

Joe in Conversation with the World

To Celebrate Joe L. Kincheloe
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The Graduate Center

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[*Shirley's assignment, which became my prompt for this tribute to Joe was quite spare but directive (she is a good teacher): she gave me three words about Joe to respond to: colleague, collaboration, publishing.*]

Let me give you a bit of context: I am a professor of English at Queens College, and also on the faculty of Urban Education. Joe and I became colleagues in 2002-2003, when I moved to 80th Street (CUNY's Central Administration) as University Dean for Undergraduate Education and began a project to re-envision liberal education. Joe, Phil Anderson, my significant husband, and Eleanor Armour-Thomas (Queens College) became my CUNY friends and unpaid 'consultants,' as I tried to figure out how to mobilize 17 colleges to rethink general education for 250,000 undergraduates. The four of us talked a lot that first year of the project. Every couple of weeks, I posed questions, dilemmas, and the three of them consulted – and consoled, and we thought through possibilities to make change happen. We all know that the coin of the realm in the university is a book, and Joe opened the door for Peter Lang to publish *Reclaiming the Public University*, a collection of essays on the project. The second book on the projects that I've invented at CUNY is in the works. Thanks to Joe and to Shirley. We became colleagues and then friends, Phil and I, Joe and Shirley.

As I writer, I tend to follow those lines that keep repeating themselves in your head – you’re never sure where they’ll take you. The line – or image – that kept nagging me was that ‘Joe was in conversation with the world.’ An ongoing – and persistent -- conversation with the world. I am certain that he believed that he – and we, with him -- could fix the world, and make it new. I hear his voice in company with the great religious reformers, the Methodist ministers, from whom he came, and the wise rabbis, who believed that we are responsible, socially and ethically, as human beings, for *tikkun olam*, which means, literally in Hebrew: *to repair or perfect the world*.

I hear Joe’s voice in company with some of the great social writers, Walt Whitman, William Blake, Henry Thoreau, Yeats, Thomas Hardy, Austen, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Chinua Achebe, Nadine Gordimer, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin -- those who raised their voices and pens to speak out, to remind us of what and how we need to see, what we need to do about injustice.

Joe was above all, a teacher; a writer of songs, a singer of tales. He was a visionary, a bard, a seer – a poet: “Poets,” said Percy Shelley, “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” By poetry, I mean what Michael Oakshott, the British historian, means, in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*: that poetry engages in speaking to the world through all kinds of image-making performances: music, stories, sermons, folk tales, poetry, all kind of verbal and imaginative play.

Joe said: “Come play with me: let’s make a song.” Conversations with him were inclusive, generative, digressive, surprising, improvisational. There was an intensity to his listening, a profound empathy and generosity that drew you in. These were moments of encouragement – of courage making. The great conversations – like the great poems – are invitations to speak and to

speak out. They are calls to participate, to join in, to come together through understanding, to build community.

This is what it was like to talk with Joe, when you had the sense that the words reached out into the atmosphere to stop the chaos, to transform the elements. Everything mattered: McDonald's burgers, psychoanalysis, the bell curve, schools, kids, intelligence, indigenous knowledge. The world was history, knowledge-making, popular culture and people, always people, and music, religion, always the play of theory and practice, always idol-smashing; always about making the world better – particularly for kids and teachers.

Philosophers and poets, rock and rollers, social activists, even those of us who had been silent for too many years—when we were in conversation with Joe, as colleagues, friends, we were geniuses together, we felt we could do anything.

And we did: breaking boundaries in making books. We were given license. The books are laid out on the tables: an astonishing 600 volumes. Fifteen single authored volumes. Another six in the works. Another ten with Shirley. Another dozen with friends, colleagues throughout the world. The volumes in Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, French. The edited series staggering: their titles telling: Bold Visions, Transgressions, Reverberations, Counterpoints, Rethinking Childhood.

And the revolution is in full force: Joe and Shirley have broken out of the country and into the world: just open the Freire Center web site at McGill – and you will be in touch with where they have come to, where they were going and must continue to go.

This is shape-shifting stuff, genre and boundary breaking, these social networks—the multi-mediated world through *You Tube, Face Book*. Joe and Shirley made publishing theirs – and all of us were invited in, colleagues all, students, faculty, teachers, those of us who were doing the work in inhospitable places, found a home, a place to live.

Joe made a “ceili” wherever he went. In the great Irish storytelling tradition, the *ceili*, from the Celtic, is the telling of stories round the kitchen table, stories to tell the histories of the people, and to create the future, to build courage and fortitude against the weather, human suffering, and the tyrants. To laugh, and have a good smoke. To crack. Joe probably inherited the sense of *ceili* from his Irish forebears, the Kinsellas. The *ceili* comes out of the deepest needs of the community to keep the old tales alive, and to enact the great Irish tradition of “wit,” as the greatest enemy against oppression. Joe was the star of the *ceili* – he drew us all in around the fire. He had the “sight,” they said in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee. He elicited our tales and our music.

I’ve been to several *ceilis* in Ireland: In Leenane’s pub in County Clare, with Tommy Peoples, the great Irish fiddler, at the center of the circle, who drew players from across the oceans, and opened the heavens with his playing, and we were all musicians, players and listeners. I’ve sat in Seamus Heaney’s sitting room in Dublin, where late into the night, we were called upon to sing our tales. At the center of the *ceili* is the great fiddler, the great poet. That was Joe. He is called the “star”: “He is the man,” says Henry Glassie, the folklorist, “who can reach into a dreary conversation, find a thread of silver, and spin it into a story that deadens time and enlivens the sense.” Who outwits the tormentors. And makes art. And “all art,” says the Irish playwright, John Synge, “is a collaboration.”

Thank you, Joe. . . . for inviting Phil and me, into the conversation. We will keep talking to you. . . .

