In Memory

In the conclusion to his essay on historical method, "Dreams and Play," Bob said that "we write histories to define ourselves on the stage of time." In his own brief hour on the stage, Bob Connors undertook the demanding role of defining us to ourselves, and he performed this role, over and over again, with conviction, perspicacity, and quiet eloquence. We have lost a wise soul and a devoted friend. Our loss is truly profound.

University of New Hampshire
Durham, New Hampshire

Remembering Dr. Bob

David Edwards

When I first heard the news of Bob Connors' passing, a darkness swept over me and blocked my view of the future. I hated myself for being so selfish in that moment. My loss certainly could not compare to that of his
wife Colleen and daughter Aillinn, for whom this was the greatest tragedy of all. Still, in the moments just after my friend Bronwyn told me the news, my numb mind turned instinctively to thoughts of the future, to a life after Bob. This was the man who was going to chair my exam committee next spring, oversee my dissertation, guide and direct the final stages of my PhD odyssey. We were supposed to grow old together: he at the University of New Hampshire, continuing his work and supporting mine; I at a smaller, local institution, hoping to make a difference. The stories he told me about his teacher, Ed Corbett, matched my own private fantasies of a lifelong relationship with a model teacher and scholar. I was neither ready nor prepared for the sudden and inexplicable loss of the most important person in my professional career. Bob Connors was my coach, my philosopher, my friend.

I met Bob before I even knew who he was. In 1996 I had just applied to, and had been rejected from, graduate study at the University of New Hampshire. I stubbornly moved to Newmarket, New Hampshire, got an apartment, and took summer classes to improve my chances during the reapplication process. And because I wanted to work with the writing center—having been a peer consultant at my undergraduate school—I was told to meet with some guy named...oh, it’s written down somewhere...here it is, a Professor Robert Connors.

I found my way to his office one August afternoon. I was greeted by stacks of books piled below overflowing bookshelves, two desks masquerading as paper shrines, and little room remaining for human habituation—your typical faculty office. Then a large man—wearing a plaid shirt and jeans, with a scraggly beard and tight, shiny eyes—greeted me and invited me to sit beside him in one of two armchairs set side by side. I remember being struck by this arrangement: he never conferred with students while seated behind a desk; rather, he preferred to greet them as if they were guests in his living room.

As we talked about writing center policies and training, I remember thinking how his appearance and personality seemed at odds with one another. It was as if the powers that be had placed the gentle spirit and wit of an English professor in the body of a woodsman. An axe wanted to be in those hands, not a pen. When I learned later that he rode a motorcycle and was once a trucker, I nodded silently. Yet, over the years, as I understood more about him and his love of literature, writing, rhetoric, and history, I came to see this bulky, bearded man as the gentle giant of the English Department at UNH, a teddy bear with a soul. And only after I had read a dozen or more articles authored and coauthored by Robert J.
Connors, articles that helped to shape and define the discipline I now study, did I understand that the quiet, humorous, unassuming man sitting next to me that day was one of the central figures in the field.

Without my realizing or seeking it, Bob became my mentor. Slowly I discovered, through three courses and our contact at the writing center, that I wanted to emulate him. Bob impressed and inspired me. He knew everything, it seemed, about rhetorical history, writing center administration, composition theory, and literature; he also knew a great deal about plants, carpentry, old books, old furniture, meteorology, the politics of universities, cigars, and Louisiana cuisine. Yet, he maintained the attitude of a lifelong student, constantly researching, writing, and learning. He was the model of the scholar and teacher I feared I could never be but wanted so desperately to become.

Bob gave me style, which is not to say that he taught me fashion sense. Only Bob could successfully manage to wear a tweed jacket, aquamarine shirt, and multi-hued tie to class without looking clownish. Rather, Bob introduced me to what we both suspected was a diminished canon of classical rhetoric: style. His own mentor, Ed Corbett, had explored the subject extensively, and Bob continued to “carry the torch,” as he put it, hoping to pass that torch along to someone worthy of the task. Bob invited me to hold that torch at the 1999 CCCC convention in Atlanta. In my first appearance at a professional conference, I sat, terrified—the nameless graduate student between Dr. Robert Connors and Dr. Ross Winterowd—clutching a paper about the history of style in composition and feeling terribly out of my league. After Bob impressed and amused a standing-room audience of a hundred peers, speaking on the decline of sentence-combining theory, he turned to me and, noting the panic in my eyes, said, “You’ll be fine.” And, remarkably, I was.

That is how Bob invited me into the field and under his wing. He gave me confidence when I had none, encouraged me in the comments he wrote on a dozen of my papers written for his classes, and smiled at me when I was choking on the words I spoke in front of a hundred people who surely knew more than I. These things I remember, and I remember the “extracurricular” help as well. He was the first to invite me to the Oak Room, the faculty dining hall at UNH, where we would discuss the nineteenth-century German university system, our children, master’s theses, or nothing but the movement of air masses over New England. Complaining one day, unexpectedly, about my very young and turbulent marriage and my continued inability to provide financial support to that union, I watched Bob laugh as he told me that, for some time, I would be
the "net income sucker" in that relationship. He always did have a way with words.

Strangely, what I think I will remember best, and miss the most, are the chance encounters in the basement of Hamilton-Smith Hall. Bob had two offices at opposite ends of the basement—an office in the writing center and his faculty office with the comfortable chairs—so he was constantly patrolling the hallways. My own office was also in the basement, so at least once a week, and often once a day, I would see Bob approaching me, slightly stooped to reduce his height and bouncing gently as if he were hearing a tune in his ear. I would call out, "Hey, Dr. Bob," which was my way of paying respect and having fun with him at the same time. And he would always reply, "Hey, Dr. Dave," which was his way of telling me that he believed in me and expected great things in the years to come. I will miss that confidence, and I hope I can still live up to those expectations without my beloved, bearded rhetorician there to convince me that I belong.

University of New Hampshire
Durham, New Hampshire

Remembering Bob Connors

Andrea Abernethy Lunsford and Lisa Ede

This is the second time in two years that we find ourselves writing a memorial tribute for someone close to us. Two years ago we commemo­rated the death of Edward P.J. Corbett, our friend and mentor. When Ed died on June 24th, 1998 at the age of 79, we mourned his passing, but we also celebrated his long life and many contributions to the field. We could not have imagined that almost precisely two years later we would be mourning the untimely death of Bob Connors, who died in a motorcycle accident on June 22.

There is much to celebrate about Bob's life and work, including his long and productive association with Ed Corbett. But since Bob died at forty-eight, not seventy-nine, our epideictic task feels harder to carry out. Bob should have had thirty more years—years of productive work and joyful living with his wife Colleen and daughter Aillinn. While we grieve