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# Wil Linkugel and Gifting 101

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# WIL LINKUGEL AND GIFTING 101

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MARI BOOR TONN

**W**il Linkugel was many things, among them a fabled storyteller. Given the chance to get in the last word—a comment I trust would yield his winning, wide grin—I return his favor by beginning with my own Wil origins tale. With his beloved wit, he might dryly point out that I am a starring figure in places in the Wil Linkugel narrative. But, in truth, he plays both the leading roles and a vast cast of supporting ones throughout—in the truest meanings of such words. With a dutiful spoiler alert, the basic plotline of the brief essay that follows is this: Gifting—gift-receiving, gift-giving, and gift-circulating—are key themes about Wil Linkugel as a person, colleague, and award-winning public address teacher and scholar. All of these roles were cut from the same bolt of charity.

So, Wil, here are some stories back at you.

I no longer recall the exact date of that icy December in 1983 when I arrived in Wil Linkugel's office outfitted in what I fancied as my best smart suit, with white nylons (the fashion then, alas) muddied noticeably after slipping repeatedly on the slushy, steep-hallowed hills of the University of Kansas with hopes of altering the course of my professional life. By then, Wil himself had become a revered institution in his own right since arriving ABD from the University of Wisconsin to the flagship university of his home state of Kansas in 1956 after earning two degrees from the University of Nebraska in 1953 and 1954, the latter two interspersed with teaching four years in a one-room Nebraska county schoolhouse and another two in a

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nearby high school. (The inclusion of his early engagement with young prairie minds in his brief obituary, when rationed ink might have been spilled further detailing his sizable academic achievements, is a telling measure of the man.)<sup>1</sup> By then, at Kansas, Wil had helped build the Communication Studies department, directed its debate program, supervised the basic course, was serving his second tour of duty as chair, and had pioneered some of the first courses in the nation on the rhetoric of black Americans and women's rights during the turmoil of the 1960s, as the latter stages of these social justice movements and their consequences continued to unfold.

I never learned if he remembered, but I had first met Wil Linkugel briefly years before at one of those noisy hotel-room convention parties after presenting a paper a colleague and I had written in the wee hours while engaged in administrative work at Pittsburg State University, three hours south by car on US-69. At 29, with a newly minted MA in hand, I was the first female to sit on the Deans and Directors Council (even temporarily) directing Continuing Education, after a couple of teaching stints in nearby rural high schools, parts or all of which would have grown a feminist if one were not so inclined already. Among my local circle, my job was nothing short of enviable, and I had a picture-postcard family to boot. So, to the puzzlement of many, I yearned to use my energies and mind differently, imagining doing the research and teaching akin to faculty for whom I scheduled extension classes and cars to far-flung spots. As I sped the snowy highway practicing out loud why I deserved 11th-hour admission into the doctoral program, I fantasized that Wil Linkugel—who had written his 1960 Wisconsin dissertation on the scrappy suffragist Anna Howard Shaw and had penned many pages empathetic to souls with feminist bones—would appreciate my aspirations and what I convinced myself was a version of raw talent meriting his gamble.

Wil and others did. During that December meeting featuring the Great Soiled, he asked searching questions, sized me up, teased me tongue in cheek on my living in a small Kansas town made most famous for its long-departed band of unruly “crazy” Socialists, and coached me directly on taking the GREs (needed immediately for consideration) with an honesty I would mimic later for my own students. Thus, over the holidays, I embarked on a self-guided two-week crash course, revisiting the intricacies of algebra and praying to the examination gods that my English-teacher les-

sons about the twin forces of language and critical thinking that I once had preached to squirmy rural adolescents would hoist me sufficiently through the rest.

Doctoral work always entails a stew of agony and ecstasy, and mine likely differed little in the main, with one possible exception: The ecstasy was both liberating and intoxicating. Usual miseries of sleep deprivation and wolfing bargain food while turning pages of a book were rendered small by intellectual stimulation and camaraderie that I viewed as a secular version of heaven. (One I found preferable to that other Paradise I had been schooled in since my youth and those tut-tutting responses to my questioning of spanking doctrines and the alleged inferiority of females and other human species. God apparently has stricter admission standards than did KU.)

