

# Lynn H. Turner

## Background

I was born in Chicago in 1946 to a middle class Jewish family. My father, Jerry Hirtenstein, was a World War II Navy veteran, who became a jeweler like his father (and his father-in-law). My mother, Roberta Newmark Hirtenstein, was a graduate of the University of Chicago, a very smart woman who chose to use her incredible talents to raise me and my brother, Scott, who was born in 1950. We were the traditional nuclear family. I was the first-born grandchild and my parents were two first-born children. Thus, for the four years between my birth and my brother's, I was the star of the family solar system. I am not sure how graciously I adapted my position to the arrival of my brother, but my extended family (all of whom lived in the Chicago area) still made me feel special in the role of big sister.



We lived in the city for my early years, and then moved to Skokie, Illinois, when I entered elementary school, and then further north, to Highland Park, Illinois, when I began high school. Although I saw this second move as highly disruptive to my social life, I can understand, upon reflection, that my parents used these moves as a way to obtain better educational opportunities for their children. My parents placed a high value on education, and I always loved school. I can remember crying my eyes out when I woke up one morning feeling sick, and my mother would not let me go to school. I still recall the smell of College Hill elementary school in the early mornings, as we all filed in to be greeted personally by the principal, who wore so much heavy face powder, she seemed to walk in a perpetual cloud, and when she leaned over to shake your hand, a puff of fragrant, white powder hovered in the air. At College Hill I was moved up to first grade midway through the year, ahead of my kindergarten peers. Thus, I became the youngest person in my class; initially that demographic was the bane of my existence, it became nicer as I got older.

In seventh grade, my class moved on to Skiles Junior High School, and there I met Miss Rhode, an early mentor and inspiration. Miss (before the advent of Ms.) Rhode taught us theatre -- the Evanston school system was excellent in those days with lots of enriching programs that are being cut in the current climate. After a few weeks in Miss Rhode's class, I was 100% hooked. First, I adored Miss Rhode and wanted to be just like her when I grew up. She got unruly, squirmy junior high kids to read Shakespeare and like it! For some reason, I remember her being a little late for class often, and me sitting in the classroom, hearing the click of her high heels as she hurried down the hall to our class. This sound presaged a wonderful hour of drama class -- it was exciting to hear it, and to anticipate what was coming. Miss Rhode was young and fun, and when I played Kate in our production of *Taming of the Shrew*, I knew this was for me. Interestingly, a few years ago when I went to see a

production of *Taming of the Shrew* in Spring Green, Wisconsin, I could still recite (silently) the lines that I had memorized in seventh grade! I did not have the feminist critique in junior high, but I did develop a love of the language and a love for performing. And, I made my career plans – I was going to teach speech and theatre to junior high school students when I grew up, a goal that I maintained through college.

I went to Highland Park High School and joined the Garrick Drama Club in my first year. I didn't keep it up, truthfully, because my friends didn't think it was "cool," (shame on me for bowing to peer pressure), but I still knew that I would pursue teaching speech and theatre. And, I did. I graduated high school and chose the University of Iowa for college because of its great theatre program (and, truthfully, because of a very cute guy who took me out when I was visiting the school, but that's another story). At Iowa I was able to participate in a lot of wonderful theatre. I acted in several shows including Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, and I was responsible for hundreds of hours of tech work on shows such as an original opera called *4000 Dollars, Così Fan Tutte*, and another Miller play, *A View from the Bridge*. Also at Iowa, I met Sam Becker and Bruce Gronbeck. Sam was the chair of the department of Speech and Dramatic Arts, and he taught me in an independent study focused on television drama, and Bruce was a graduate teaching assistant who taught me Group Discussion Principles. Although I still majored in education and theatre, these two mentors started me thinking about communication issues, and a scholarly life. They maintained a relationship with me throughout the rest of their lives, and my life was enriched by that, and diminished by their recent deaths. They both were supportive and inspirational. When I thought about going back to graduate school to get a Ph.D., Sam was one of the first people I consulted. I wish I had saved the note he wrote me in response to my inquiry. "Lynn dear, " I remember he began. And he went on to gently remind me of my dismal record in College Algebra at Iowa. He mentioned that the areas I had said I was interested in, family communication and gendered communication, were, at that time, mainly investigated quantitatively, and he wondered if my background would have prepared me well for statistical research. However, he was, as always, my cheerleader, and he said, he knew I would do well in whatever I put my mind and energies toward.

