

Memories of Teresa Hunt

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I met Teresa Hunt (then Kynell) when we were taking a night class at Michigan Tech, probably in 1993. I think at first a lot of the graduate students in the class didn't know what to make of her—she did not dress in slightly musty jeans, sweatshirts, and ragged tennis shoes or appear otherwise unkempt. In class she spoke with grace and authority. Because I was among the not-so-kempt students in the class, I regarded her at first with perplexity if not outright suspicion. Nobody seemed to know her; she wasn't a teaching assistant and therefore not part of our *elite* clique who generally dominated class discussions and spent Friday evenings at The Library (a restaurant/bar in Houghton, Michigan, popular with students). Like most night classes that met one night a week for three hours, we had a break halfway through the period. One night during the break I remember speaking with her. I don't remember who initiated the conversation or any of what we spoke about, but only that I quickly discovered there was a person there beyond the alarmingly focused and disciplined scholar we heard during class. She was good humored, friendly, and although not too much given to talking about herself, she probably told me she commuted to class from Marquette, Michigan, a hundred miles east of Houghton along the southern edge of Lake Superior. I think it was some time before I learned she was a full-time, non-tenure-track faculty member at Northern Michigan University,

The winters in northern Michigan are well known, but in the Keweenaw Peninsula where Michigan Tech is located, winters can be epic, with snow accumulations of up to twelve feet on record. My wife Sue and I wondered if Teresa had contingency plans for the winter nights when it snowed heavily, which was at least as common as clear weather in that part of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Sue urged me to invite Teresa to stay with us if the roads were really bad. But I began to learn what an independent person Teresa was. She gratefully said she would accept the offer if she ever felt she couldn't get back

safely, but because she had classes at Northern to teach the following day it was important that she get home the night before. Cell phones were rare in those days and were not at all reliable in the thinly populated UP. I don't think anyone I knew at that time owned one. Teresa didn't. However, she usually drove an SUV and never let the weather stop her.

A year or two later, Teresa took a leave of absence from Northern for one term at Michigan Tech so that she could carry a full load of classes and finish her coursework requirements. She stayed on campus part of each week that quarter and became a beloved member of the graduate student gang. On a few festive weekend occasions, her spouse (at the time), Kurt Kynell, a history professor at Northern, would join us for parties.

At some point I learned that, like my wife and me, she had lived in Alaska for a number of years. Teresa had grown up mostly in Anchorage, Alaska, and had worked as a reporter for the *Anchorage Daily News*. Teresa and Kurt lived some distance from Marquette in a rural setting where they kept horses. And yet, despite a friendship that developed over some fourteen years, I have come to realize I never knew much about her. She was close to a sister who lives in Oregon, and she would often go out there to visit and spend time romping with her two nephews. She also visited her father in Texas frequently, especially in the last year of his life when illness resulted in frequent emergencies. A few years ago, just before Christmas, she wrote to me about an anticipated visit from her sister and nephews. She was looking forward to spending the holiday with children, commenting that because she and Whit had no children they had never shared the excitement of Christmas morning with kids.

Teresa set high standards for herself. By the time she began writing her dissertation, she was back at Northern Michigan University teaching full-time. The task was more than usually arduous. She told me afterward that she would shut herself in her office at home every night and write. Kurt would bring food and leave it outside the door as she pushed herself to keep on schedule by working far into the night, then going to work the next morning. The task paid off when she defended the dissertation in the spring of 1995. She had by that time submitted the draft to Ablex Publishing, a leading publisher of scholarly books in communication at that time. *Writing in a Milieu of Utility: The Move to Technical Communication in American Engineering Programs, 1850–1950*, was accepted for publication by Ablex within a year after she earned her PhD. It is one of a very few scholarly books in the technical communication field to go into a second edition.

Teresa never called attention to her accomplishments. She published constantly, both articles and books, which she began doing long before

she earned her PhD because she felt a great deal of pressure to prove herself as a scholar in her department. It wasn't long before she had outperformed some faculty members considerably senior to her. Not long after completing her PhD, her position was converted to tenure track and she became an assistant professor. Over the next few years, she taught technical communication, composition, and—what she described as a self-indulgent and beloved sideline—mythology.

Teresa had a genius for collaboration. She formed professional friendships with many leading scholars in composition and technical communication, including Robert Connors, Michael Moran, Beth Tebeaux, John Lannon, Katherine Staples, Jo Allen, and Merrill Whitburn. But more than professional collaborations, she made deep, lifelong friends, and her friends became friends with each other.

In 2003, she emailed me to share her sadness at the death of a colleague at Northern, an irascible professor students either feared or discovered the heights of their abilities. Teresa clearly admired him because of his concern for students and his love of teaching. They had occupied neighboring offices for years in an ancient, rundown building. This colleague was among half a dozen Teresa counted among her best faculty friends, all “outcasts,” as she called them. This perspective, oddly, was a perception she had of herself, perhaps because of her unorthodox career path and persistent sense that she always had to work hard to prove herself an equal in the academic community.

In 2004, Teresa wrote to tell me of seeing a former Michigan Tech classmate of ours while she was at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in San Antonio. He had suffered a life-threatening bicycle accident and was finally back on his feet after a long recovery. Teresa was glowing with delight at seeing him well and whole again, telling me she nearly wept as she talked with him and urging me to write to him myself.