At Kansas, Wil was among many brilliant faculty minds I encountered: Donn Parson, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, Ellen Reid Gold, and Dorthy Pennington, among them. I likewise luxuriated in a clever, industrious, and generous graduate student cohort, several of whom have emerged as disciplinary household names: Bonnie Dow, John Murphy, Susan Schultz Huxman, Ed Hink, Tom Burkholder, Claire Jerry, and Debbie Chasteen, and others outside of rhetoric, such as Robert Bookwalter and Mary Lee Hummert. Eric Doxtader, an undergraduate debater, was also on hand to enliven the mix. It was a time Wil himself frequently would recall later as a “golden era.” So it was, even as we knew he had had other gilded moments, a brief roster of which includes Randall Lake, Bill Balthrop, Gus Friedrich, James Klumpp, Jesse Delia, Thomas Goodnight, Richard Johannesen, B. L. Ware, Diana Carlin, Jackson Harrell, and Robert Rowland, the latter of whom returned to Kansas to lead the ship in various posts.

Simply put, on that inclement December day, now decades passed, Wil Linkugel handed me one of his many gifts. I could pretend they were unique to me, and some I cherish as my own in that special spot all people harbor. But I know otherwise.

By gifting, I draw from the insights of Mari Lee Mifsud and Lewis Hyde in their separate treatments of gift cultures across the globe since antiquity.<sup>2</sup> A true gift “economy” of exchange is intimate and foregrounds people rather than a distant, commodified trade of mere objects. Gifts are never fixed or stationary but rather ripple through a wide network as they work their magic. Gifts must constantly be consumed or cease to exist as gifts, as their constant “eating” paradoxically renders them more abundant. Gifts

always bear traces of the giver, even as they fuse past, present, and future generations often on a far remove from one giver's open hand. The generosity underwriting gifting is the chief means since antiquity by which any person attains and sustains honor in the present—and into the future—to many different people. And although genuine gifting eschews expectations of immediate personal return, gifts nonetheless are never “free,” as they powerfully refigure obligation. As Mifsud succinctly puts it in her theorizing of rhetoric as gift, “[A] gift economy creates for members permanent commitments that articulate the dominant institutions of law, politics, culture, and interpersonal relations. The theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity.”<sup>3</sup> And so it was with Wil.

Hospitality and its various rituals since archaic times have figured centrally in gifting cultures, and Wil's zeal for hosting was immense. My cohort was not alone in attending baseball games that he and Ed Pappas orchestrated at spring conferences, where a hardy bunch of us froze in delight. He and Pappas also engineered introductions to the culinary adventures of flaming cheese and uzo in Chicago's Greektown at NCA. And there were those elaborate dinners that Wil and his wife, Helen, hosted at their home where, I recall, they once served escargot in shells to hungry graduate students who would have eaten anything at a faculty table excepting possibly the carpet. Wil also shepherded hours-long treks in vans to NCA, where we were packed like sardines amid piles of luggage and buckets of popcorn and cases of cheap alcohol he was smuggling in for the KU party. Such miseries were eased by his endless tales and cheery admonitions, when our cramped limbs were becoming candidates for amputation, that we simply needed to stop for a minute in some forsaken place and “shift around.” So, we would, and we were the better for all of it. The delight and demands for fairness he brought to the softball games he orchestrated were as famous as were his joys and rigor in classes that recruited flocks of students like flies. Wil viewed a life worth living as hard work necessarily tempered by play. For my part, he was present, too, at more sober rituals during one of the most difficult chapters of my life, standing sentinel near me in a tiny windswept cemetery whose small Kansas town long before had packed up and left.