I was at Iowa for only two and a half years, because I was involved in a serious car accident over the holiday break in my junior year. I was hospitalized for several months, and could not go back to school in January. After I left the hospital and finished rehab, it did not seem practical to return to Iowa, and my parents were not supportive of me leaving Chicago. So, I set about trying to get my B.A. from a local university. I went to Kendall College, where I did the lights for *The Rainmaker*, to Roosevelt University where I acted in *The Cherry Tree*, before I finally settled down at the University of Illinois, Chicago. I chose that school in the end, because it allowed me to graduate within the same calendar year as my class, 1967, albeit in December rather than May. For some reason it was very important to me to graduate in a timely fashion, and show (someone – myself, perhaps) that the accident had not really slowed me down. At Illinois (where I was a member of the

first graduating class of the Circle campus – as it was known then), I did not participate in theatrical endeavors, but I had a fabulous education professor there, who really turned me on to teaching at the high school level. In his class we engaged in fascinating discussions about educational theory and practice. He assigned us to do pre-student teaching. My experience at Harrison High School in Chicago was eye-opening. The first day I arrived to the English class I thought I was to observe, the harried teacher told me to “take over” as she had to go to the office. I’m sure that she was just looking for an opportunity to take a break from her rather unruly class, but I was stunned to walk in and be “in charge” right away. As I recall they were discussing Goethe’s *Faust*, and it was an interesting educational moment for me, in many ways. The material was difficult to say the least, and the students were not too motivated. But, to their credit, they took pity on me, and let me ask some questions which they answered to the best of their ability. It wasn’t a class that would put me in the running for teacher of the year, but, honestly, I felt like a real teacher and it was exhilarating. I graduated from Illinois prepared to teach English and speech and theatre. In September prior to my graduation, I married my husband, Ted Turner, who has supported me in everything I have done. After my graduation, Ted was interested in pursuing a Ph.D. in English, and that took us back to Iowa City. While he was doing that, I decided to try for a Masters in Speech, which I received in 1970. The Masters program was so much fun for me. I absolutely loved the focus on theatre with no distractions from other requirements like College Algebra! I really enjoyed my directing classes with Cosmo Catalano. My final project was a one-act play called *The Wooden Box*, and being able to coordinate all the decisions and see them come alive was exciting and rewarding. I even loved studying for and taking my comprehensive exams. Right now, in my attic, I may still have the timeline I created for my history of theatre question, and the designs I made for a set for Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which was the basis for another question. I did well on my comps and some of the faculty inquired as to whether I might be interested in pursuing a Ph.D. I recall laughing a bit, and though flattered, saying that I was finished being in school and was now ready to teach.

I received a job offer in West Branch, Iowa, which worked well for us as my husband was still writing his dissertation in Iowa City. Teaching at West Branch High School was a joy. I loved my students, and I loved directing the plays. I had a progressive principal and it was a really happy job. In addition, during that time our daughter, Sabrina, was born, a personal joy. Then my husband finished his Ph.D., and received a job offer in Ames, Iowa. We moved, and I got a job teaching in Colo, Iowa, a really small town outside of Ames. The school was a junior-senior high and each class, 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade, had only about 25 students in it. I adjusted to this, after a rough first year, and I was finally teaching junior high theatre, just like Miss Rhode. However, after about four years, I found the job stressful – junior high kids are really high energy – and I wasn’t sure I was doing anything new anymore. I began to think about other things.

