SPEECHES GIVEN AT 8/16/98 MEMORIAL SERVICE [Gloucester, MA]

His Life [excerpt] - Lee Steele

Bob’s career as an engineer – which had moved rapidly by necessity because of the war – had become less satisfying. He dropped out several times to write articles, work on marine-related inventions and even considered running a boat yard. In the summer of 1960, Harry Hoey presented a solution to the dilemma. Career change, at age 45, took courage and willingness to risk.

Our children were 2, 4 and 6 when we moved to Cranbrook. Up to the end of his life, Bob referred to the 20 years there as the good years, the best of his life. He chose to teach English, rather than Math and Science, because of his life-long love for literature and poetry and because of his own interest in writing. Perhaps I was the only one who appreciated what a healing experience teaching boys at a boarding school was for Bob. It enabled him to do for others what he would like to have had when he was a boy.

Soon he was caught up in enthusiasm. He appreciated the freedom the school offered for him to design his own courses with titles like “Terse Verse”, “Perception Process” and “Great Plays”. He enjoyed playing with the students, instituting The Great Cranbrook Paper Airplane Contest – from the balcony of the gym – and the rubber-band-powered Boat Regatta in Jonah Pool.

He wrote a long paper on teaching. Here are some excerpts from its introduction:

“Although I do not log my moments of overwhelming satisfaction, I am sure that since 1960 – the year I left a twenty-year engineering career to become a preparatory school English teacher – their frequency has more than doubled…”

“Resonances of pupils and teacher, proclaimed in the eyes of the pupils, are no more subject to judgment than are communions between people and sunrises…”

“I frolic in the suspicion that my pleasures as a teacher derive more from a reverence for the aesthetic in my engineering experience (analysis and design involving fluid dynamics and structural dynamics) than from schooling in pedagogy, composition and literature…”

“The effectivenesses of we who would make discourse more fruitful can be increased by a shift of focus from language to perception.”

Fran Dagbovie recalls (in a letter of two weeks ago):

“Bob never seemed to doubt the rightness of my being – coming as I did from an immigrant, working class background – in a Cranbrook classroom or office. In those early years, he listened to the questions I brought him, ever patient. When I came to his cozy attic of a classroom, I would find him grading at a student desk or breezing in and out of his walk-in closet/treasure trove, cataloging or trying to find a book or article or special Steele SWAD evaluation form (a version of which I still use). I might comment on a book, and he would look out those small windows in Room 200, to a place beyond the brick path, before filling in my gaps of knowledge in gentle ways. One book he adored, Kon Tiki, I read and taught – inspired by his enthusiasm, as non-nautical as I could be, but totally caught up in the adventure of sailing that Bob so loved. And when he evaluated my teaching, he praised my enthusiasm rather than critique my lack of
Bob modestly would not acknowledge his own influence in mentoring so many students toward the deliberate choosing of the “best” words and the creation of clear, concise, well-nuanced expression. Nor did he claim credit for the growth in individual young people due to the personal interest he showed them and the love of literature and poetry he encouraged. Room 200 was a place of thinking. But, filled with poets’ dreams, otherworldliness also emanated. I don’t climb the stair in the map lobby to Bob’s old classroom without remembering.

“The acceptance and outreaching of all the Steeles were sustaining to us. I remember it all with gratitude. Thank you Bob. Love to Bob, to Lee, to Jeffry, Jonathan and Nancy and to all your extended families from the Dagbovies.”

Cranbrook was a family place. Faculty way was a community where families helped families in times of crisis. Our children were close to Bob, understood his work and often helped him become a better teacher. He was involved in their lives weekday afternoons in the playing fields and Mom could return to social work. Summers and some semester breaks were spent at Folly Cove and mostly devoted to writing. His annual poem was sent to friends in lieu of a Christmas card.

Nearing retirement at age 60, Bob bought a sailing cruiser and named her Elsewhere. Quoting a letter from his colleague, Ben Snyder: “In fact, the word ‘elsewhere’ I find perfectly descriptive of the impression he made upon his many friends at Cranbrook. It was not absent-mindedness, for he was not, but rather the ‘lovable complexities’ which left us all intrigued, puzzled, bewildered and enriched in such wonderful constructions as a grading matrix and his daily dealings of interpreting poetry. As a student might have said: ‘I’m not sure that I understood, but it was simply marvelous.’