Wil's generosity extended to rituals particularly terrifying to graduate students—oral examinations. Before, amid, or after necessary grilling of ideas, he would defuse attendant fears with his special brand of humor that

was a holding or embrace rather than a skewering. To Jackson Harrell, who shared Wil's encyclopedic love of baseball and coauthored some of Wil's most memorable essays, Wil tamed examination jitters by beginning, "Who was the starting catcher for the 1934 Gashouse Gang . . . and what was his batting average?" To Randy Lake, who has enriched the field's collective understanding of Native American rhetoric, Wil started the defense of Lake's thesis, which he had directed, by saying, "So, what's a white boy like you studying Indians for?"—a dryly put, concise, and penetrating question from a white, straight man who spent much of his academic life ensuring underrepresented voices were both more visible and respected. Another acolyte who came armed with homemade cookies to his defense, with the promise that they would be the best the committee had ever eaten, reported Wil softened his landing later by humorously seizing on the cookie guarantee, saying, "That was the most profound statement you made during the whole examination."<sup>4</sup>

Hyde claims that "A gift than cannot move loses its gift properties,"<sup>5</sup> and travel in both literal and metaphoric senses conjure memories of Wil. The summer following my first year of coursework he insisted I take the required statistics course at the university near my home rather than at KU (assuring me he would massage the needed approval) because he insisted that I not miss more of the quotidian pleasures and aggravations of my young family, or squander stolen hours in study, constantly driving hours to wed dimensions of my new life. The following summer, when I had slated to be at home with a plate clear of coursework, Wil voluntarily hatched a scheme for me to enroll in his summer seminar in apologia, with the rationale that all parties would reap benefits if I were a member. His creative pre-Skpye plan was the following: I would attend in the flesh the weekly session every other time, and he immediately would mail me cassette tapes of class discussions between. Sandwiched among the lively, insightful discussions among him and class comrades on these tapes were occasional teasing shout-outs to me, with an ironic nod cognizant of stereotypes of some women's cushioned lives and gendered social expectations.

As illustration, I once was alerted that if I were fiddling away time sunbathing while listening to these tapes I might consider applying more lotion to avoid social rebuke for unsightly peeling. No doubt I still have those tapes somewhere in the myriad treasures I hoard, as I still have the syllabus and pages-long appendix: gallows speeches since antiquity, scores

of apologia culled from media, and critical analyses with a breathtaking gamut, which I shared just weeks ago with a new colleague for an undergraduate student hungry to mine more fully the history of apologia, and who was elated with the trove. “Moving” gifts are elastic, they travel, and the more that they are constantly consumed the more they multiply like loaves and fishes.

The circulation of gifts among generations is captured vividly in one of Wil’s most legendary signature courses, “The Rhetoric of Franklin Roosevelt,” which enrolled both undergraduates and graduate students who often waited in a que for seats. Wil had developed and team-taught the course with a history professor who, beginning on the first day, would share powerful and often poignant passages from his mother’s diary, begun on the day Pearl Harbor was attacked to provide him in later years a different lens on the war than history books might tell, and which once recounted how he had tossed his favorite rubber toys into the local victory heap to aid the escalating war effort.

Beyond ample history readings of the era, we read every speech FDR had given, from his candidacy through his long presidency, as well as the voices demonizing him, such as Father Coughlin’s. The close reading care with which Wil situated and excavated FDR’s rhetoric is evident in a story Wil once told of granting an unusual request by a creative undergraduate to write a hypothetical speech for FDR in lieu of the standard paper. The stunning result so echoed the timbre of Roosevelt’s rhetorical voice that Wil humorously speculated that he could rattle FDR scholars for a while by brandishing it as a newly unearthed FDR rhetorical treasure! Students likewise explored the savvy, boundless empathy and courageous rhetorical performances by First Lady Eleanor, her behind-the-scenes lobbying for the suffering, as well as the withering critiques of her on every front imaginable. Wil considered Eleanor Roosevelt nearly mythic and rightly credited her sizable role in an FDR era so revered by a spectrum of folks who struggled on the edges.

