



Goldblatt, E. (2001). Steve Parks: An appreciation. *Workplace*, 7, 49-50.

STEVE PARKS:

An Appreciation

Eli Goldblatt

A few years ago I heard Jim Slevin give an impassioned talk at a Writing Program Administrators summer conference about the general state of composition/rhetoric as a field and the job of directing a writing program specifically. He made a point in that talk I found invaluable. He said that, beyond all our advances in theory and research and our high cultivation of administrative arts, we should never forget that in the 60's & 70's compositionists were also hell-raisers, rebels, and overworked laborers questioning their lot. He warned us not to forget these roots as we hobnob with deans and provosts, school superintendents and foundation program officers. Effective writing instruction requires empirical research and emotional empathy with those who most struggle to navigate the social and linguistic conventions of written language. Teachers are complicit with a system that can stand against many of our students, but to do our jobs well we must constantly find ways to challenge the oppressive aspects of that system.

Steve and I have worked together at Temple for five years, and it is a great pleasure to work with a colleague who challenges, supports, and inspires me every day with his energy and action. He just doesn't think like most academics. Academics tend to focus on their individual careers, and too often they separate their broad social principles (which are generally progressive in tendency) from their inch-by-inch efforts in the workplace and the region. Indeed, academic life tends to encourage us to give our allegiance to the particular fields that reward us and honor our work; local conditions and even institutional politics are, for most professors, rather embarrassing but ephemeral nuisances that stand in the way of real work. In short, we are trained as grad students to be mercenary mandarins who should be prepared to go anywhere for a job, serve the university or college that awards us tenure and gives us travel money, and leave the moment we receive a better offer. We can resist such training, but we resist at the price of appearing odd, recalcitrant, sentimental, or unserious.

Steve resists this training because he simply sees himself situated in a place and time. He recognizes that he lives in a city, his kids go to the public schools upon whose quality over 200,000 other Philly kids depend for their future, he walks the streets with people who don't have access to tenure or even steady employment. He acts with the constant understanding that he is one among many and that he has a responsibility to make alliances, shape policy, teach his students in a way that will make life better for us all. Yes, he worked for tenure—that was a drama I will decline to discuss here—but it didn't stop him from organizing the Institute and TDC along lines that did not point to the consolidation of individual accomplishment so necessary for professional acceptance.

He chooses work because it matters to others and he develops partnerships in the community not as a colonizer but as a comrade.

To be fair, any praise of Steve Parks must be accompanied by praise for his wife and partner Lori Shorr. Lori also works at Temple University, as director of school and community partnerships. Like Steve, Lori does the hard work of linking university to community, professors to teachers to community workers. She has the vision and forthrightness to pull a meeting full of academics and school administrators toward a concrete resolution when they would just as soon slip away after a few satisfyingly round pronouncements. She runs grants that have hundreds of college students tutoring in schools around Temple, and she is always thinking of ways to forward equal and reinforcing relationships between neighborhood initiatives and university projects. So Steve's ideas are wonderful, his attitude inspiring, but even in his personal life he elaborates his commitment to social change in partnership.

I'll leave the interview to speak for itself—it's that good—but I can't resist closing with a word about history. Steve is 13 years younger than I am, and when I met him I thought he had a serious case of '60's envy. But I've spent enough time around him to know that that was a very simplistic read of his interest in the time period I draw my own political identity from. What I have come to realize is that he has responded to the sparks of that time but he also sees the instability, the in-fighting, the wasted efforts on dogmatic programs. He teaches me that the point is, as he says, to "stick in the game" and do some good as a partner to those who need to change their lives. He brings wisdom to the study of history and commitment to the pursuit of activism, and I find those qualities not only admirable but also precious to every generation.

Eli Goldblatt, Temple University