

Craig Gibson

Thanks for the Learning

Remembering Susan Whyte

“Find Thyself a Teacher.” — *The Talmud*

The library world has lost one of the bright lights of the profession and a teaching librarian of exceptional talent and influence. Susan Whyte died on August 14, 2025, after a five-year battle with multiple myeloma and two stem cell transplants that overcame even her strong spirit. This tribute is a celebration of her life and legacy, and while it presents a personal perspective, it reflects the experiences and remembrances of many whose lives she touched.

In 1994, I first met Susan Whyte, a librarian of rare talents, uncommon wisdom, and a great heart. She was co-organizer of the first-ever LOEX of the West conference—that year at Willamette University in Oregon. At that conference, I became acquainted with her and her great enthusiasm for teaching and building relationships at Linfield College, where she was at that time an instruction librarian. I would learn over the next three decades how much influence she had among students and colleagues at Linfield and elsewhere across the country. She was a dynamic force through her teaching, mentoring, and guiding and a stellar example of servant leadership for many.

Teaching with Susan

Susan and I became colleagues in the ACRL Immersion Program in its earliest years as a cohort of faculty built that program, and often saw professional roles and lives transformed. Susan believed that the integrity of the teacher is most important in developing personal connections with students—and imparted that vision to Immersion participants. Susan first awakened me to the wisdom of Parker Palmer, who most cogently expressed these ideas from his own experience—his “dark night of the soul”—and his recovery and discovery of himself as a whole human being beyond the divisiveness, the competitiveness, the reputation signaling, and the “culture of critique” of the academy. Susan’s affinity for Palmer was a natural one because of her own Quaker upbringing and values of seeking wholeness through moral intuitions and a deep inwardness that illuminates the self and others through collaboration and mutual truth seeking. She was a natural disciple of Palmer—and a brilliant one.

The Immersion experiences with Susan showed me not only the depth of her intuitions and ability to inspire librarians to become better but also her great sense of fun, role modeling of risk taking, and the necessary uncertainty—and creativity—of teaching. Clearly, anyone

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who could engage in the opening plenary of Immersion with silly props like a hammer and robot's head, wandering among the assembled participants to the recorded music of "If I Had A Hammer" to illustrate the behaviorist approach to teaching was quite capable of risk taking and instigating some laughter among librarians at the start of an intensive week. It was a necessary tone-setting activity that all of us were involved in, and Susan was our stellar role model in the risk taking—and the necessary personal connections—that the best teaching requires.

One of the most telling moments for the Immersion faculty would come at the end when we were saying farewells to each other after that intensive week of laughter, some tears and missteps, and feeling ourselves growing, along with the participants. We would simply say, "Thanks for the learning."

Mentoring, Teaching, and Leading

Susan's journey saw her become the director of the library at Linfield College for 20 years, a vital member of the ACRL New College Library Directors Mentoring Program, and an ACRL Board of Directors member. In her continuing role as library director, guide and mentor to her staff, and student advisor, she contributed to student success in ways that transcend the conventional meaning of the phrase often used in the academy. Susan developed bonds with students that helped them discover their best selves beyond any information literacy or research classes she taught by herself or in partnership with faculty. After winning a campus teaching award at Linfield, she described her philosophy of teaching in a *College & Research Libraries News* article,¹ based on her undergraduate education at Earlham College and under the influence of Evan Farber, who was an early example for the profession of intellectual engagement and partnerships between faculty and librarians.

Reading with Susan

Among all of my colleagues, Susan was a reader of uncommon breadth, depth, and intuitiveness. Conversations with her about her reading were a gift in themselves—she was a catholic reader of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and journalism.

On one occasion, we found that we'd both read Wallace Stegner's *Crossing to Safety*. "Yes, Wally Stegner," she said, "one of our finest novelists." She saw in him not just a "Western" writer but one who wrote about universal truths discovered and strengths gained found in long-term friendships across decades. In *Crossing to Safety*, two academic couples first meet in graduate school and build a friendship across varied institutions and landscapes into



old age, with all of the triumphs and trials that the academic life brings to anyone deeply involved in it. Ultimately, it is the friendship that matters most, and ephemeral matters fade away in the annealing process of experience and enlarged perspectives. Just as in teaching relationships with students, Susan saw the importance of maintaining ties and friendships with colleagues that transcended passing crises, tensions, and uncertainties. It is always, she believed, about the relational dimension and helping friends and colleagues become their best selves. We all "cross to safety" in the academy when we build community that deepens others and also ourselves.

A recent book about the travails of higher education—now in more challenging, even perilous times than ever—confirms what I always only partly understood about Susan’s beliefs and her living out her professional credo. Digital humanist Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University*² calls for a reorientation toward community within and without—among faculty, staff, and students on campuses and more lively connections with the larger community, alumni, friends, former students, and interested citizens. The “generous thinking” of which Fitzpatrick writes is a shift for the academy as a whole—in changing the culture from fragmentation to wholeness and to mutual responsibilities and benefits. It imagines a process of mutual learning at scale. It is a bold departure from the typical reward system of the academy that Susan, others, and I often discussed—and one in which librarians could participate as teachers and partners.

Susan was always a generous thinker in her own way, searching for community and for opportunities to learn and to mentor others and calling upon others to learn along with her.

The Long View

The last time I would ever see Susan was in early December 2019—in the “Before Times,” as we often think of them now. I visited with her over lunch in Cincinnati when she was there visiting relatives, and I caught up on her travels and her life in retirement, glad to hear that former students from Linfield would often come to visit her. As we enjoyed the lunch, we were waited on by a young woman tentative in her manner, who told us her family were refugees from Syria and that they had escaped the terrors of that country to come to America. Near the end of the meal, Susan reached out, took her by the hand, and said, “You’re a brave and courageous young woman, and we’re very glad that you’re here in this country. We wish you all the best in everything.”

Susan always enlarged the circle of empathy.

Susan’s life is a testament of faith in the power of individual human beings to make a difference in the lives of others—through teaching, mentoring, guiding, leading, and, sometimes, just through good conversation and listening—much needed in these times. She is an example for a fraught and divided academy and a profession in search of something beyond the latest technological trend or social cause. The enduring verities for Susan were about forging the human bonds and bringing out the best in each other.

In his *Education*, American historian Henry Adams famously wrote, “A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops.”³ Of course, I would change the gender in this statement for Susan but not the truth of it.

Now she has crossed to safety, and now she has gone home.

Thank you, Susan, for the learning. ♪

Notes

1. Susan Barnes Whyte, “Every Librarian a Leader. Stuffy No More: Passion and Humor in the Library,” *College & Research Libraries News*, vol. 57, no. 3 (1996).
2. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).
3. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Random House Publishing Group, 1999).