Including the voices of mothers and wives in a public address course on a “presidency” still strikes me to this day. And gifts from this class have circulated to surprising persons in later generations, including the great-granddaughter of Eleanor and Franklin. In the final weeks of a course I once taught, this young woman shyly revealed her famous ancestry and her hunger for more knowledge about her ancestors that certain familial es-

trangements in the sprawling Roosevelt clan had denied her. So, we hammered out a final project and later an independent study for the next term that became magical journeys for us both, as she learned more about her extraordinary forbears and shared nuggets of family gossip and reflective insights. During my last visit with Wil, as we swapped stories, this one, in particular, made him beam.

Mifsud's premise that the theory of gifting embraces human solidarity is amply illustrated in other public address courses Wil inaugurated at the University of Kansas in the 1960s, decades before many institutions discovered the merits of rich semester-long immersion in the voices, experiences, history, and culture of women and blacks. To Wil, empathy and respect for the subjects mattered, not genomes; he viewed social justice as a collective duty and not solely the responsibility of a marginalized group to engage and enlighten disinterested or even reluctant others. Wil first had offered the "Rhetoric of Women's Rights" course in 1965 and made a later version a regular offering by 1970, adding "Black Rhetoric" in 1969. By the time that I matriculated in these courses, he had handed them to newer colleagues Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Dorthy Pennington, respectively, who made them their own, even as these classroom experiences bore Wil's pedagogical DNA. In "Black Rhetoric," we engaged arguments by black abolitionists in speeches, pamphlets, and black newspapers; mined the artistic genius of Harlem Renaissance orators, writers, and poets; and wrestled with various tensions among rhetorical roads chosen. Dorthy remarked recently on how Wil's "keen eye" for including underrepresented voices moved beyond the classroom to recommending underrepresented scholars to "the rhetorical luminary, scholars who had never heard of me/us."<sup>6</sup>

The "Rhetoric of Women's Rights" course he had pioneered landed me in love—passionately, head over heels, irretrievably besotted. Wil's keen interest in women's rhetoric had emerged in the 1950s, an era in which ostensibly proper middle-class women busied themselves or drugged their dreams by crafting sculptures out of tuna casseroles in some manicured suburban outpost. The appeal to him was scholarly on one level, to be sure, but its siren song also inspired in him a rare uncanny sympathy for its subjects, evident in his still misty-eyed tellings about various female students being sexually assaulted on the way to his night classes on those same hills where I had first skidded. Remarkable women rhetors, whom I never knew had walked the earth, had become my soul mates, their challenges



profound, their energy and doggedness boundless, and their tongues and pens smart, eloquent, logical, and poignant.

Wil's 1974 essay in *Speech Teacher* detailing that course is masterful in both articulation and reach, a generous offering prompted by numerous requests for the syllabus.<sup>7</sup> Carefully detailed units cover social movements and countermovements; major rationales for sexism; competing arguments over natural rights, expediency, and other strategies; a panoply of feminist voices, exhausting organizational campaigns in schools, churches, and taverns across the country; attention to issues, such as birth control and dress reform beyond more visible issues, such as the ballot or the ERA; tensions among differing wings of the movement; treatment of emerging second-wave activists; inclusion of nurses abroad and female activities on the home front during war; and a chronicle of political varieties of feminism, and more.

An accomplished public address scholar who could meticulously unpack a speech, Wil nonetheless understood confining rhetoric to oratory was limiting; rhetoric to him involved writing, cartoons, fashion, and other aspects of culture in a kaleidoscope of ways. His creativity in engaging students in such discoveries remains a marvel (and his information-loaded footnotes should not be overlooked). One can claim without exaggeration, as I do, that a course he envisioned and carefully crafted decades ago has echoed through the generations in profound ways—altering curricula, spawning feminist scholarship, helping launch feminist scholarly careers, and prompting students to assess critically various dimensions of their gendered world. Among the course's readings (before Karlyn arrived at Kansas) was her landmark essay on "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron."<sup>8</sup> Karlyn has often credited Wil's thumbprint on key aspects of her thinking about early feminism, in particular.

