

CHAPTER 25.

MEMORIES

Victor Villanueva

Washington State University

Let me open with a memory, something of an aside rather than a thesis.

In April 1984, the Sunday edition of *The Seattle Times* included a half-page article with the heading “The American Family is Alive and Well.” The article featured a picture of Anne, her husband (Brewster, if I remember right, though he introduced himself to me as “Budge”), and their children sitting around a dinner table, holding hands for the dinner blessing. It was clear that her world was so very different from mine. While she was in the Sunday *Times*, I was living with my mate and our three kids at the time in what was literally—quite literally—the oldest apartment house in the city of Seattle (a slum that got around Landlord-Tenant rules because the place was officially a historical landmark).

Now, I mention this not to point to race and class and the like, but to mark a memory of how I could believe at the time that, thanks to Anne, I could someday enjoy a lovely house with wife and children in a lovely neighborhood. I could believe that because whatever my abilities or their lack, I could count on Anne to be direct and truthful, not have to worry about the pity or the condescension I often felt at Big University.

And that’s what this chapter is about.

For the rest of this brief chapter, I will continue to carry on about myself, but I do so as a means to describe Anne Gere the Mentor. I write this chapter less to honor the researcher and scholar that is Anne Gere than to give thanks to the person who helped launch a relatively successful career. Professor Gere’s academic career as a professor is about ten years longer than mine, and our ages are even closer than that. Yet whatever successes I have enjoyed over the last 40 years or so would have never been realized if it weren’t for her. This is less to honor Professor Gere than to thank her, a very long overdue thank you.

In 1979, I entered graduate school at the University of Washington in Seattle. Three years earlier, I had entered a community college with a high school GED that I earned while in Vietnam. I had entered the community college to acquire a bona fide high school diploma. I had already tried to secure a job with a GED

after seven years in the military, where I had been a personnel specialist for most of my service (with a brief stint as an infantryman). I was a well-trained clerk, even a non-commissioned officer overseeing the large personnel offices of Ft. Lewis, WA. But a clerk without college, never mind a conventional high school diploma, was not going to land me a job. I transferred to the University of Washington after receiving an AA because I had gotten bitten by the learning bug but also because it was nearby, having decided to stay in the Pacific Northwest. And the nearby, beautiful campus was affordable for Vietnam veterans (\$177 per quarter. Imagine *that!*). It was rough going, but I stayed past the undergraduate degree, even as I was insecure, lacking graduate writing abilities (or even an understanding of what those abilities might entail). I had simply decided to continue in college until I failed. And it was clear that I was admitted to the graduate program because of my minority status. It was written on my GRE score sheet. In those days there was a notebook where graduate students could read informal comments written by our professors. The notes about me were kind but not encouraging, and among those notes was my GRE score sheet with something like “Minority applicant” written on it. I would stay until I couldn’t. Dropped out once, after trying to write a paper on Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” What? I had nothing to say. I don’t know why I came back the next quarter.

My GRE scores were pretty high when it came to Quantitative Reasoning and Verbal Reasoning, but the Literature Advanced test was a washout. I really knew very little—and it showed. Among the literary categories, I scored lowest in American Lit.

Then in 1981, I stumbled into Anne Gere’s “Theories of Invention” graduate seminar. As a kid I saw something from Benjamin Franklin in which he signed a document as “Inventor.” I needed more American Lit credits, so I thought that Professor Gere’s course was an American Lit course, “Theories of [the Literature] of Inventors.” What I discovered, thanks to Anne, changed the rest of my life: *rhetoric*, the discipline that continues to shape how I see, hear, and read the world. I stumbled in that class, trying to grasp Kenneth Burke (as if anyone really could, but at the time, I *knew* the problem was within me). Anne assigns me to present on Ann Berthoff’s *Forming/Thinking/Writing: The Composing Imagination*. The focus of my presentation was on Burke-in-Berthoff. But more important was that I discovered rhetoric *in* writing, that there were theories that could guide not just the teaching of writing but writing itself. Later I would find that Berthoff relied on Burke and on Aristotle but mainly on I. A. Richards (the one who wrote *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, putting aside the same Richards who wrote basal readers).

