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In Memory of Alan W. France: October 27, 1943 to September 19, 2001

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One of the most powerful memories I have, Al, is of your expeditions to discover the best coffee shop in any place you lived. I remember one particular place that you liked—and I liked it too. Getting to the place necessitated a potentially invigorating amble through back streets and, ultimately, along a wooded path beside a stream. The path was narrow and so we walked, single file, with you in the lead. Al, the explorer, the walker of new paths, the one who found the way. And this is how I'm coming to think of the times we are living through now. Al, the fearless reconnoiter, is taking the lead down the road we will all travel sooner or later.

*Excerpt from a letter to Al in the summer of 2001 by
Vivienne Anderson, North Carolina Wesleyan College*

In Memory of Alan W. France



October 27, 1943 to September 19, 2001

I cannot think of Al France (never was he “Alan”) without thinking of Karen. In 1986, when they came to TCU’s graduate program in English together, Al was confident, aggressive, and wise about the ways of the academy. Karen was hesitant, unsure of herself, and quiet. Thus, they were a wonderfully complementary pair. Karen soon found that she was wonderfully smart, and she grew in confidence without ever losing the warmth that was so much a part of her thought and manner. Al, with one PhD in hand (history, 1975, Rice University), did not have so far to grow. He knew what he believed and had passionate ideas about most of the issues that came up in his studies. Thus, before long, he took over my continuing education.

It started one day when he was particularly upset by my attempts to get students in a linguistics class to think objectively about language. I remember him sputtering in indignation as he tried to explain that language was far too important in our lives to be treated as mere combinations of sounds. Later, my education continued when Al asked me—for reasons that remain a mystery—to be his dissertation director. As chapter after chapter of *Self, Society, and Text* came in, I began to understand the political and cultural implications of what I had been doing in the academy. In a very persuasive way, Al was asking me to stop guarding the tower and to dive in.

My reading of his first book, *Composition as a Cultural Practice*, furthered my education. But Al (and Karen) made their most effective pedagogical move when they asked me to write a brief afterword responding to the essays they had commissioned for *Left Margins*. Knowing that I would initially resist the ideas in most of the essays, they also knew that the best of these essays would speak to me in ways that would be hard to resist. And it worked. It was not long before I created a first-year seminar on gender issues and team taught a course in popular

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culture. Soon after that, I began to write about social class. There are complex reasons for these changes, but Al's influence played a major role in this broadening of my intellectual life. As I write this, I am planning to teach my last graduate seminar at TCU: "Teaching and Social Class." I shall dedicate it to Al—and to Karen.

Gary Tate, Texas Christian University



Al was a freight train intellectually, which might explain those late nights long ago with his bourbon and his MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour. He needed something to slow himself down to a coast for a few hours. Someone with all that energy needed some place to put it. And he put it into the scholarship and teaching of composition, particularly into the discovery of ways to teach students to use writing to become active agents in the grand battle with culture for personal identity and political freedom. Over the years after our graduate school days together, I found my own teaching of writing to be adrift in the sea of work that all of us face in busy departments. But Al always brought me back around. We'd exchange our latest ideas about teaching and scholarship, and I'd come away refreshed and humbled—or like I'd been hit by a freight train.

Carol Reeves, Butler University



I met Al on a June day in 1982; we said our wedding vows a year later at St. James Episcopal Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As many will attest, our relationship was stormy at times, the inevitable result of two strong-willed people attempting to live and work together. However, during the nineteen years we were together, Al taught me the lessons of commitment, the primary one being that when something seems worthwhile according to one's personal calculus, it's important to give it everything.

In 1990, for instance, when I was treated for breast cancer, Al cared for me while continuing full-time at West Chester. He encouraged my determination to finish the dissertation I had started months before. He designed head coverings for me when my hair fell out, rode bicycles with me to raise my spirits, cooked and cleaned, invited friends over, and stood by our sixth-grade son as he faced his fears, did homework, and contended with a bully at school. He committed all of his resources, creative and

practical, not just to my survival but to my day-to-day assurance and comfort, and in so doing he shaped my recovery to his will.