## **My Life in the Discipline**

By a series of lucky breaks, I was able to secure a job teaching speech and interpersonal communication at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. I began by substituting for Dr. Judy Pearson who was on family leave, and then later, when she returned, I was hired as an adjunct. That was fortunate for me, as I was able to work with Judy as a colleague. She was a helpful mentor for me. She asked me to serve as her assistant editor for the Iowa Journal and together we authored a convention paper, and later a publication. We had similar interests in gendered communication, and she opened my eyes to the literature in communication on the subject. Later, she brought me on as a coauthor for her text in gender and communication, which was a great opportunity for me. She and her husband, Paul Nelson, were friends and colleagues who taught me a great deal about being a professional in communication studies. Overall, the department at Iowa State, as well as other people at the university at that time, made up an interesting group for a neophyte like me to get to know. Randy Majors, Patrick Gourin, and Denise Vrhcota were all in the department, and I took a film class from Bernie Timberg. After four years at Iowa State, I thought I should go back and get my Ph.D. in communication because, except for that Group Discussion class I had taken with Bruce Gronbeck as an undergraduate, I really had never studied the material I was teaching. The discipline actually did not exist when I was an undergraduate, and I was getting by in the classroom, just because I was reading more widely than my students on the subject.

At this point, I began thinking about where to go to school. I narrowed it down to Northwestern University and going back to the University of Iowa. I took a summer school course in family communication with Dr. Kathleen Galvin at Northwestern and that sealed the deal. Kathy was and is a marvelous teacher, and, of course, she really shines in her specialty of family communication. That class was a revelation, and I wanted to be at Northwestern to work with Kathy. Also, during that summer, I spoke with Dr. David Zarefsky who was then the chair of the Communication Studies department. I told Dr. Zarefsky about my interests and my goals, and he was enthusiastic and welcoming. I did not know enough about the discipline at the time to realize how important these people were, which was a good thing, because I might have been more inhibited in my questioning if I had known. I began my Ph.D. program at Northwestern working as a research assistant for Dr. Charles Berger, and with Dr. Michael Roloff as my adviser. Later, Roloff, Berger, and Dr. Paul Arnston would be my committee for my dissertation, and I would publish one of my first scholarly works with Paul. All of these people remain important to me, and I value the lessons they taught me in and out of the classroom. In addition to the faculty at Northwestern I was fortunate to matriculate with a stellar group of students. Sam Becker was right to fear for me in terms of my math skills, but thanks to the help I received from Kathy Kellerman who was a year ahead of me in the Ph.D. program, I aced all three of my statistics classes at Northwestern. I loved being in classes with such bright and exciting Ph.D. students, who accepted me completely

although I was embarking on a second career and was considerably older than most of them.

I left Northwestern for a job at Marquette University, which has been my academic home since 1985. I was hired to teach in the College of Speech by Drs. Robert Shuter and Ron Arnett, and both of them were, and continue to be, mentors and colleagues. The same year I was hired MU also hired Dr. Helen Sterk, who has been a friend and writing partner of mine since day one. Other department colleagues, Drs. Patrice Buzzanell, Patricia Sullivan, and Steve Goldzwig all made working a pleasure, and all have collaborated with me on writing projects and taught me so much about communication, and the blend of personal and professional relationships that I find incredibly important in my life and career. In the years since 1985, I have taught hundreds of students who have, in turn, taught me much about communication/life. I value the relationships I have had with them and those who continue to keep in touch, and who are now members of our discipline, such as Dr. Lisa Tillmann, a former undergraduate of mine, who is now a professor at Rollins.

### **Service to the Discipline**

At this point in my career, I began to think about giving something back to the discipline, and so I sought some leadership positions. I first served as President for the Organization for the Study of Communication, Language, and Gender (OSCLG). When I had been in graduate school at Northwestern, Dr. Pam Cooper had suggested that I might enjoy attending their conferences. She was completely correct. OSCLG helped me find my voice as a feminist scholar, and I tried to repay the organization by serving as host for three of their conventions (with Helen Sterk) and then leading the organization. In addition, when attending my first OSCLG conference in Oxford, Ohio, I met Dr. Richard West, who quickly became a dear friend and colleague. He is also my most important writing partner. Rich and I have collaborated on multiple projects dating back to 1995, when we published a study on gay and lesbian parents coming out to their children. I cannot imagine my life or career without Rich. I am sure that I received much more from OSCLG than I ever gave back, but it was a pleasure to serve there. The other organization that I wished to serve was Central States Communication Association. I presented one of my first convention papers at Central, and it is my home regional association. Literally just as I was thinking that I should become more involved in CSCA, I got a call asking me to interview for the position of Executive Director. With trepidation, I did so, and am glad I did. In so doing, I met many wonderful people and learned about leadership on a regional level. I followed Dr. Arlie Daniels as Central's Executive Director and I will never forget my trip to Oklahoma to meet with Arlie, to transfer the files and get a crash course in bookkeeping. Arlie helped me understand the way Central was run and his steady leadership helped complete the recovery CSCA made after a huge financial set-back had stunned the regional. I received the reigns from Arlie, and he definitely left his campsite better than he had found it. I hope I could say the same. I am proud of several of the traditions I introduced to the association: short courses

