

10-16-10

Donald H. Graves eulogy

Penny Kittle

Thank you for those memories of Don. What a lucky man to have lived this life surrounded by all of you.

I am honored to speak today about what Don has meant to teachers here in America, in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and so many places where I imagine copies of *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* are still passed hand to hand. It's true his first book sold an estimated 250,000 copies. But that's a fraction of those it reached--purchased by one, read by many. I first read Don's work myself in a borrowed copy.

Don went on to write 26 books in 25 years. It's productivity few of us could match, but Don was at his desk at first light and he was impatient to get stuff done. He would write the blurb for the book first, he told me, then write with the end in mind. And I would add: at a relentless pace. When writing his last book, *A Sea of Faces*, he emailed me a poem a day.

Don summarized his research like this: (And I quote from an introduction to a book he never finished:) "I pulled my chair up to a child and just plain observed the child write. I recorded everything the child did, I drew and labeled the process by numbers; I tried to anticipate what the child would do next (big mistake) and learned quickly

that anticipation was just not quite right. I had to *follow* the child.”

That observation method opened up an entire field in composition studies.

Don showed us how to see children. Don resisted his own celebrity because he wanted each of us to believe in the power of studying *our* students. Lean in and listen, he would advise, not carry his book around our classrooms (as I confess I did) and hope that *his* words would be right for our work. He made me believe that I could lead *any* child towards joy in crafting with words--and I worked to prove him right. I risked more and learned more in the flawed but determined research of my own classroom. It seems naive in our current culture to put such faith in teachers, but Don surely did.

Don began the Writing Process Laboratory at the University of New Hampshire and maintained a lasting respect for his colleagues and students there--many of whom became leaders in the field of literacy. He said the names of so many of you here today with reverence. He maintained a belief that workshop teaching could bring energy to classrooms. In 2004 when he and I began interviewing children, I was privileged to watch Don immediately connect to kids through their writing. He celebrated their work with a big smile and a, “Well how about *that?!?*” His full attention to the thinking of children mirrored his full attention to life: Don lived with arms open to it all.

Don kept data on *everything*. He rattled off obscure facts about the Red Sox or a battle from World War II. Don Murray would email his daily word count, and Don would counter with the hours and minutes he'd cleared brush on his 13.2 acres of land that day. He tallied what he ate, the animals that crossed his property, the elevation gains across miles of travel with Betty on biking tours. This precision had purpose. Don said, "I'm always looking for the one big question--the one that will make the connections."

And Don was a rock star in the world of teaching writing. In 2005 he signed books at the NCTE conference until his hands trembled from fatigue and hunger. As long as the line continued to stretch through the convention hall, he wasn't moving. He was revived by chocolate-covered macadamia nuts delivered by his cherished Hawaiian friends--only to find that eating and signing resulted in chocolate smears across the title pages.

His followers were fiercely devoted. He packed convention halls, often speaking to hundreds and hundreds of teachers at a time. He encouraged folks to keep coming in, to fill the aisles and pile upon the stage behind him. At one conference our room had overflowed and dozens pressed from the hall. As the tension mounted, Don reached out both hands--a pastor's move-- to settle the rising agitation. When told we were beyond capacity a woman shouted from the

door, “We want to see the Don!”

And of course we did. Don was not only deeply thoughtful, but entertaining. He would shuffle a dance move mid-speech or imitate the frustrations of a teacher interrupted repeatedly by the school intercom with perfect accuracy. He would tell me after that presenting drained him because he tried to send his energy out to each person in the room--and as the crowds got larger, he could feel his limitations.

Of course, in the last few years Don stopped presenting. I missed his patterned sweaters and determined pace speeding through the convention hall. I brought home stories from NCTE and we could gather for coffee and share. In Pennsylvania I showed a video of Don and a child. A young woman whispered to the teacher next to her, “Who’s that old guy?” The woman whirled around in her seat, whispering fiercely, “How did they let you graduate from college without knowing Don Graves?!” Don cackled at that.

If Don were here today he would have asked how I got this writing done. I would tell him there were two parts: panic and procrastination. How to risk words when the subject is so precious? But Don helped me believe in the process, so I read articles and favorite poems, watched out-takes of interviews with children, and reread hundreds of emails. I scribbled images and phrases until I could find lines.

When things got difficult, I walked out the front door to stand beneath a black sky on the brink of morning. I felt the chill of our stone walk on bare feet.

Above, the stars.

Above, the mystery and expansiveness of a world beyond.

Yes, Don is gone, but he has left us a legacy of paying attention, of listening, and of deep love.

May we carry that legacy into the rest of *our* lives.