This characteristic of giving his all to the worthwhile can be seen also in his relationship with his former wife, Susan Pieper. The stark facts—that they married and divorced twice in the 1960s and 1970s and had two daughters together—speak eloquently of the love and pain they knew and of Al's faithfulness to the positive value of lifetime commitment.

There are friends who knew him longer than I who swear that Al was a monarchist when he arrived at Rice. But his studies in history must have changed that. For a time after earning his PhD there, he owned and operated The Little Hut in the Montrose section of downtown Houston, where an unlikely mix of construction workers, insurance sales personnel, nude models, visiting Austrian royalty, Rice graduate students, and the basically unemployed gathered. As the proprietor of the Hut, he donated uniforms to the Little Hut Honeys softball team, organized a series of blood drives for victims of police-related shoot-outs, and in general resisted the police department's attempts to intimidate the clientele and the city's attempts to close down the Hut. In these acts, he was building community among the underclass of citizens that the city council, as good capitalists, regarded as economically nonproductive and dispensable.

When he returned to academic life, this time in English studies, he remained focused on giving voice to the disenfranchised. With his research and teaching agenda, he worked to ensure that we all—students and colleagues—would be better able to defend ourselves and others from co-optation by our capitalistic state. He dedicated himself to this work article by article, class by class, and student by student, often taking on our burdens, helping us find solutions, and exciting our imaginations as to what might be possible. To Al, this humble work seemed worthwhile, and he gave it everything.

Karen Fitts, West Chester University



Alan was dear to us, both as a colleague and as a friend. Before knowing him personally, we felt an affinity with his articles and his book, *Composition as a Cultural Practice*. We respected his ability to bring together theory and practice, his concern for teaching, and his unapologetic Marxist critical stance, which was rigorously materialist without being dogmatic or extremist. In 1994 he and Karen Fitts asked Don to

contribute to their collection *Left Margins: Cultural Studies and Composition Pedagogy*. The acquaintance that began over correspondence on the book developed into personal friendship during the 1996–97 year that Don spent with them in Baltimore as a visiting professor at Loyola College, where Karen was teaching. We came to know them as teachers, partners, parents, and thinkers. Despite his illness, he and Karen drove from West Chester to Knoxville and back the same day to be at our wedding in 1999. We saw that the intensity and dedication informing Alan’s work also informed his relationships. It was not as if his heart and head were one faculty; rather they were two faculties that he drew on equally.

We last saw Alan and Karen in July of 2001, in West Chester. For so long they had learned to live with both hope and the gravest of challenges that neither seemed quite of this world. His attitude was the same as he had shown throughout the years of his illness: a mix of resolve to keep fighting the cancer with which he had won several bouts, and calm determination to make the most of his remaining time with his loved ones if he lost the battle. We are confident that Alan was wise enough to know that we understood the gift he had given us in sharing his mind, his friendship, and his struggle.

Janet Atwill, University of Tennessee

Donald Lazere, Emeritus, California Polytechnic State University



Dear Al,

It’s been a little over a month since your untimely death. I feel sorrow and loss, but I also feel anger and powerlessness. I never felt that you and I were done talking and learning, dining and wining.

Non omnis moriar. I’m not all dead. It may be trite to say that we live on through the lives of all those whose minds and hearts we have touched, but in your case I find this metaphor irresistible. You, Al, are a *rara avis*—the kind who makes folks believe they’re the most important, gifted, original beings ever to walk on the face of this planet. That gift of yours, the gift for making others feel very special, for lifting up the human spirit and dignifying it, has left a lasting imprint on me, as has your ability to keep in sight the perennial aspects of life and the connectedness of all matters in the universe.

Your idea of connectedness never seemed to be an abstraction, though. Yes, human and beast, tree and river may each be a part of nature,

but only the men and women fighting for progressive politics, fair economies, and social justice—and against cultural stereotypes of the repressive “natural order”—can ensure that the powerful stop dumping garbage in the backyard of the powerless. Our very survival rides on our courage to risk personal loss for the common good. You, my friend, had the courage of conviction that few possess, and you tapped into it without stint. Sometimes men and women are like two ships passing in the night; I’m grateful our ships have made close, extended contact.