Wil's scholarly curiosity was broad, which on first glance suggests an eclectic renaissance scholar who probably could have made the Yellow Pages a fascinating rhetorical topic. Subjects range from Anna Howard Shaw (multiple works, including a book with Martha Solomon Watson), to Marcus Garvey (with B. L. Ware), to genres (with Jackson Harrell), to apologia (with Jackson Harrell and B. L. Ware), to political figures, such as Nixon and McGovern (with Dixie Lee Cody) and Lincoln, to pedagogy, and even to a book on baseball (with Ed Pappas).<sup>9</sup> His coauthored essay on apologia (with B. L. Ware), "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves," reigns

as among the most widely cited in the field, and once was rumored to be the most cited of all. His nuanced treatment (with Jackson Harrell and B. L. Ware) of Nixon's failure to redeem himself during Watergate is a touchstone for how apologetic analysis using the concepts he and co-authors forwarded goes beyond mere cataloging of apologetic strategies/postures. Arguing that political legitimacy is a unique rhetorical recipe with structural, ideological, and personal ingredients, the authors trace how Nixon falters in moves and shifts throughout the scandal, arrogantly wasting the one-of-a-kind culturally bestowed ethos of the presidency.

Wil, like Kenneth Burke, was fascinated by avenues for redemption, perhaps because like the most shining of humans, he was a dance between the sublime and the imperfect, that waltz between the ideal and the real or ordinary that most people inhabit even in their best moments. Wil recognized the same combination in his insightful analyses of Anna Howard Shaw, whom he admired with a vengeance, admitting that even the most spectacular beings are not always equally skilled at every task. Nor was he. Despite the range of Wil's scholarship, much of it traffics in key themes: underrepresented voices and ethos or character—assaults on it, redeeming it, or enlarging it through rhetorical personae. Beyond his landmark work on apologia is his essay (with B. L. Ware) on Garvey as a Black Moses, which is situated within forms reflecting aspirations and visions of a culture that become archetypes. Garvey, they argue, illustrates transcendent formism. In another illustration, Wil and Dixie Lee Cody chose, in their essay on Nixon and McGovern during the 1972 election, to forego engagement with the divisive Vietnam War—significant, to be sure—to marry the key themes of marginalized voices and ethos by contrasting opposing camps on appeals to and constructions of women, and the ethos entailments of those constructions, for both women and the candidates.

In both teaching and research, Wil gravitated toward collaboration, drawing energy from the constant give-and-take, the messy-but-enriching tussle of minds. Whether a partnership or solo effort, Wil's work brims with an astounding breadth of contextual knowledge, routinely engages with concepts and theorists from varied disciplines, and speaks with a clarity that is sophisticated while concise and accessible. In the essay on Nixon and Watergate, as one example, he and his co-authors eloquently write: "The persona was being resculpted and his own hand held the chisel."<sup>10</sup> Another sentence reveals Wil's trademark wit. "Political cartoonists commonly de-

picted [Nixon aka ‘Tricky Dick’] as akin to the man with a sneaky squint and beady eyes who sell the used car and its engine separately.”<sup>11</sup> Beyond analysis, writing mattered to Wil, who thought smart ideas should be clear, not just to fellow academics, but to anyone’s second cousin twice removed.

Mifsud writes that generosity is the chief avenue by which persons achieve honor,<sup>12</sup> and Wil was bestowed multiple honors throughout his career. Among his recognitions were two major teaching awards, an inaugural inductee into the Central States Hall of Fame and the Kansas State Association, a candidate for the President of the National Communication Association, and a lecture series at KU named for him that will continue to bless future generations yet unborn. Among my most treasured professional memories is delivering the last Wil Linkugel Lecture at Kansas that his deepening, decade-long bout with Parkinson’s disease would allow him to attend. As we together later navigated the strangeness of his difficult physical odyssey, he spoke movingly and reflectively about receiving gifts in ways that true gift-givers know. Gifting circles back and boomerangs. Gifting is, in the end, that amulet that staves off a vacant, sterile life. Wil lived that philosophy.

