



Keith

I have put off writing this for a long, long time. It's not that I didn't know who to write about—I knew right away who it had to be. But I've found the idea of trying to capture Keith and what he did for me intimidating. I tried once before to summarize Keith as a teacher, when I helped write the dedication for our campus literary magazine. In the end, we wrote "Keith was a _____ (adj.) teacher." We knew everyone reading it could fill in the blank with lots of wonderful words, and then we didn't have to pick just one. Now I'm a writing teacher, but I still find myself skeptical that some words on a page can capture who he was.

As a freshman in college, I decided against the counsel of my advisor to take Writing of Fiction I. After all, I was there to learn to be a best-selling novelist: no sense in putting it off. The instructor was Keith Denniston, and I was in about three feet over my head. This was not high school, where turning something in on time that actually had plot and characters and was more than a page long exceeded the "A" requirements by about half. Keith had strong opinions about what made fiction work, and I had no idea how to produce stories like the ones he admired. I didn't even know how to *read* the stories he admired. When the best student in the class started talking about the "sexual imagery" in the story "The Use of Force," my head just about exploded.

I eventually learned how to read like Keith did, and how to write the kinds of stories—and poems—that he admired. Keith probably gave me a better grounding in the study of literature than any of the English classes I took. But none of that is really very important, and none of it is why I chose him to write about.

Keith wasn't what I thought a college professor would be, in strange and wonderful ways that taught me a lot and continue to teach me as I think back on him. He talked about scandalous things, the joy of alcohol and how to make love to a woman. He was as blunt in his interpretations of people and their actions as he was in his interpretations of stories and poems. He knew if it was good or bad and why, and he said so. But through all of that, he loved everyone he encountered.

He showed it in how he designed his class. Keith had high standards, but he didn't enforce them through belittling people or shaming them. He didn't shout or rage. He told it like it was. His was the first unconventional grading scheme I ever saw, and it allowed me to fail several times before I "got it," while still reflecting my eventual learning in my final grade. If he thought you were wrong, or if what you wrote didn't work, he told you so. It wasn't candy-coated, but it wasn't cruel either. He just believed in telling the truth.

He told the truth always, everywhere. Every time we'd have a writer come to campus to give a reading, Keith would announce that, afterward, there would be a party at his house. He was quite insistent about the phrasing: "It's not a reception, because a reception is a boring little event where you stand around and drink tea and try to say witty things. This is a party." And they were parties. There was alcohol and jazz music played on a real record player and lots of talk and laughing. And at the end of the night, people were welcome to stay if they were too tired or too drunk to go. I can remember being at his house other times, too, not just for parties. I don't recall why, but to this day I'm amazed at it: He let us into his home.

Actually, I should clarify. I'm amazed that he let *me* into his home. At the time, I wasn't very like Keith. (I'm still not very like Keith, but I'm more like him now.) He was a partier, a democrat, a beatnik. I was an uptight, conservative, square, arrogant teenager. There was no reason for him to like me at all. I wrote a story about a guy who was (I realize now) a complete, selfish jerk, and I thought he was the hero of the story, and Keith knew I thought that, but he liked the story because it was a true story. And he liked me even though I didn't know who

the hero was, I didn't know anything about politics or history or stories, I didn't know how to relax or be authentic or anything. But he let me into his home.

That was Keith. He had strong, definite opinions about everything, but one of his opinions was that every story or poem had a worldview, and “in a democracy, we have to accept every worldview.” That didn't mean he agreed with every worldview. I don't think he agreed in the slightest with any worldview but his own. But he'd let them be stated and would help people figure out how to state them better. And he'd accept them. And he'd accept the people behind them.

So while I look back now and can't really figure out what Keith could possibly have found to like about me, I know he accepted me. I know he loved me.

Keith died a few years ago. As I think back on my time with him, I just wish I had spent more time in his office and at his house—not because he could have taught me more about literature or creative writing, or even about jazz or history or politics, but because he could have taught me more about love.

—*Carl Gerriets, English Instructor*