

## For Randy

Karen Finley

I don't want to do this. I still keep the emotions tied to my vest close to my heart—not yet labeled. How does one even begin to express a relationship with a beloved colleague who died *too* young?

How do we do this *in writing*?—of course, I reflect and hold his spirit with me in so many ways—as I introduced our new students just last week—I tried to smile and keep a space for possibility, for rigorous dialogue, a space for the discomfort to speak to us for our research—as I walk to the farmers' market and feel my basket empty then full, and somehow the space for abundance that I carried brought a dance with the weight of the carry. *It is a dance, this thing called nature, this Hudson River view. Where are you?*

Randy and I shared many things in education: our students, politics, values, culture, cooking, books, travel—but what we privately shared was a wall. We both faced the same wall from different directions. I faced north. Randy faced south. This wall both separated and joined our offices. But it provided us a space where we were in close proximity to each other. Either side of this wall was our private desk and here we both wrote our lectures, graded our papers, wrote our books—created our theories and listened to students—spoke on the phone with colleagues and our families. Randy was a fierce and inspired scholar who consistently worked on his research alongside being a professor and department chair and carrying out so many other duties in his workload. Our bodies were probably less than a yard apart between our desks against the wall. There was closeness; yet there was a wall. There was a comfort in the hushed voices and the energy of being in the humanness of intellectual activity.

Randy would understand this poetic space with his humor and jumping intellect that twirled and went on high-speed chases up hills and valleys. Although Randy always referenced in his bio that he went to clown school and was a dancer, he had a parallel limbered-mind practice that pirouetted, improvised, or carefully crafted choreographed overtures that were not routine.

We also shared a view. We both looked down Bond Street from Broadway. There are cobblestones and a water tower in the distance to the Bowery. This window corridor into the bustle of a slice of

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New York off an important artery was valued as an escape to think the big think. It was also the backdrop for our conversations alongside his immense library.

I feel so blessed, for I had time and space with Randy that was unscheduled. During the academic year we had weekly talks where we checked in on our program, academic news, and issues to discuss, but mostly we just talked. Randy never said he was too busy and always made time to see me, time that didn't have to be scheduled. Randy was a family man, and if he had a call from his children or his wife, that took priority. Randy respected your time for family. Sometimes, if the week got past us, we would check in for a week review on Friday. These weekly conversations would move through topics and issues that involved our students, curriculum, and research, but varied from philosophy, cooking, wine, coffee, tennis, art, West Coast, economics, ceramics to parenting, friendship, and God. His flexibility and allowing space for connecting and discovering dialogue not always in a scheduled time slot is something I so dreadfully miss.

Recalling the intimacy of education, where we pass on and inspire knowledge to the next generation, requires community and partnership with our colleagues. Randy and I had such a relationship. I came to Tisch at NYU just after my NEA and Supreme Court battle. Randy was always supportive of my work and encouraged the visibility of my research and projects.

Toward the end of his life, I at times stayed later in the office and our conversations turned more serious. We discussed the meaning of life, of dying, of god, of the afterlife. Randy, to my knowledge, was an atheist. But we had conversations about the soul, the body, the spiritual, the mind, and knowledge beyond the physical form. These profound private questions were difficult topics considered in depth; yet the realness, and the limitations of the body, were near. Randy continued to work and flourish until the end of his life here in physical form. His belief in education was paramount, and one of his requests to me was to understand that the admissions process was an opportunity to connect and guide. He wished that we should choose not to treat random bureaucratic processes begrudgingly and dismiss them; rather, we should welcome encounters, even admissions, as opportunities, as of moments of entrance, and for the professor to take the given responsibility where education and inspiration may engage the student.

My most treasured and well-worn paperback is *Poetic Space* by Bachelard. And Randy gave me poetic space; he listened, responded, and recognized. We realized early on that, at various times in our lives, we had been in proximity or in the same space at the same time. We both went to school in the Bay area. And we discovered that we both were at the same Talking Heads outdoor campus free concert. And our paths intersected via people and places.

Last night I was in Chicago, at the Free Street Theater, seeing one of our former students, Ricardo Gamboa, now a PhD candidate in the American Studies department at NYU, and his partner Sean Parris perform their collaborative work, *Space Age*. The multimedia performance work addresses both their relationship as a Mexican-American and African-American queer couple and is a coming-of-age story for queer boys of color. The performance focuses seriously and also with humor on issues of race, family, immigration, class, private, and public queer love. It is both provocative and empowering in the artists' embrace of the brown and black male body holding each other.

Moving together.

But I wasn't prepared for the text to include reminisces and influences of Randy. For the coincidence that on the night of Randy's passing, Ricardo met Sean. Ricardo speaks of Randy's influence and believed in him; yet, Ricardo also expresses this crazy world we live in, of sorrow, of joy, and of his grief while meeting his future partner. Randy had a tremendous, life-changing, personal impact on the lives of his students and colleagues.

I start out my latest performance—*Unicorn Gratitude Mystery*—by dancing. I enter the room with the Talking Heads blasting—and for a moment I recall that time, way back when, at Berkeley, when we were all dancing, a public moving together with the music as one. Randy would never miss an opportunity to get up and dance.