That same semester in 1981, maybe, I took a class from Bill Irmscher. It'd be years before I'd discover that he had been NCTE (National Council of Teachers or English) president and 4Cs (Conference on College Composition and Communication) chair—or what that even meant. With Irmscher, there was more Burke, plenty more Burke. But as kind and gentle a man as he was at that time (there were tales of a less-gentle Irmscher), it was Anne to whom I would turn to talk about these things. Irmscher seemed always to like my writing. I hadn't the confidence to believe him. It was Anne who I trusted to be honest with me about my writing, such as it was.

Anne Gere didn't seem to treat me like the poor unfortunate (the only Latino grad student, the only grad student of color, the less-than-able writer, veteran, raising children, all those things that give rise to a sympathy that reinforces insecurities; tokenism is a sin). I never got the sense that Anne Gere saw me as anything but the student before her.

Somehow, I got through the doctoral exams (two of which I failed and would have to take over). Anne was my director. I asked if she would stay with me, blunders and all. I was advised by others against her: she was a new associate professor (as if I knew what that meant), that she had not yet directed a doctoral student, and most of all, that she was "tough." But it was that very no-nonsense toughness that attracted me to her. She opened up a new world to me, and she was direct without malice or arrogance. Just straightforward. I needed that. I knew I was in a world in which I did not belong.

1983. Anne agrees to mentor me. I bounce around ideas for a diss. Anne's face drops. I was playing the "doubting game," as Peter Elbow would call it (149). It's a game common to graduate students starting out, I've discovered over the years: find the fault. That's fail safe. There is no such thing as a bulletproof paper or a bulletproof theory. Fault is always there to be found. But seeing the contributions is so much harder. And actually providing a contribution harder still. But what the heck? Two years earlier I hadn't even known there were such things as rhetoric or composition.

After recovering from her discovery of how much I didn't know, Anne handed me articles she had copied for her own research, and she handed me *every* issue of *College English* (CE), *College Composition and Communication* (CCC), and *Research in the Teaching of English* (RTE). I really don't know how literal that is—every issue. I know that I had several stacks on my living room floor; each stack was about three feet high. And if I were to be analytical, every issue was possible. CE was 40 years old, CCC 35 (I was chair of the organization, 4Cs, during its 50th year and my 50th year on earth), RTE about 15 years old. All issues was possible. But literal or not, Anne cleared out her shelves, told me to prepare a 3x5 card for each article in each journal, then come back to her. And I

did that. I thoroughly learned rhetoric-and-comp (learning rhetoric, the ancient study, would take much, much longer; or, honestly, was never as thoroughly understood by me as rhet-comp would be). Eventually, that task would provide not only for a dissertation but the foundation for *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory* (and everything else I would produce).

Still 1983, Anne adds my name to a proposal for a 1984 4Cs panel. Scary. I would be on a panel with Melanie Sperling, Ann Matsuhashi (who would, as Ann Feldman, be the local arrangements chair for the 4Cs program that I would chair 14 years after that first 4Cs), and Anne. I was to be the respondent. Anne advises me to read their work, to understand their mindset as well as their scholarship, so that I'd be prepared to respond. Reading Melanie Sperling was different. Her research and scholarship concerned education. I didn't realize that Anne's did too, apart from her work for the Puget Sound Writing Project. I think I did well in responding for that panel. At least I was told by Anne that I had done well, that I had a talent for speaking. She wasn't one to dole out empty compliments. So I wanted to believe her, but I couldn't quite, not yet. Now, 40 years later, I have delivered over a hundred talks, more than half of which have been keynotes. She was right. Am I bragging? Of course I am! But I would have never discovered that ability if it hadn't been for Anne. If I hadn't done well, she would have tactfully told me so. She gave me that first taste of confidence, of something more than, greater than, bravado.