“[Upon receiving their retirement gifts] Pete Slader tore his open with characteristic vigor . . . Bob, on the other hand, turned his over and over, as if trying to peer through the wrappings – delicately hefting it, shaking it, balancing it, examining it intently as if there was a reasonable chance that it might blow up.”

At age 72, he acted on a life-long fantasy of living his life on a boat when he commissioned a 32’ sailing catamaran to be built in England, and for most of the next four years cruised the waters of the south of England, canals of France and the Mediterranean. He would entertain family and friends aboard the boat for varying intervals.

The last phase of Bob’s life was clouded by awareness of failing memory. He had creative ways of coping with increasing disorientation. He carried compasses to Gloucester and always had at least one dictionary with him. He sewed name tapes on briefcases, hats and umbrellas – which regularly returned from Schooners Pub, the Glass Sailboat or the waterfront. He loved this park, where he walked almost daily until his last illness. In his final days he would look out at Folly Cove and remark that he had chosen the most beautiful place on earth.

Thank you, Bob, for an interesting, eventful, creative life. We appreciate your openness to risk and willingness to experiment. You always respected the uniqueness and autonomy of family, friends, students. It takes teamwork to build a strong well-
functioning family and you were a good team-mate. After your death, we became stronger, supportive and more open to each other as a family. It was a life worth living. Jean Erikson wrote in Wisdom and the Senses: “Your life cycle is after all your most personal creative effort. Shouldn’t it in some way continue to communicate with all the old and young with whom you shared that life?” I think that was all Bob asked for as immortality.

In the Classroom - Ellen Levy [Kingswood, class of 1975?]

Two months into the first course I took from Mr. Steele – it was called “Terse Verse” – I received a midsemester evaluation which began with this sentence: “If the family is distressed to find a poet in it, I wish to declare that to no degree am I responsible; the damage had been done prior to Ellen’s starting in this course.” Looking back, I would have to disagree. I only became a poet as I read that sentence. With its perfectly balanced tone, it confirmed what I had until then only suspected: that a propensity to love a certain sort of intense language intensely was, to put it mildly, a mixed blessing. Nonetheless, it was Mr. Steele’s recognition of, and sympathy for my plight that allowed me for the first time to accept it as a blessing.

By then I had realized that he was similarly afflicted, and that he hoped and feared to find a poet in every student he taught. As some of you know, he assessed student writing not by giving grades, but by tallying the number of what he called “cogent lines” contained in each piece. To be cogent, in Mr. Steele’s sense, meant to write economically, pointedly, vividly, in a voice that was your own and no one else’s. The implication being that to make sense, in whatever form, is to be a poet.

And if, despite one’s best efforts, one fails to make sense? The result might be nonsense, which Mr. Steele loved (Alice in Wonderland was a lifelong favorite of both of ours) or – and he was keenly aware of this possibility – it might be silence, thick with the unsaid and the unsayable. The Richard Wilbur poem, chosen by Bob, that I’m going to read is about the threat and attraction of this sort of dense silence. In fact that poem is itself so compressed – such an excellent example of “terse verse” – that I thought I should unpack it a little before reading. Its title is “In the Churchyard”, an allusion to Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” Gray mourned the lost potential of the dead, seeing in each of them an unachieved poet, “a mute inglorious Milton.” Standing, like Gray, in a graveyard as dusk falls, Wilbur first rejects Gray’s vision as a sentimental denial of death’s stark finality. He then nevertheless, like Gray, finds himself unable to stop reaching for a life beyond death, which he imagines as a silent music, a “balked imminence of uncommitted sound,” or as the French poets Wilbur loved to translate termed it, la poesie pure. Finally though, called back to himself by a real bell’s tolling, he rejects the pure poem for the actual one, which in its imperfection is more faithful both to the living and the dead.

[She reads poem].

