



## IN MEMORIAM: STEVE AS A TEACHER

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*Editor's Note: This is one of two articles written by graduates of the Narrative Therapy Initiative's Training Program following the death of Steve Gaddis, in the spring of 2022. These words were spoken at Steve's Celebration of Life on Sunday, May 29, 2002.*

I first met Steve Gaddis as a student in Boston College's Graduate School for Social Work. His Narrative Therapy class was one of the most competitive to get into in the whole program. I had heard of his Narrative Therapy class, particularly that it was one that addressed the politics of social justice in ways that went beyond the important, but lacking-in-X claims of valuing cultural diversity and considering social determinants of health. I remember waiting over my laptop, watching the seconds tick towards registration time, course code ready, anxious and hopeful. I sighed in relief and exclaimed joy at the same time. I got in.

Steve touched a lot of lives in his lifetime, and there are no doubt countless people who have learned something meaningful from him. But there was something special about meeting Steve in the classroom that calls to be shared. If you've not had the official opportunity to have Steve as your teacher, I want to share with you what it was like to be in a Steve class. For me, it was unlike any learning experience I had had in my life.

On the first day of the course, I walked into the classroom and saw Steve sitting there in the front, smiling his warm Steve-smile, the desks arranged around him in a casual semi-circle. It was summer, and Steve was dressed in his shorts, breezy button-up short-sleeve, and outdoorsy hiking sneakers.

Once folks got settled, Steve welcomed us to the class and expressed a genuine gratitude for our presence. The acknowledgment was deeply sincere. He was not going to take for granted what we were caring about by attending this particular class.

He then let us know that it was his tradition to start each class by putting on a song for everyone to listen to together. He invited us to pay attention to whatever might stand out to us or move us in our experience of listening. So we sat together, letting this song he had selected wash over us.

Once the song had finished, Steve made space for every person in the room to share a bit about where they were transported to in their listening. One by one, each person took their turn to share, and I already felt, in the first few minutes of the class, like I was getting to know my classmates in a different kind of way. I remember being struck by how we all had heard the same song, but had such different reflections. I really liked seeing how other people's responses were so different than mine.

I'd taken a bunch of graduate classes by that point, so I remember thinking: Okay, that was a pretty cool introductory "grounding exercise." *"But I know what comes next. Now we'll review the syllabus and get to the 'instruction,' which will allow us to transition into the 'real' learning, where the teacher in the front of the room tells all the students what they should know in order to be good therapists and do well in the class."*

But this is when it started to become very clear that Steve was not your typical professor.

Steve, being in no rush, began his power point slides. The first was simply a photo of him as a little boy. He started to talk about his life and personal history, his struggles and painful experiences of abuse as a boy, his time before meeting Narrative Therapy and what it meant to him when he finally did. He shared about how this narrative worldview that we would be learning about together came to be so important to him. He spoke about how therapy in his life had harmed him as a young person, despite therapists' good intentions, and shared stories linked to how he came to understand his life's purpose: "to be a therapist who doesn't suck."

Steve was now nearly in tears with urgency, those tears reflecting the pain he experienced in his own life and how much it mattered to him that we meet people in respectful ways. He went on to express how absolutely crucial it is that we take up our responsibility to help people who are hurting and suffering from the effects of injustice seriously, and that he believes we are called to do this with accountability, curiosity, and a commitment to dignifying every person we meet.

*"Okay,"* I thought. *"This is getting real."*

The next slide is a photo of him and Ashley, who he introduced to us as his wife and best friend. He introduced us to the idea that each person is a relational achievement, not an individual one. He told us that much of what was possible for him to do and be in his life was made possible because of his relationship with Ashley. I mean, have you ever been introduced to a teacher's life partner in the first few slides of a class before? Has any teacher paused to acknowledge upfront that who they are as a person is made possible because of their most precious relationships?

I hadn't before, and I haven't since. I've never seen any teacher be so real and vulnerable right out of the gate. In the first 30 minutes of our first class, I already knew more about Steve than I have ever known about any of my teachers, ever. This class was already unlike any other class I have ever taken. I couldn't have really told you why at the time, but I was already feeling more at home and more eager to learn in this class than in any other I had experienced.