Chris Teutsch, West Chester University



One image of Al comes constantly to mind: his face, the first time I met him, across the table from me when I visited West Chester for the first time during my campus interview. In my memory, Al’s face is open, encouraging, warm. There was something about his eyes, their liveliness and kindness as he listened with the other faculty members to my stumbling answers, that was tremendously reassuring to an anxious candidate. I have learned since that time that it is a common search committee practice for members to maintain a stance of reserve during an interview. Not so with Al. Apart from any assumptions of how he measured my candidacy, I was clear on his persona at the table. It was one of welcoming.

Having spent my first eight years at West Chester as Al’s colleague and friend, I feel now that my first impression fairly well captures a certain quality that I have loved and will miss most about him: his inclusiveness. Al was always about welcoming others to the table, and never about finding ways to calculate that the table was one chair short. Within our department in general and as a respected leader during a time of rapid and tremendous change within our composition program, Al’s has always been the voice of tolerance, the eye of most generous measure, the one who was quite singular in terms of his national accomplishments as a scholar, and yet so very ordinary in the way he blended into our group and functioned as a conciliator among individuals who can be quite fractious at times. It seems to me that Al held us together, a steady and at times overlooked binding presence.

Anne Herzog, West Chester University



What made Alan France remarkable as a teacher and scholar was the unity of his professional passions with his personal values. His insight was that composition should be distinguished as a field by its assertion of the epistemic unity of writing to teaching, theory, and the practice of social justice. More than any single course taught or essay published, this insight was Alan France's greatest contribution to all of us. Al taught it and wrote it; more than that, he lived it. In a recent post on a composition listserv, someone complaining about the institutional requirement that writing professors be both great teachers and provocative scholars lamented, "We can't all be Alan France." To that I reply: more's the pity; more's our loss.

Bill Lalicker, West Chester University



I met Al around four years ago during my campus visit at West Chester University. This isn't the kind of context that usually engenders friendships, but we liked each other right away. The experience was of old friends becoming reacquainted. Al quickly became an important person in my life. As a senior member of the composition faculty, he helped guide me through the quagmires of academic life. As a scholar, he supported my work. As an intellectual, he challenged me to reflect on my assumptions. As a neighbor, he lent his spirit to community building. As a friend, he brought laughter to almost any occasion. I loved to be around him. Al France wasn't a friend in the smaller sense of the term. He was a friend who filled up your life, improving it in indescribable ways.

Vicki Tischio, West Chester University



Al was not in a hurry. That's how I remember him. Walking up the stairs, taking the time to talk to people he might meet along the way, his voice resonated in the stairwells. Ambling up Gay Street toward the bakery, or driving across the country for a conference, he had time to stop and talk or enjoy the scenery. Al took the time to get to know people he'd only just met (and I count myself in that category), and shared his time generously with students, colleagues, and friends. He made time for a cup of coffee, a glass of wine, or a pleasant conversation. And why not? Perhaps we can

all learn life lessons from this approach. There was no urgency to Al's mission. He was patient and resolved. No panic. No desperation. Just a quiet walk toward home.

Jen Bacon, West Chester University



Al had an unmistakable voice. Though I find it difficult to describe precisely, I'll try for the sake of those who never heard it. Al sounded the way a large tree does when nudged by a persistent wind—deep wood moving slowly a half an inch one way or another. Or like the teeth of a great saw cutting through that same deep wood—clean, serrated, and rhythmic. He had the voice I have always imagined a particular character from *The Lord of the Rings* might have. This character was a grandfather of the forest, a mighty creature—part man and part tree, a shepherd of trees who spoke slowly and thoughtfully like a forest at work. As I imagine this shepherd, I'm sure he sounded something like Al.

If I only explained that piece it would be enough, but of course there's more. Let me tell you how he was a worker for social justice, how as I think of him now, I also think of the murals on the inner walls of San Francisco's Coit Tower, murals of Californians hammering and planting, sweating and digging—murals of workers and their work. Except that these murals show people much larger than life, as does my description of his voice, and it seems to me that part of Al's charm was to make himself just as large as one needed him to be at any given moment, and this was usually quite modest in size.

Joseph John Williams, Doctoral Student, Syracuse University

