

Tributes to Jan Swearingen (1948-2017)



Texas A & M Professor Carolyn Jan Swearingen would have been 69 on August 18, 2017. She died on June 1, 2017, after being diagnosed with a mean and aggressive form of cancer in early December 2016. A powerful classicist, stalwart feminist, loyal colleague, and loving friend, Jan is remembered by many of us who worked closely with her.

The following professional tributes could be ordered in a number of ways, but I've chosen to arrange them from the personal to the pedagogical to the professional. All of these tributes offer harmonious tones of mourning, celebration, and appreciation. The final tribute offers advice on how we might best continue to honor Jan's intellectual legacy.—Cheryl Glenn

Friend and Colleague: Jan Swearingen

Cheryl Glenn, Penn State University

When I think of Jan Swearingen, I think of how good she always smelled. I think of her perfect posture (she was always reminding me that I could stand taller—and she was right!) and that way her little finger fluttered so elegantly.

Like many of you reading this, I, too, loved and admired Jan for all the many ways that we nine outline in this tribute: her brilliance, her capacious intellectual curiosity, and that fierce loyalty of hers that was so beautifully balanced by a generosity and gentleness of spirit. She loved her family and her close friends, and she was proud of all of us, which is probably why—when we gathered at her memorial service at Ghost Ranch in late June—we already felt as though we knew one another: she had bragged about *each* of us to *all* of us.

Over the years, Jan and I shared many things: a love of Santa Fe (to which she introduced me back in 1994), cooking (which we often did together during her frequent visits), children (ours are so smart they make our teeth hurt), and, of course, rhetoric. As rhetoricians, we often appeared on the same professional programs, speaking to the importance of broadening the focus of rhetoric beyond that on the early Greeks and Romans to include practitioners of rhetoric throughout the ages, around the globe, and, especially, women. We were both fascinated by the formidable medieval women who commanded rhetorical power, women such as 11th-century abbess Hildegard von Bingen, whose music, art, plays, and writings (scientific and religious alike) continue to inspire.

Right after her heart-breaking diagnosis, Jan wrote to me: “Dear Cheryl, Thanks eternal and abundant for your friendship and love and support. We have travelled many roads together and now begins another. Sharing Hildegard with you over the years is one of my treasures. Love, Jan.”

Soon the chemo, radiation, and surgeries interfered with her regular notes and letters. Still, we managed to stay in very close contact, talking or texting nearly every day. Eventually, Jan’s suffering would give way to silence. Yet two days before she died, she texted me one last time, “Love to you 2, dear friend.” Thus, Jan took in the bright hour, when, as Emerson tells us, we “cease . . . to be a prisoner of this sickly body to become as large as the World.” To me, the spirit that is Jan Swearingen will always be as large as the World.

Mentor and Angel: Jan Swearingen

Hui Wu, University of Texas at Tyler

Jan Swearingen and I met by fate through what the Chinese call “spiritual interactions” (shen jiao, 神交 epistolary relationship). But neither of us knew we had corresponded to each other across the Pacific when we first met at Texas Christian University. I had applied for a doctoral assistantship in Linguistics and English at the University of Texas at Arlington, where she directed the Graduate Program in the Humanities. A letter notifying me of lack of funding bore her name—C. Jan Swearingen, a strikingly unusual name to me as an ESL professor in China. I had never seen such a long, non-English-looking last name before. Not until we met at TCU as professor and student did we recall our correspondence. She told me she tried hard to obtain an assistantship for me. Though she had not been successful, she did remember my credentials and last name.

Fate brought our relationship naturally to our families and children. Her son, Ben, would stay with us when she was out of town. She made sure that Ben had enough supply of Coke and milk, because he did not drink water to

quench his thirst. She made sure that Ben had his blue over-weight duffle bag in good shape, because that's his backpack for school. Ben would hang out with Donna like her big brother; they would talk and laugh incessantly about things that did not make sense to us at all. They would laugh so hard that they both fell from the couch to the floor, while curling up their bodies like snails, gasping for breath. The fact that both of them are fast talkers might have had something to do with their incessant talk in those old days, I guess.