Inventory of the Cellar (A message received since July 7) - Jonathan Steele [class of 1974]
I, Robert Steele, being of sound heart and fertile mind bequeath to the children of Folly Cove and Faculty Way the following:

Two large disarmed fluorescent light fixtures, ideal for use as an enormous in-out box for student papers

Six large, buoyant wheels – three of aluminum, three of styrofoam

One scissors-like collapsing wall unit, for books at least four and one half inches in depth, but also suitable for the draping of trousers

The Ditty Box

That peculiarly strong green tape which, when combined with tongue depressors or popsicle sticks, was the enabling technology behind many of the innovations to emerge from this basement laboratory

A jar of indelible markers for branding all movable objects with six immaculately even capital letters

A network of brackets made from hockey sticks, essential for mounting a Christmas tree firmly to a load-bearing member of the building

A jar of smooth aluminum alloy rivets – rust resistant, lightweight, unquestionably useful . . . for something

A mechanical teaching aid that demonstrates the physical principles of pole vaulting

A machine that writes poetry

A foil, which will lift a sailboat out of the water, if it can just achieve sufficient . . . heresy

Storage of these items should not be a concern, because – whether they be kept in a museum, a damp basement, or a landfill – their design cannot decay; the conversion from hockey stick to Christmas tree holder, from light fixture to in-out box, is irreversible.

Memories of Bob Steele - Scrib Jelliffe

It wasn’t long ago that we gathered about the great table and celebrated Bob and Lee in their fiftieth wedding anniversary. We took the occasion to look back over our remembered times together, to meet friends from hereabouts and to take a walk along the cliffs that look out to the sea.

Now we reflect once again and look at Bob as he might have looked at us over his interlocked hands, or as he ducks his head into his shoulder to laugh and admit that what he has just said was quite, well, “come on Bob!”
And didn’t we all enjoy his puzzling over the right word, the apter phrase – whatever that might get him to admit he’d heard a gem? Or the dramatic anger he could sustain – for only a moment – when bombast threatened a lovely idea, when someone dared speak of a BIG truth when he knew the truth comes only in random glimmers.

Some of us heard there was a wild side of Bob that got played out at Cranbrook. There under a lamp post, muffled figures on bikes, moonlit riders off the rendezvous which would be the stuff of stories around the mailboxes the next morning. Was Bob the ringleader, did he bark the commands and knock at the doors of unsuspecting Hoffmans, Kelleys, Hazens? Was it his bike that led the pack up the hill to the Lebos, to a house number on Academy Way? then down Lone Pine to jolly King Kiendl? Can you see that creaky bike and the trouser leg bound in a clip, the hat with earflaps (or was that Dick Heavenrich?) and the pipe? Don’t forget the pipe!

Bob had a keen distaste for bombast. What better place to begin its demise than a new-type Student Comment Form that replaced words with mere dots which themselves represented a string of our favorite adjectives. Linking the dots was lots of fun. Students were invited to play as well and the whole idea was evocative of participatory education, so that the school bought millions of copies – e’en unto the 21st Century!

Every Spring, Bob would be signed up for Ben Snyder’s army and report to the pole vault pit where he lectured on physics and somehow got the non-athlete to rise to uncomprehending heights. Pauses in the training regimen were used for discussions of poetry. John Nevin and others came to realize that Bob’s gift was to reveal to them a talent they could believe in.

Then there was Christmas. There was always snow when we gathered in the house at the bottom of Steele’s hill, tasted of the mulled wine, grab dittoed sheets of carols and makeshift lanterns, then worked the mittens back on while we stumbled out the door and down the snowy steps . . . is anyone there? do they hear us? Oh, no! Not that one again! Hey, they turned off the lights! “Merry Christmas!!”

Well, we didn’t find the big truth in Bob’s time, but we enjoyed pieces of it and we enjoyed the talents, the humor and the well-being of those who shared his light and felt drawn to his gentleness and eccentricity. Within his smile, he often seemed to say, “Not quite, but close, very close!”

A modest tribute to Bob Steele’s memory - Sam Salas

Bob’s requirement of his students to write a given number of cogent sentences a semester is still an ambition of mine. I have spread this lesson among several generations of English teachers and told them about Bob Steele.

What do you think of a man who stands next to the pole and coaches pole vaulting while reading a book? Is this legend about Bob? I have the image in my mind. It made a perfect picture.

When Bob and I talked I felt valued and appreciated. It was his attention, his kind and intelligent response, his sincerity and his respect for every person that gave me that great feeling in his presence.

As a teacher I felt very excited that this ocean-loving engineer would come and want to teach in the same school with us, the rest of the teachers.