1985, I land a tenure-track job, with my all-but-dissertation (ABD) status. I send Anne (over the mails in those days) the first draft of the dissertation. I had no idea what I was doing, but I needed to keep that job, and I needed to complete the dissertation to do so. We were a family of seven by that point (five kids), and insofar as my wife was also a high school dropout, I was the primary income source. I was desperate.

Schedule a phone call with Anne (email would come some years later, modems and command strings, and the like).

"Hi, Anne."

Anne: "What *is* this?"

End of conversation. One doesn't forget a "conversation" like that.

I would have to rethink everything but the theory chapter and the literature review. Yet I had to have a degree in hand by that June, or lose my job.

I think. I write. The study: a comparison of basic writers of color and writers of color in a conventional first-year composition class. The literature of the time had decided that students of color don't do well in college because they are stuck in an oral culture, that literacy makes for higher-order thinking (replete with "proofs" from Vygotsky and Piaget and even Plato). My father got an eighth-grade education through the GI Bill; Mom never completed high school. Yet

she was a voracious reader. And so was I. Yet I failed and stumbled nevertheless. And here I was, stumbles notwithstanding, trying to get a Ph.D. I could not buy the cognitive deficit theory. Anne supports my empirical study: recording group work in both classes, looking for the connections among reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Anne provides the lavalier mics and recording equipment. Her own research at the time concerns group work (a matter I didn't put together until her book *Writing Groups: History, Theory and Implications* was published). I work it. After all, it has to be acceptable to Anne. I write. I mail the diss.

Anne and I speak on the phone, late night on a Sunday. I'm in my office (we didn't have a house phone; couldn't afford it). Over the phone, Anne goes through the three hundred or so pages with me, page by page, line by line by line, not just with revisions but with detailed copy editing. All those graduate students I have directed (nearly 100, including a couple of 4Cs chairs) had to "suffer" through that same treatment—because I learned how terribly important it is, because there would have been no dissertation without the deep guidance I received from Anne. There was no Word app, no Google Docs. She sat on the phone with me for hours! Who does that?

And at the oral defense, when folks were kind, asking questions because I still wasn't really a writer (and as far as I'm concerned, I was in this profession nearly ten years and well published, even receiving national awards for what I had written, before I truly discovered the writer in me). Then the graduate representative (which in those days was someone from another discipline, in my case someone from speech communication) pulls out a dissertation with a title very much like the title of mine. I am devastated. Anne whispers, "I read it; don't worry."

A few years later, I publish my first single-authored article (I had a co-authored piece before that). It was a reaction to a speech delivered at NCTE by Richard Rodriguez, whose political views were initially offensive to me and to those of color who had become my convention buddies (and with whom I still communicate). I write an article on the mindset of those who are immigrants (like Rodriguez) and those who are Americans of color (like me). It appears in *The English Journal*. Two people tell me there's a book there: the late and wonderful Mike Rose and Anne. But it's Anne I knew and trusted at the time (a friendship with Mike Rose would come later). That book would become *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Anne, not exactly holding my hand, more like putting my feet to the fire, was there for me, guiding me.

Over the years, we have become colleagues, Anne and me, each of us with our own successful careers, crossing paths at this organization and that. Most, I imagine, see us as peers. But she is always my mentor in my eyes. I thanked her

in my acceptance of the 2009 4Cs Exemplar Award, but I still don't know if she knows that I couldn't have had this successful career but for the care she showed me 40 years ago, this tough, respectful new associate professor who guided me, who believed in me.

So Anne: Thank you. Not just from the bottom of my heart but from deep within my soul.

WORKS CITED

"The American Family is Alive and Well." *The Seattle Times*, 22 Apr. 1984.
Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. Oxford UP, 1973.