But I *still* am expecting these to be brief detours before the real lecture starts. I'm just waiting for Steve to pass out the syllabus, go over the assignments and readings, and begin talking about Narrative Therapy and how we're supposed to do it.

But no. Next we're told that we are going to do Introductions. We're going to meet the people who we will be learning alongside for the next nine weeks. Steve organized us into small groups and offered questions to us to help us be curious about each other's personal histories, our values, and the ways we might most like to be known by others in the class.

Until that point, for an entire academic year, I had basically only known my classmates by the name tags on their desks and how they responded to a professor's questions. But now, I found myself asking someone, who I had just met, how it came to be that she decided to pursue social work and what she thought she was caring about by choosing this field. I still remember the stories she told me that day. And when it was my turn to share, I noticed I had never been asked questions like this before. I had never reflected on how I might most like to be known by another person, and found myself sharing stories I didn't even know I had to tell about myself.

People who have been students of Steve's wouldn't be surprised to learn that we didn't get to talking much about Narrative Therapy that first class, or even the second. Because introducing each other to the rest of the class took the better part of three 3-hour sessions.

I came to realize later that this was Steve teaching at his best. These were not "icebreaker" exercises in service of the real learning to take place later. Steve taught by doing. He wanted to teach much more than another "modality" of therapy. He wanted to introduce people to a new way of seeing the world. He wanted to grow alternative ways of relating to each other that were healing and had the chance to address the harmful effects of injustice. I remember him saying to me once, "One thing I like about the narrative worldview is that we don't have to talk about it; we can just do it." And he lived it as a teacher in ways that were just remarkable to me.

Even when we finally did get to the syllabus, we found Steve using it to take stands against oppressive stories of learning. Assignments would come with explicit statements, like:

*"What you genuinely think matters much more to me than what you think I think will be impressive."*

*Or a weekend intensive might start with: "Is it okay if, for the next several hours, we privilege my relationship with these ideas? Then we can have a chance to explore what you think about them, and we can discuss*

*whether you feel they they might suit you or not?”*

I mean: who does that?

Steve took real risks to go against the norms of teaching. Time and time again, he went out on a limb to do things differently. And man, could he make it look easy. But I later learned that doing teaching this way was incredibly difficult for him for a long time. Before classes, he would be shaking with Nervousness. He could be caught by immense waves of Fear and Self-Doubt. He called trusted friends in the early hours of the morning, panicking about whether or not what he was doing was good or whether he could do it.

But standing up to oppressive learning cultures just mattered that much to him, enough to fight through the Fear and Self-doubt in order to do things his own way, ways that he hoped would help people know they mattered and their knowledge was important.

I would often ask him, “How do you do it? Who was your Steve?” He would smile and say, “I’m very, very stubborn.” Then he would add, “I have far too much privilege to not doing anything about the ways people are being absolutely crushed by these oppressive learning expectations.”

Steve taught like there is a lot at stake in any learning environment. Because there is. It matters if a teacher shows they’re vulnerable. It matters if a teacher pauses to care about someone in the class who is hurting. It matters if a teacher shows you that they don’t have it all figured out. It matters if a teacher shows a real desire to be accountable to their students.

A course with Steve would always end with a final assignment, usually something along the lines of: *“Please share with us something that has been meaningful to you about your experiences taking this course.”* During these presentations, incredibly moving stories came forward that sometimes people had never shared before in their life, anywhere. There were often tears, swells of emotion, a feeling of connection and being seen in ways you could not have imagined before Steve’s class.

Steve’s classrooms became communities. And the most important lesson I believe he would want to impart was this:

*Every person is unbelievably precious and utterly unique—and it is our urgent responsibility as human beings to do what it takes to help each other know this about ourselves.*

And it brings me such incredible hope to pause and think of just how many of Steve’s students have taken this to heart and are out there living the values that Steve held so dear. I know Steve would be so proud of what his teaching has made possible in so many lives. Thanks for everything, Steve.