and pre-conferences at the convention, and the Hall of Fame, which I had the honor of being inducted into in 2012.

After working at these jobs, I was ready to relax when the call came asking if I would be willing to run for the National Communication Association second vice-president. I was initially reluctant, but over time became convinced that I could offer something to the association. I was interested in accomplishing a few things in my tenure on the executive committee of NCA: helping increase our reach and the visibility of our research; standardizing and professionalizing our processes; and juggling the tensions of being a large association with the benefits of a smaller group. I did not have on my agenda mediating among the conflicting needs of members, but I should have. My convention in San Francisco carried with it the challenge of meeting in a Hilton hotel that was being accused of poor treatment of its employees, and the threat of a labor strike was very real. As it turned out, there was no actual strike, but issues surrounding the fair treatment of employees were front and center at the convention. In the end, I tried to offer accommodations (such as other venues for some meetings) and I was pleased that our members sought to express their heartfelt support for labor in a variety of constructive ways that did not rend the fabric of our association or our convention. I believe it is useful for us to model civil discourse in the midst of disagreements that we have about issues. Overall, I believe we have increased our visibility and we are working still on the Presidential initiative I began to revise our By-Laws and streamline them to guide better practices. I am hopeful the new By-Laws will soon be passed, and again, we have learned to engage in civil discussions of topics freighted with conflicting values for our diverse membership.

### **Lessons Learned**

Of course, the experience of being NCA president brought with it myriad lessons for me. When I reflect on it, I think of something I wrote for one of my Presidential columns in *Spectra* that I will paraphrase below:

NCA's mission is as follows:

The National Communication Association advances communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific and aesthetic inquiry.

The NCA serves the scholars, teachers, and practitioners who are its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests in research and teaching. Dedicated to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication, the NCA promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life, the application of competent communication to improve the quality of human life and relationships, and the use of knowledge about communication to solve human problems.

In many ways, our mission speaks to my passions and my reasons for choosing a career in teaching communication studies. In addition, embodying this mission, both as an NCA member and as president, is an absorbing struggle that requires me to be totally present in the moment if I am to have any hope of doing it well. As Kenneth Andersen mentioned in his Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture in 2003, NCA's principles and credos are not easy to enact, and while they provide guidance, "we often have to resolve conflicts between and among the principles in many situations."

Here is where the real work begins: How do we mediate among many resolutions that seem at cross-purposes? How do we reconcile seemingly opposing ideas among members that all stake a claim to our credos and principles? How do we really and truly be present to one another and enact our passions and our purpose?

Perhaps the beginning of an answer to this huge question comes from the practices of reconciliation. While reconciliation has been practiced in many contexts, I am most familiar with how it has been applied in churches interested in redressing racism. Reconciliation requires presence because, according to Paula Cole Jones, an independent anti-racism consultant for the Unitarian Universalist Association, it "transforms the present moment as well as the future of a relationship." As Cole Jones notes, reconciliation has close ties with ethical communication practices, and practitioners have to break through the barrier of "safety by avoidance" and begin to encounter each other through empathy, mutual resolve and "right relations."

In addition, we need to focus on the joy in what we do. When I think about my favorite times in the classroom, conducting research, or even in a committee meeting, I think about laughter and insight that feel a lot like play. But, many times, in the heat of disagreement while pushing the relevance of my points, and the righteousness of my cause, I forget about our shared commitments and I forget to play nice with others. In the future, I am going concentrate on remembering these lessons.