After we graduated, Teresa and I would try to meet for lunch or dinner at least once when we were at a conference. This was not always possible because Teresa was continually in demand, busy with meetings concerning her many projects. The exception was the year CCCC was in Nashville. For years afterward, Teresa told friends about the afternoon she and I skipped out on the conference and went out to see Nashville. I don't know how we found it, but after some walking and a cab ride, we arrived at the Nashville Parthenon, a life-size replica of the original Athenian Parthenon. I was amazed at the seven-and-a-half-ton doors that could be swung open and closed with one finger. Teresa was taken with the twelve-ton, forty-

two-foot statue of Athena. Before we left, we purchased souvenirs in the gift shop. Teresa bought postcards of Athena and sent me one sometime later. We walked the couple of miles back to the conference hotel, stopping on the way for burgers at a replica of a 1950s diner. Some of our friends scoffed at our delight in ersatz classicism. I was a bit defensive, but Teresa just laughed.

Like any of us, there were contradictions in her nature. She was one of the most determined and gutsy people I've ever known, and yet, she could be fearful as well. She thought nothing of driving alone 200 miles round trip through heavy snow and icy roads in the northern Michigan winter nights, yet, one evening at CCCC in Washington, DC, we went out with a group of Michigan Tech alumni and faculty. We were walking to a restaurant within a block of an area we had been advised could be dangerous after dark. Teresa admitted she was frightened and huddled close among several of the men in the group on the way to and from dinner.

As was typical for her, she didn't say anything about it when she was appointed acting chair of her department, a position she held for about two years, I believe. She continued to teach, write, and work with the Association for Teachers of Technical Writing raising funds for the annual conference. When eventually she happened to mention she was chairing the English Department, I asked her how she managed to keep up with so many duties. She acknowledged that it was a lot to do, but said, "I just compartmentalize." That meant that she set aside specific times each day for each duty and focused only on that task. She didn't discuss her incredible ability to focus and maintain self-discipline that enabled her to do it all successfully.

Teresa hated to be seen at a disadvantage. She didn't want anyone to feel sorry for her. She was seriously injured one September in a collision with a deer late at night driving home from class. The deer came through the windshield, and she received head and upper body injuries as it thrashed about. She was scheduled to appear on the program for the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) that fall, and although she was back on her feet by then and had returned to teaching, she didn't want her colleagues to see her looking so physically battered.

Once when I had grumbled about having been drafted for another responsibility when I was already too busy, she told me, "You'll figure out a way to manage. We've been figuring out ways to manage for well over ten years now. Eventually, we'll both decide we've had enough. We'll open a used car/used book shop and showroom, and we'll call it Cruise and Peruse!"

She was asked by Northern Michigan University, in 2002 or 2003, to take the lead in writing their accreditation self-study report, a task that involved some two years' work. It turned out to require much more work than she had been led to believe, but she went through with it and succeeded to such a degree that she became in demand for accreditation training and consulting around the nation. For the next couple of years, she seemed to be away often doing such work.

Yet, as her career advanced and her responsibilities and commitments increased and she sometimes seemed to grow weary, she often returned to her long-time love of teaching as a focus for everything else she did. In the fall of 2004, we were working together on a book chapter at the ATTW conference while Teresa was also very busy with accreditation travel and other duties. She wrote to me then that she felt her energy flagging and that it was increasingly challenging to maintain a balance among her many duties, including travel, administrative work, teaching, scholarship, and still having a home life. Yet, she ended the message by saying she would be fine, that it was not as if she were facing a health crisis or a life tragedy. She looked forward to having lunch that day with a first-year student whom she had agreed to mentor. She said that commitment helped her remember what all her work was really for.

She was also asked to serve as interim Assistant Vice President (AVP) for Academic Affairs at NMU, a job that I think proved increasingly discouraging to her. She began it with more trepidation than I had seen in her before. But when she began the job in January 2005, she was hopeful. She wrote to me about one of the perks of the new position, a beautiful view of Lake Superior from her office window. On one particularly beautiful day, she said that people kept coming to her office to take pictures of the view, surely another indication of her generosity to allow such disruptions in a very demanding job. She gave me some sense of her schedule as she exulted that she had the next month free from travel. Her most recent trip to conduct accreditation work had taken her to four states.

Although she never told me much about it, she told me sometime in the last year of her life that she was thinking of stepping down from the AVP position, but she had hope for accomplishing the goals she had set for herself in the job first. She missed teaching and writing, but also believed there were important things to do in her administrative role.

Everyone knows what Teresa did for the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) as the conference fundraiser. She took on that job for the first full-day conference held in 2002 in Chicago. She saved our bacon that year, raising more sponsor funding than ever before. Teresa

would notify me every week, sometimes every day, as she nailed down another sponsor. She often said she should have gone into selling used cars. Each year thereafter she met or exceeded those accomplishments. Like everything she did, she treated the job as if it was the only thing she had to do. What amazed me was that the sponsors she won for ATTW saw her as a friend, not simply as a business contact. She insisted on giving them the best possible representation in the conference setting and program for their support of the organization.

One of the last times I heard from Teresa was when she and I were notified that we were to receive the ATTW Fellows Award for 2006. We exchanged some excited emails, but in the midst of the excitement she mentioned that the past year had been difficult, made worse by poor health that winter. But in the last message I ever received from her, she reminisced about our lunch in the greasy-spoon restaurant in Nashville.

It was in that message, also, on February 24, 2006, almost exactly ten months before she died, that she wrote the sentiment she would express a few weeks later when she received the Fellows Award: "All I ever wanted to do was NOT embarrass Michigan Tech." She certainly achieved that hope and much more, as a scholar and teacher, as a friend, as an extraordinary human being.