When Ben was attending the University of Texas, Donna received scholarships from Texas A & M and several other universities. Jan drove us around the Texas A & M campus, sharing information about resources and engineering programs. When it was time for Donna to make the decision about college, I called Jan. She told me to let her make the decision by herself without pushing it. I took Jan's advice and kept my mouth shut. The second year at Texas A & M, Donna said it was the best decision she'd ever made. Although their universities were football foes, Ben and Donna still talked to each other incessantly like brother and sister in their college years.

Fate decided that Jan was my guiding angel. Before the first day of class in fall 1994, I found a book in my mailbox in TCU's English graduate office—Robert Oliver's *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China*. Her note inside told me to keep it as long as I wanted. This book incited me to research in Chinese rhetoric. After I started my first college teaching job in the U.S., I received another book from Jan—*Seven Chinese Women Writers*, which aroused my desire for theorizing cross-cultural perspectives on feminism. Her note on the cover page reads, "For Hui, in appreciation of your friendship, generosity, and intellect" with "intellect" underlined. I'd say the same, and then some, about her. Her wisdom and intellect put us together on several conference panels and in special journal issues on Chinese rhetoric. Together, we published our book, *Guiguzi: China's First Treatise on Rhetoric*, and a companion essay.

Fate brought us together. And with Jan as my guiding angel, I have been moving upward in career and family life, a career and life that I could not, and dared not, to imagine before I met her. I am thankful to Jan for being my mentor and sister, part of my family, and Donna's aunt. Love and peace to Jan, my angel.

Taking a History of Rhetoric Class with C. Jan Swearingen

Jennifer Bay, Purdue University

Beth Brunk-Chavez, University of Texas at El Paso

Taking a history of rhetoric class with C. Jan Swearingen was, at times, like trying to drink from a firehose. While her style was never to lecture, we left each class with a profound respect of the knowledge she shared with us—from Enheduanna to Sor Juana, from Diotima to Sojourner Truth.

While her breadth and depth of knowledge may have overwhelmed us, taking a history of rhetoric class with Jan was not so. It meant reading deeply and closely. It meant spending three weeks on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. She taught us to slow down, to absorb, and to connect.

Taking a history of rhetoric class with Jan was the scent of patchouli.

Taking a history of rhetoric class with Jan was to receive your writing back knowing it had been carefully read and filled with checks, double checks, check pluses, and the occasional check with exclamation points. It was reading her marginal and summative comments that poetically praised your insight while also pushing you to think beyond that moment.

Taking a history of rhetoric class with Jan was to make connections between Eric Havelock's pre-oral cultures and the Tamarians from Star Trek Next Generation.

Taking a history of rhetoric class was to momentarily be transfixed by the rubbing together of her finger and thumb while she thought deeply.

Taking a history of rhetoric class with Jan was learning through a way of thinking and writing now called feminist historiography. It was to come to the innate understanding that women were a powerful rhetorical force and that the methods we use to uncover their long history needed to be different than standard historiographic methods. In short, Jan taught us to look for what was missing, what we knew must have been there but were not being told. She taught us to understand that women were powerful and possibly dangerous. Like her colleague Hans Kellner, Jan taught us how to "get the story crooked," in order to illuminate the ways those who had been left out could shine forth. She was connecting us to a network of feminist historical scholars who were not just her colleagues but also her dear friends. These were important scholarly—and personal—lessons for developing feminist scholars.

Taking a history of rhetoric class with Jan was ending classes with the phrase "Same bat time, same bat channel." Urban Dictionary reminds us that this phrase was used to tease viewers for the next episode in the Adam West *Batman* TV series. More recently, this phrase is used "to affectionately tell

someone that you will see them soon, particularly at a regular time/place.” We know that there will not be another history of rhetoric class with Jan, but we’d love to hear her make that promise one last time.