Aren’t we lucky that the Steeles were there when we were there, learning about books
and family and teaching and playing?  
Bob, I must apologize because I never told you how much I admired you and how much I enjoyed our conversations on poetry, the ocean, Chile, or the evaluation form. What was good is that you were totally there. It was a big gift to me.  
Lee, Nancy, Jeff and Jonathan, you must have had something to do with the goodness of this man as he must have had something to do with your goodness.  
Thank you!  
Sam Salas  
Cecilia also sends her love.  

In the Kitchen - Nancy Steele [Kingswood, class of 1976]  

Firstly, thanks so much for coming.  My father would have been surprised and touched by the size and make-up of this gathering.  
We received a number of very kind notes when he died and in them, many of you remembered Robert Steele's love of language.  It was his big, generous way of embracing the world and the people in it.  
So what I've written here is a simple appreciation for my Dad, thanking him for the way he taught me to play catch with words.  It takes place in the kitchen of the house here at Folly Cove, where my father sat in a rocking chair near the window. . .  
Mornings were good in this kitchen, Dad.  Your first pot of coffee in the morning – sometime around 6 a.m. – was inevitably produced according to some obscure formula you settled upon sometime in the 1950's.  
You would say, "Good morning Nan.  Did you hear the gossip of the gulls this morning?  As best as I could make out, they are planning to take back Folly Point once and for all from the cormorants.  I suspect that the near-perfect circle they have formed indicates that today is to be the day."  
"No, Dad, I didn't hear them.  But the water is so smooth today.  Maybe these conditions are essential to their plot."  
I'd make the second pot of coffee so it was always much stronger.  We braced ourselves: Dad for the sip, me for the jab.  "Uug", he'd say, "this is fashion gone too far!  It started last night with the broccoli."  
"Yea but your complaint last night was that broccoli's vibrant color is not adequate compensation for its lack of flavor.  This coffee, by contrast, has lots of flavor."  
"Don't confuse the subject with taste.  This damned experience is confounded by years of coffee-drinking history.  For all we know, I may have developed more and essentially different receptor sites for coffee while you may be experiencing something akin to my perception of pea soup.  And while biology is playing its role, there are no doubt psychoanalytic factors weighing in.  I shudder to think what Freud would say about my apparent inability to get pleasure from broccoli."  
"Dad, I think you should worry more about what Freud would say about your love of pea soup."  
"Touché, Nan!  That brings me to another matter.  Why can't I get any pea soup around here anymore?  What's all this fascination with food in its near-raw state?" . . .  
I cherished those morning rituals.  Now when I make coffee, I think back to being a student of Robert Steele's and the exercises he gave us in Class Room 200.  One
assignment involved writing an essay without using the verb "to be". Be careful if you try this at home. It's nearly impossible. Topic did not matter much with my father. But while we're at it, I should thank some of the topics which we sacrificed in that kitchen. Thanks to lawyers, evil shopping malls and big corporations without souls. Without them there would have been fewer occasions to feel virtuous at low cost. To be balanced, let's also thank carrot cake, the lapping of harbor wake, rum and water, the women's movement (I remember how well he listened when I came home a little scared, the only straight person at a lesbian music festival), soccer, Emily Dickinson, Christopher Fry, and the “whop” of the jib popping out on a fresh tack.

So, I'd like to say good-bye now, Dad, by acknowledging one topic we never tired of - the question of how much we inherit through biology versus what we get from the nurture of the kitchen. Through whatever mechanism, you gave me a distinctive voice and a bravery to use words, risking misuse at every turn. Whatever the curse – biology or Freud – I embrace that gift. I hope I can pass some of that along to your granddaughter, Lucia. And I predict that she too will be enraptured by her father – whether it be nature or nurture, this tradition of adoration is inevitable. I only wish I could have heard you say her name once. To play catch one more time with a word, her name, oh, such a precious word.

From 'Letter to Dad' - Jeffry Steele [class of 1972]

Now, while I have your attention, I’d appreciate some specific information. About two weeks before you went into the hospital (it’s strange to date back from an unplanned event) you read me a poem you had apparently only recently discovered, the one about flowers growing by the road. None of us can find this poem – which, judging from the tears you shed at the last line, clearly meant a lot to you – and we therefore cannot read it today. Now, of course, even if you were here you probably wouldn’t remember where you left it. It was not an author I recognized. Did you xerox it from the New Yorker? I wonder if we’ll ever know. Anyway, it described driving past some beautiful flowers having only the moment it takes to speed past in which to appreciate them – concluding that Heaven shares her greatest wonders with those who have the least time to take them in, that even in just driving by we may receive the flowers as deeply as anyone who may have come close enough to smell them, even as deeply as the gardener who may have planted and cared for them. Did you feel, on some level, that you had let life pass without taking the time to breathe it in fully? That there were flowers you wished you’d smelled? Places you would like to have visited? People you would like to have known more closely?

