and how they would try to live together. Susan knows what she is doing, he said.

Chris, too, I said. And then I said, Poetry is my only government, which has mostly held true over the years.

Well then, he said, you must enjoy chaos. And then he chased me around with arguments from Plato and Socrates. He became my personal bee, a role which he sustained over the years. When I saw Don, I heard "Buzz."

We taught together this Spring. We were trying to decide what to do. At one point we were going to do a Don designed program called When Words Lose Their Meaning, until I realized I did not understand a word of it, so I said "Let's do Shakespeare, instead," and he agreed immediately, and we were off on a journey.

What do you want to do? he asked me.

How about three plays? I said.

And then there was a long silence, a cocked eyebrow, and a healthy "Buzz." He could not believe that I would deny students the richness of Shakespeare's work by offering them only three plays. For him that was sacrilegious. Don had a clear "No."

We dickered and debated and, of course, I lost all the arguments. We ended up teaching eighteen plays-- EIGHTEEN-- and I went back to school. I submerged myself in Don's teaching world-- essays, response papers, two plays a week, and lectures. Teaching for Don was a full contact sport.

I was the one used to improvisation and jazz teaching. I had my four questions: what do you want to do; how do you want to do it; how do you want to evaluate it; and, what significance does it have? I was pretty cocky about it-- this pedagogy. And I actually thought I knew what I was doing.

Buzz, Don said, and Buzz and Buzz.

He wrote out all his lectures, like I am doing now with this memorial talk. He said he did not care much about presentation or style. Don't pay any attention to me. Study the content, he said. Pay attention to my words.

Don designed every Shakespeare class either using one of his workshops or with exactly the right strategic move to keep the momentum on the question the program addressed. He thought every program should ask a question and pose a problem. Our question was what is Shakespeare's truth? It was not enough that I had to read eighteen plays, write talks, and carefully read twenty-five student papers every week, I had to try to figure out what Shakespeare means.

He is a poet, Don, I said.

No, he is one of the world's greatest thinkers, he said.

We went back and forth. I said beauty; he said truth. Then I would say truth, and Don would talk beauty.

We loved different plays, which amused us both. He loved The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado About Nothing, and Twelfth Night. I struggled with all three. I offered A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Taming of the Shrew, and Romeo and Juliet. This last play threw him into a typical fit of bemusement. "It's Shakespeare's worse tragedy," he said. "Do you really want to teach it?" (meaning how can you have such bad judgement when so much is at stake for the students?)

When we divided the program into seminars, I convinced him to let the students group themselves. I had all sorts of reasons based on independence and teaching with our mouths shut. I had read his book and the earlier one he wrote with Bill Arney, so I cunningly used the paradox

of freedom argument against his better judgement. It is a simple argument: our task is to teach students how to think independently. Don listened and said, "Okay. I have never done it that way, but let's try."

So, I told the students in our first program meeting that we would leave the room and that they should divide themselves into two equal groups, which would be their seminar groups and the faculty evaluator. One student asked Don and I to say something about our teaching styles, so they had some basis to make the decision.

Don said he taught with two hands. One hand pulls and the other pushes, he said. He said something about the hovering and the disappearing Socrates, which is a key distinction in the Arney/Finkel book. He said he was a hovering Socrates-- involved and active with students-- and then he shrugged. He always managed to disappear himself in a teaching situation and let the words he had just said remain buzzing in everyone's head.

I said what I said, and we left to continue our debates. The students were not ready when we returned. It turned out that my seminar was way short of volunteers. Students had jumped over each other to get into Don's seminar. I just loved that, and it was good for me, as Don always was good for me.

Hard, difficult, but good for me.

Working with Don, I stiffened my arrows. I had been trying to shoot a noodle into the bulls eye. In the Shakespeare program I was taking attendance, writing warning letters, putting on my Clint Eastwood face, and generally rigorous/critical/analytical pullpushing my students into serious discussion and work. It was amazing to me, to my family, to my friends, and to the students who had had me in other situations and had followed me into the Shakespeare program.

I was Don's student. I was trying hard to keep up and to please him, as all his true students did.

He had high standards. He taught with more than his hands. For me, he was all tongue and mouth. He was always in my face, about one half inch away, with a cocked eyebrow looking at me with that Carlson, you don't mean that, you can't mean that, you can't do with that rap he had.

Jeeze, I will miss him. He shook me up. I will miss that Classical/Structured/ALLOVER ME approach he had. So I am going to ask all you Finkels-- Susan especially, David and Daniel, Benjamin, and Zoe-- and Friends of Finkels to continue Don's teaching for me. Teaching these days is drifting into the virtual. I use E-mail. I use phones. I just had a call from one of my students who is teaching English in a village in

Santiago, Chile. So, I am teaching him, but I can hear Don's BUZZ in the background. How can anyone teach without getting into someone's space and pushing and prodding them to be better than they think they can be?

Good question, Don.

All you Finkels and Friends of Finkels do not let us ignore that question. How can you teach without complete engagement with your students-- without an in your space personal relationship? This style and quality of teaching is one of his legacies, and we all need to sustain it. Don said he was trying to teach with his mouth shut, but he had his hands firmly on all of us.

So I am offering one answer to Don's question by quoting this poem by Mary Oliver. It is not a poem I wanted to use, but it fits . Don is "a lion of courage" and a "bride married to amazement" who did not simply end up having visited this world. The poem is called "When Death Comes":

When death comes
like a hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something

precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up having visited the world.

My last conversation with Don was about Shakespeare. He asked me what character I most identified with from any of the plays and, when I told him, he gave me that look he had which was a combination of I will give you some time to reconsider and are you serious? I will not tell you which character I told him since there are too many Finkels and Friends of Finkels in this room and I do not want to go through that harassment stuff again.

I asked him who he identified with the most. His answers always surprised me. I was certain he would say Prospero, since he was so much the very Prospero himself for me-- the master teacher and a magician.

Rosalind, he said. And then he said, quoting her, "Can one desire too much of a good thing?"

That is how I will remember him. Our Don/my brother, my sister/ his Rosalind, our lion of courage, his face an inch from mine, quoting poetry of all things to tell me what is of value in life. I will remember him as a bride married to amazement: Rosalind Finkel, the flower of Shakespeare's genius.

"Can one desire too much of a good thing?" Don asks us all.