A Tribute to Dr. C. Jan Swearingen

Rachelle A.C. Joplin, University of Houston

My relationship with Dr. Swearingen began in the fall of 2012. I was a freshman at Texas A&M University, a newly minted English major with a rhetoric focus who was eager to find a mentor. I took her History of Rhetoric course in the spring of 2013 and found the relationship I had been searching for. She taught her History of Rhetoric subversively, introducing me to the feminist scholarship that I am thrilled to contribute to today. In addition, Dr. Swearingen became a priceless fount of wisdom, shaping my experience in higher education. She directed my undergraduate thesis, and I am humbled to have been one of the final students to ever work directly under her tutelage. Her guidance in applying to graduate school encouraged me to consider, at a fundamental level, what work fulfilled me and contributed to a greater good.

I am now earning my PhD in rhetoric and composition at the University of Houston, and I genuinely would not be here if it were not for Dr. Swearingen. Her mentorship, willingness to push me, and ability to see potential in me resulted in my decision to pursue academia as a career. More importantly, though, her scholarship created the potential for my work to exist in any form whatsoever. Her brilliant intervention into the rhetorical canon and her deft ability to weave her research into her teaching have each allowed space for feminist rhetoric to thrive and grow.

The pithy secondary title to my undergraduate thesis was “Why I Am Allowed to Write This Thesis.” I go on to explain in detail the rhetorical canon and how women injected themselves into it, allowing for the current rhetorical moment to exist, and thus for my scholarship to emerge. However, for the purposes of this tribute, I would like to say simply that, in large part, I was allowed to write this thesis, be this scholar, do this work, because of Dr. Jan Swearingen. And I will never thank her enough for that.

She Was a Model: Jan Swearingen

Cynthia Haynes, Clemson University

There are only a handful of women in the field of Rhetoric whose scholarship, teaching, and mentoring touched the lives and careers of so many women today. C. Jan Swearingen is one of those women. I was fortunate to take 3-4 graduate seminars with her: History of Rhetoric I and II and several

Feminist Theory courses. Because Jan worked in classical rhetoric and feminist studies, she brought a unique perspective to the material. I remember having my wordview split open on a number of occasions. Jan allowed for rich discussions and invited her students to spar with her, all the while gently pushing us to rethink and deconstruct the phallogocentric history of rhetoric. In addition to taking her seminars, I regularly attended informal meetings at her home after she created a reading group on feminism. We explored early women theologians, such as Sor Juana, as well as poets, activists, artists, and countless women who are now considered canonical in women studies. Jan's own scholarship also made a deep impression on me. She taught us well. She was a model for how to be a strong woman in academia. She left us too soon.

East-West Rhetorical Studies

LuMing Mao, Miami University

I have been feeling my loss since the sudden passing of C. Jan Swearingen. I have lost not only a dear friend but also someone whom I can always count on for constructive and engaging dialogues, someone whose ideas and scholarship I have come to respect and admire a great deal. At the same time, I know I must also count my blessings. For well over two decades now, I have had the good fortune to get to know Jan, to get to learn from her, and, better still, to work with her on a number of projects near and dear to our hearts. I want to celebrate this good fortune of mine and what Jan has meant, and will continue to mean, to me and to our field.

As we all know, Jan was a feminist historian of rhetorics and literacy. She was much more, too. Her ability to discover new ideas, to challenge the accepted paradigms, was well known to her colleagues and students. Her impatience with overstatements and with essentializing claims was simply a delight to behold. She was infinitely fascinated by Chinese rhetorics' emphasis on complementarity, harmonic opposites, and parallelism. She would call my attention to oft-suppressed traditions in Western rhetorics, beginning with the pre-Platonic sophists, that shared and fostered the same kind of emphasis, albeit not as importantly present as it was for Chinese traditions. It was her insight, among many others, that current East-West rhetorical studies represent a real live contact zone that had helped lay the foundation for the impressive growth of comparative, global rhetorical work that we are witnessing today. I still vividly remember the most recent time Jan and I met—in October 2016 when she visited Miami University; when we reminisced about the roads we had travelled together; and when we discussed the future trails we planned to map out, to tread, to explore. Little did I know then that this would also be my last time talking to her in person, but how much I know now that these moments will stay with me for the rest of my life.