You may wish to have completed some monumental work such as getting a book published or an invention marketed, to have more to “show for” your time here. But your legacy is not to be archived on a shelf or pictured in a catalog; it is in the gift you left to every person with whom you spent time. I may have envied my peers for their particular skills or material possessions, but they usually envied me for my parents and family. After a visit to Folly Cove, some friends have commented that in their own families so much energy was spent in the struggle to get along that little was left for the thoughtful exchange of ideas they experienced in my family. And speaking of your
accomplishments: if the ability to get a large roomful of hushed people hanging on your every word when you have no idea what you’re going to say next isn’t a major accomplishment, I don’t know what is.
You were always determined to find the newer, better way. You were a pioneer as a parent, as a teacher and as an engineer. I got the strong message that I was not to do things in the same way anyone else had. And while this has been my knee-jerk reaction at times – rather than a carefully considered choice – I do appreciate that you modeled this non-conforming and questioning stance.
Thank you again for bringing us to Cape Ann. You must have had a gut feeling that the area would provide richness for us beyond sheer coastline beauty. But thank you also for balancing our experience here with that at Cranbrook, which provided a nurturing learning environment for all of us that we may not readily have found here at the time. Thank you for teaching me to write well. I’m not sure how you did this. I must have been in the ninth or tenth grade, and I recall going from being totally frustrated to attaining a level of accomplishment in a matter of a few days, without being taught a single grammatical rule. I guess I was finally receptive and you must have figured out the particular information I needed. Only in studying Spanish did I realize that what I had mastered were things called “noun clause”, “adjective clause” and so forth. Thanks for giving me an appreciation of things nautical. Although it’s been about a decade since I’ve sailed a boat – last time must have been with you in England – I take pride in the fact that I know how. You preached on the beauty of engineering, whether marine or otherwise, such that I too become engaged with the study of how something has been made and enjoy talking to people about their work with anything mechanical. Thanks particularly for being able to relax enough about the “Dad role” to be someone to hang out with. I appreciate all the places we visited: Georgian Bay, down to Honduras on the Talamanca, standing outside the Met (after Edna’s wake) until we could procure a pair of tickets to Turandot, and that spur-of-the-moment bus trip to Montreal from where I lived in Newburyport. Although it was somewhat arduous, I appreciated our last trip together, one year ago: the Liberty Ship cruise out of New London.
It was you I first heard require of a group (or class) that no one speaks twice until everyone has spoken once. Nowadays one might think of this technique as having been learned at a personal growth training, but it just came naturally to you. You simply wanted members of a group to get the most from each other, and you respected everyone’s thinking, regardless of age or experience. As much as you liked to tell stories or pontificate, you seemed to derive the most satisfaction from enabling meaningful group process. When you would rate the success of our annual Christmas party, it was always had to do with whether the group was engaged in something together – singing in particular.

Letter excerpts [not included in the service]

Dear Jeffry,
I don’t know if I ever expressed to you that your father was my favorite Cranbrook teacher and I credit him with teaching me to write. As a result, I selected him as my English teacher for several years running. He had a unique style as a teacher – demanding, yet impeccably fair to every student. He didn’t play favorites and made no
attempt to try to be “friends” with the students, maintaining a professional and scholarly demeanor at all times. Yet his warmth and genuine desire that students learn came through clearly. His criticism was constructive and appropriate and his praise given only when deserved.

My thoughts and sympathy are with you and your family as you address this enormous loss.

John Getsinger
(Cranbrook class of 1969)

Dear Lee,
I have very fond and clear memories of Bob, the long reach he made to young faculty such as myself and the electric excitement he imparted to young minds. We marveled at his classroom, which today in 1998 [18 years after he left] in my mind is Bob Steele’s classroom. His insistence upon honesty to students and his definition of rhetorical self-serving were a high standard for us young teachers. And, of course, his seasonal sharing of verse lifted our hearts and aspirations. . . To the memory of an extraordinary teacher.

Charlie Shaw