

Tribute to Kathi Kitao

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When I first knew Kathi as a part-time teacher over 20 years ago, I was confident I knew two things about her interests: her field was Applied Linguistics, and her hobby was Knitting. When I became full-time faculty, however, I was corrected: her field was Communication Studies, and her hobby was Crocheting. Oh. (Apparently, the knitting and crocheting communities maintain warm and cozy relations, as is only fitting, but woe betide anyone who confuses the two.) Not that I was completely wrong about her knowledge of Applied Linguistics. She could teach classes in it and even co-managed Wakamoto-sensei's Senior Seminar while he was on sabbatical in Oxford. Nor did Kathi's range of teachable subjects stop there. When a part-time teacher scheduled to teach a course about Elizabethan England suddenly fell ill, in stepped Kathi at the drop of a hat; she knew plenty about it, and away she went. At my interview for tenure, Kathi quizzed me on the Shakespeare authorship controversy. Of course, she had read the latest book on it. In fact, the longer I knew Kathi, the wider her range of interests seemed to be. Ever wonder what she is listening to on her headphones, as she walks from place to place? Everything.

So, when I decided to compose a poem in Kathi's honour for a farewell party in January, my inspiration was naturally Emily Dickinson's "The Brain is Wider than the Sky", and I entitled my

effort “Kathi’s Brain”. It’s a pastiche, so not too serious, but it was born, nonetheless, from a genuine admiration for the range of Kathi’s intellectual enthusiasms. Hence the 3rd verse:

Kathi’s Brain’s as boundless as the Milky Way -
An academic constellation -
Spanning Literature, History, Applied Linguistics
And Interpersonal Communication.

Such versatility, of course, is both admirable and useful. However, I would say, for our department, it has been more significant: Kathi has been a unifying figure. Too easily, we fall into our respective camps, defending our interests and showing far less curiosity in or sympathy for “rival” fields. Only Kathi had wide enough interests and knowledge to engage any of us in a proper conversation about any of our fields. Only she could span us all. We needed that, and not just for camaraderie. It’s easy to seek an echo from an ally. It’s invaluable, however, to be able to seek an honest opinion from a sympathetic and informed listener who is independent of your or anyone’s agenda. Talking to someone that you trust is a relief: you can drop your defences and be open to hearing a different point of view. If Kathi thought you were wrong, you knew it wasn’t personal or strategic. If she agreed with you, you could feel more confident about your view. Who among us ever became angry or defensive while talking to Kathi? It would be too easy to comment that the Communication specialist might know how to be persuasive in negotiation. But

Kathi never engaged in strategies. Rather, she showed us the true spirit of communication is openness and authenticity rooted in a genuinely liberal mind. That's been valuable to the department, no doubt. But for all of us, personally, the benefit has surely been more profound: whenever we were talking to Kathi, we could just be ourselves; that is truly liberating.

We all know Kathi's main field of expertise is Communication Studies. Fewer of us know the major of her first degree: Occupational Therapy. I think even fewer of us could confidently explain what that is. I admit I had to look it up. Apparently, it's concerned with enabling people to overcome disabilities and live more fruitful daily lives through the development of conscious strategies. Yet, my search yielded not just official explanations but also some enjoyable diagrams of "The Brain of an Occupational Therapist", detailing the diversity of skills a good therapist needs to possess. These include being a scientist, a strategist, a communicator, a multitasker, a cheerleader / empathiser and a creative adaptor. Interestingly, in some diagrams, these are laid out as making use of both left and right brain function. (Yes, we're back to Kathi's Brain.) To engage people in meaningful activity and help them achieve their goals, you need to be not only analytical and methodical - seen as left brain - but also empathetic and creative - seen as right brain. Ideally, of course, teachers should be both too, so the fields of education and communication were natural next steps for Kathi as a young woman. Now, as she retires from a distinguished career at DWC, her focus is moving on to the school for the deaf in Kenya with

which she has developed a growing involvement. Education, language, supporting people to overcome their limitations and reach their goals: the arc of Kathi's career is clear, the various threads integrated in harmony, with her latest project bringing her closer to her original impulse, while making use of all she has learned since her first degree.

By a beautiful coincidence, Kathi recently rediscovered a piece of creative writing that she wrote at the age of 20, while studying for that undergraduate degree. Based on her experiences of working in a therapeutic facility after high school, the short story, "Sad Songs", traces the evolving feelings of a young woman, as she tries to come to terms with the severe injuries that she has suffered in a car accident. "Juvenilia" is a term more usually applied to the youthful writings of Jane Austen or the Brontës, but it is with pleasure that in this edition of *Asphodel* we debut an item of Kathi's own juvenilia. As often with a young writer, their concerns are revealed rather openly, but it is touching and delightful, nonetheless, to encounter through this piece the young and questing spirit of our now senior colleague, to sense that same quality of compassion, the same interest in humanity and in nurturing that she has never lost, that have propelled her, and still do, through the course of a long and meaningful career.