I miss Jan. I miss her knowledge of Western rhetorical traditions and feminist historiography. I miss her willingness to engage with that which is unfamiliar and unknown. I miss her ability for nuanced reading, for nipping binary thinking in the bud, and for promoting capacious understanding of different rhetorical traditions and different ways of thinking, being, and doing. The other day I sat down and reread Jan's latest tour de force: her expansive but nuanced comparison of Guigucian rhetoric with the Pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle. Once again I was being reminded of why I gravitated toward, and indeed fell in love with, her work decades ago.

I know Jan has left me—much too early, much too soon. But I also know Jan will never leave me. Her amazing body of scholarship, as well as our collective fruits of labor, will forever serve as my font of inspiration. Her optimism for the future, her disdain for demagoguery, and her generosity toward others will always serve as my exemplar. Jan's legacy endures.

Memories of a Feminist Rhetorician

Susan C. Jarratt, University of California Irvine

Rhetoric studies and feminism have lost an important voice with the passing of C. Jan Swearingen. I believe my first encounter with Jan came through an engagement with her scholarship. She preceded me in the rhetoric PhD program at the University of Texas at Austin by a few years, so I didn't have the pleasure of knowing her as a student. But finding her scholarship was an important step in my intellectual development. "The Rhetor as *Eiron*: Plato's Defense of Dialogue" (PRE/TEXT 3, 1982) came out as I was exploring dissertation ideas and gave me a sense of how one could approach the venerable texts of ancient Greece from a rhetorical perspective. We must have met first when I interviewed for a position at the University of Texas at Arlington in 1985. I remember her as quiet but self-possessed and supportive. Reading her book, *Rhetoric and Irony: Western Literacy and Western Lies*, published by Oxford in 1991, made me proud to be in our field. Here was a learned, innovative study of ancient materials from a rhetoric scholar marking out new terrain – and by a woman!

A few years later, after I had a job and started to explore feminist approaches to our field, we became better acquainted through the editing process of a special issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* I had proposed on feminist readings of male-authored texts in the history of rhetoric. Jan contributed an essay on the character Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, and I was having trouble getting in the groove with her writing style. As I kept advising a more linear, hypotactic style, Jan patiently persuaded me that her more circular, reiterative

approach was equally valid and more appropriate for her subject. This was a valuable lesson in feminist style and editing practice.

Through the years, as we appeared on panels and in publications together, I came to appreciate Jan's dry wit and precise but always inventive style of scholarship and presentation. I so admired her later move into the world of Chinese and other non-Western rhetorics. She was a strong and distinctive woman and scholar. I was fortunate to come into the field in her wake and learn from her always thoughtful ways of being in our academic worlds. I'm grateful for her choice to take a rhetorical path through a too-brief life.

C. Jan Swearingen: Scholar, Feminist, and Rhetor

Kathleen Ethel Welch, University of Oklahoma

C. Jan Swearingen, late of Texas A & M University and formerly in the ranks of professors at the University of Michigan, the University of Arizona, and the University of Texas at Arlington, was one of the most influential scholars in the humanities. Her influence has and will continue to be very powerful. Her unique and very influential work on Plato, especially in *Rhetoric and Irony: Western Literacy and Western Lies*, influenced her work on religious rhetorics of the east and of the west). This positioning makes her one of the most important scholars of rhetoric of the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Also central to her scholarly legacy is the new research she conducted and published on Diotima and other historical women in classical rhetoric, her field of greatest expertise. This reputation will persist.

As we celebrate her unusually strong scholarship in rhetoric, those who knew her and worked with her can assuage their grief by continuing to study this rhetor whose tenacity and willingness to speak truth to power will make many people across our globe study the West. *Rhetoric and Irony* has been translated into other languages, most notably Mandarin. Other translations are sure to continue.

Her colleagues, far and wide, her students, and many others will continue to benefit from her extraordinary contributions as a scholar, a feminist, and a rhetor.

