

John Steven Mann

In the fall of 2009, in the month of October, John Steven Mann, passed from this life. With his passing went part of my soul. Steve was my doctoral mentor; but more, he was a teacher who helped me shape my views not only on education, but also on life. The values I hold today were brought forth and refined in those years we spent as I worked on my Ph.D.

Steve came to Hopkins, in the late 1960s, as its first and only curriculum theorist, a title I proudly wear today. In some ways Steve and I came together by accident: he needed students, I needed a mentor, my former mentor having left Hopkins for the professionalism of Columbia. I was told by Robbie McClintock not to follow him there. I was a muser and Hopkins was the place where I could muse. Steve not only let me muse, he encouraged it, he gently guided me in it. We read together the writings of a former Hopkins graduate, John Dewey. I read my writings to Steve and he read his to me. Often, too often, I would read a page or two of what I had written and stop cold. "This is not very good," I would say. Steve would reply, "You needed to write this Bill." He never went beyond that simple phrase, but the implication was definitely there: good writing is an emerging process. Failures are not simply failures; they are part of a reflective process. Ever so slowly my writing improved, although it was, still is, Germanic. With my sense of musing it was a close call (other graduate students took bets) as to whether the Notes in my dissertation would outnumber my text in terms of pages. Ultimately text won as I had only 150 pages of endnotes.

In my second year of doctoral study, I told Steve I wished to read in the history and philosophy of science. Steve gave me his library carrel key and said, "Go read." At the time Thomas Kuhn was the rage with his concept of paradigm change. After a longish, still Germanic, paper on Kuhn, which did draw some attention (even if never submitted for publication), I started my dissertation on Dewey's concept of change. In subsequent years, change was a theme in my readings of Piaget, Bruner, Prigogine, Whitehead. Today, almost four decades after my leaving Hopkins, it is change that attracts me to the

new sciences of chaos and complexity. I now call myself both a curriculum theorist and a complexity theorist. Steve, I am sure, approves.

The late 1960s was also a time of strong social change. With a background in the Ethical Culture School (NYC) and the University of Wisconsin, Steve had strong political and social views. A firm believer in the American ideal of government—one of Dewey's main works is *Democracy and Education*—Steve understood the difference between democracy as an ideal and the realpolitik activities of representative government. Naively, I did not. To me our government was the epitome of all that was good and just in American society. In retrospect, I believe Steve saw his task not as telling me to recognize the error of my ways but of helping me broaden my awareness. I am grateful for this approach, and hope it is now part of me. Gradually I, along with hundreds of thousands of other college students, became aware that what the US government was doing in Vietnam and in the southern states of our country was a travesty on democracy and a tragedy on justice. I, like others, marched in protest. Although Steve approved of my actions, he also wanted his more radical groups to listen to my more moderate comments. While I never took Steve up on this offer, I did begin to adopt an attitude of listening to the other. Of entering into conversation, not dialogue. What moderate success I have had as a teacher, administrator, school board member, I attribute to the idea of "conversing with the other." Steve's own conversations moved from academia to union worker to real estate salesperson in a small New England town, to political volunteer (2008). At that time, he started reading the history of the American Constitution—a fascinating read. Toward the end of his life he asked me how one could include such readings in high school civics courses. As a Deweyian, he believed one should immerse oneself in what one was studying. The recent travesty and tragedy of the Bush presidency takes on a new light when set against the tumultuous times that gave birth to the American constitution.

Jacques Derrida makes the point that unless we can converse with death (The Gift of Death) we really cannot appreciate life. Steve met death honestly. We emailed a lot about death and its relation to us. As an ethical culturist Steve believed that "when it is over, it is over." As a heretical Catholic, I share the same view. He asked me if my religion helped mitigate that fear—it does, it doesn't. As the cancer grew in his body, he became weaker and weaker; the messages fewer and fewer. I wrote, he did not reply. One day his daughter called me to say "My father has died. He wanted you to know."

Indeed my own life is richer for his presence. I pray his spirit will guide me when I cross over that line from life to death. Thank you Steve.

Bill Doll