To close, I return to Anna Howard Shaw, Wil’s muse, whose brilliant voice and principled struggle for social justice allured him over five decades ago in ways kindred spirits tend to do. He relished her humor and her idealism and admired the social justice cause to which she dedicated her life. As the discipline says farewell to Wil Linkugel, I repeat the last two paragraphs of his essay on her. After noting the consistent themes in more than 10,000 speeches, he illustrates with this passage aptly taken from Shaw’s own Farewell Address, which speaks to the philosophy of the gift.

The progress of a nation is not measured by the spoils of material conquest, nor by the size of their standing armies, nor the number of dreadnaughts and underseas crafts nor even by their “accumulation of the equipment of civilization” but by the progressive emancipation of the individual and the widening of the vision of personal obligation and responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

Then, Wil immediately uses his own words to end: “Dr. Shaw, undaunted by struggle, hardship, or disappointment, was imbued with a reformer’s

zeal. She was inspired by an audience, and for more than four decades treated listeners to some extraordinary . . . eloquence.”<sup>14</sup>

No one could have said it better about you, Wil.

## NOTES

1. <http://www.warrenmcelwain.com/obituaryDetail.cfm?idObituary=1002&sectionid=3> (accessed June 15, 2012).
2. Mari Lee Mifsud, “On Rhetoric as Gift/Giving,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 40 (2007): 89–105; Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).
3. Mifsud, “On Rhetoric as Gift/Giving,” 89.
4. Guest comments, <http://www.warren.mcelwain.com/obituaryDetail.cfm?idObituary=1002&sectionid=3> (accessed June 15, 2012).
5. Hyde, *The Gift*, 9.
6. E-mail from Dorothy Pennington to Mari Boor Tonn, June 18, 2012.
7. Wil A. Linkugel, “The Rhetoric of American Feminism: A Social Movement Course,” *Speech Teacher* 23 (1974): 121–30.
8. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 74–87.
9. See the following: Wil A. Linkugel, “The Woman Suffrage Argument of Anna Howard Shaw,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 49 (1963): 165–75; Wil A. Linkugel and Martha Solomon Watson, *Anna Howard Shaw: Suffrage Orator and Social Reformer* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991); Jackson Harrell and Wil A. Linkugel, “On Rhetorical Genre: An Organizing Perspective,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 11 (1978): 262–81; B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, “The Rhetorical Persona: Marcus Garvey as a Black Moses,” *Communication Monographs* 49 (1982): 50–63; Wil A. Linkugel and Dixie Lee Cody, “Nixon, McGovern, and the Female Electorate,” *Today’s Speech* 21:4 (1973): 25–32; Wilmer A. Linkugel, “Student Evaluation of Assignments in a Course in Fundamentals of Speech,” *Speech Teacher* 7 (1958): 154–7; Jackson Harrell, B. L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, “They Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 273–84; Jackson Harrell, B. L. Ware, and Wil A. Linkugel, “Failure of Apology in American Politics: Nixon on Watergate,” *Speech Monographs* 42 (1975): 245–62; Wil A. Linkugel and Edward J. Pappas, *They Tasted Glory: Among the Missing at the Baseball Hall of Fame* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 1998); and Wil A. Linkugel, “Lincoln, Kansas, and Cooper Union,” *Speech Monographs* 37 (1970): 172–80.
10. Harrell, Ware, and Linkugel, “Failure of Apology in American Politics,” 255.

11. Harrell, Ware, and Linkugel, "Failure of Apology in American Politics," 249.
12. Mifsud, "On Gift/Giving," 92.
13. Linkugel, "The Woman Suffrage Argument of Anna Howard Shaw," 175.
14. Linkugel, "The Woman Suffrage Argument of Anna Howard Shaw," 175.