

# **In Appreciation - Robert L. Solso (1933-2005)**

February 01, 2006

Robert L. Solso, former chairman and 21-year faculty member of the University of Nevada Reno psychology department, died on January 16, 2005. He was a devoted teacher of both undergraduate and graduate students.

As a Fulbright Scholar to Russia in 1981, Solso lectured abroad and made significant contributions to international research in psychology. He wrote four notable textbooks, *Experimental Psychology* and *Cognitive Psychology*, both of which have been translated and used internationally, as well as *Cognition and the Visual Arts* and *The Psychology of Art and the Evolution of the Conscious Brain*.

Solso was an APS Fellow and Charter Member and a past president of the Western Psychological Association (WPA). He received his BA from Hastings College, his MA from the University of Nebraska, and his PhD from St. Louis University. Solso did his postdoctoral work at Stanford University and returned there often as a visiting scholar. He was a Fulbright Scholar at Moscow and Leningrad State Universities in Russia, and he received a presidential citation from the APA for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology.

Solso's eclectic interests spanned cognitive psychology, Russian psychology, the future of mind sciences, and the intersection between cognition and art. He authored 37 books, 88 articles and chapters, and presented at least 75 papers all around the world, as well as untold numbers of conference presentations. He was influential professionally but also personally, as you will see when you read the following essays by friends and colleagues.

## **Kim MacLin**

*University of Northern Iowa*

Valentine's Day was a fitting date for a memorial service to celebrate Bob's life. Bob loved the finer

things in life, but equally appreciated the simple things: water with no ice, a beautiful view, a quiet moment with a book. Bob loved food, wine and friends, traveling, knowledge, and strangers on trains. He was a consummate storyteller — I have been so many far away places through Bob's words that led me into his mind's eye. He told us stories but he also created with us stories to tell. Bob truly loved this life. And a big part of his life was his students. He opened his heart and his home; he gave to us the most precious of gifts: his time. He showed his students the way — his way — of being in the academic world — a way centered on intense curiosity but ringed with compassion and respect. He didn't just teach us about theory and methods, he taught us about how to grow and think and be — and how to recognize whatever our talents might be and run with them. He taught us how to recognize potential in others and how to foster and nurture that potential when we saw it. This is something we can give back to Bob everyday through the relationships with our own students, family and friends, and through always remembering that the most precious gift we can give someone is our time.

## **Gordon H. Bower**

*Stanford University*

I was lucky to have had Bob Solso as a close friend for about 40 years, ever since we met at Stanford during one of his sabbatical leaves. With his warm, outgoing personality, he had an extraordinary ability to make friends.

Bob earned many professional honors. His books were read and respected around the world. Bob was a central figure in the WPA, holding several offices including its presidency. In 2003, he was honored for "Distinguished Service to WPA." He cared deeply about fostering students' professional development by endowing funds for WPA student scholarship awards. He also funded endowments for the psychology departments of Stanford University (in honor of my wife and me) and the University of Nevada–Reno (UNR) to support students' research.

Beyond his many scholarly accomplishments, Bob was a wonderful human being. He was funny, intelligent, modest, fun-loving, generous of spirit, optimistic, and a natural-born storyteller. He enjoyed traveling to remote, exotic places around the globe, where he often lectured. He loved his three children, opera, visual arts, good wine, and throwing rip-roaring parties.

Bob's long struggle with cancer gave us many opportunities to exchange our thoughts and feelings on important matters of living and dying. We shared funny reminiscences and sad ones, disclosed our mutual feelings of love, respect, hope, joy, and the loneliness of facing the huge Nothingness of an approaching death. Throughout it all, Bob never lost his sunny disposition and was always thankful to snatch a few more weeks to enjoy life's small pleasures.

Wherever he is now, wherever his spirit has gone, I'm sure that he's putting on another big party, entertaining his new friends and having a good time. I know that his life on this earth was a big warm party for those of us lucky to have known him.

## **Victoria Follette**

## Hiking in Alaska.

Bob loved to teach. As the summer of 2004 came to an end, he did not complain about his health, but rather lamented that he would not be returning to the classroom. He treasured his students and loved teaching. I think Bob wanted his students to truly experience the excitement he felt when embarking upon a new intellectual adventure. He coaxed and prodded his students, pushing them to expand their analysis of the subject matter. Bob was always a presence in the classroom. His style ranged from that of the intense scholar, who pushed the students with Socratic questions, to the dramatic artist, who impressed them with his tales of travel to foreign lands.

Bob's unique contribution to teaching at UNR was his class on cognition and the visual arts. This course was perfect for him in that it combined two of his great loves, psychology and art. This class fulfilled the university capstone requirement, designed to provide seniors with an integrative learning experience. The goal of having students take these courses is "to introduce them to a variety of perspectives from which to grasp the complexity of experience, and to help them gain an appreciative understanding of the natural and cultural environments" (UNR catalogue). Bob's course certainly did this and more. He conveyed his knowledge and appreciation for all of the arts with the newest scientific information about human cognitive processes that influence our interpretation and experience of artistic phenomena. These courses are generally challenging and Bob's class was no exception. However, Bob's course had a very positive reputation and was always full.

He was not one to let the class get stagnant. Each semester he updated his notes, added new slides and scientific data. He loved to travel and often added slides from his travels to this work. Student evaluations testified to Bob's success in the classroom. Some of the comments were "one of the most compassionate teachers I have ever had," "a brilliant man," and "exudes enthusiasm and inspires creative thought."

Bob influenced so many graduate and undergraduate students in his many years at UNR. However, the experiences were not always so serious. He loved to have parties at his house at Lake Tahoe and often invited his students for a party at the end of the semester. There he taught them to cross country ski, fed them wonderful food, and told them stories of his many travels.

Bob was acutely aware of the great gifts that education had brought to him. He talked of the impact of his early schooling, starting in Nebraska and on through his graduate studies. Always he saw education

as this great opportunity to experience life on a deeper level. He never stopped loving learning and as the field changed so did he, embracing fMRI work and expanding his repertoire of skills. We miss him at UNR. Students and colleagues loved him for his intelligence, grace, and charm. He was always a gentleman, with a mischievous glint in his eye. Bob was never finished with life. There were books he still wanted to write and students he wanted to teach. But as he said many times, it was a great ride.

## **Glenn Wilson**

*King's College London*

Skiing at Lake Tahoe.

I first met Bob in 1980 when we were both visiting professors at Stanford and shared a rented house for the summer. We got on so well that we shared every summer thereafter, for a while in Palo Alto. Then, for about 16 years in a row, I stayed with him in Reno/Tahoe while teaching at UNR or Sierra Nevada College. We had such pioneering adventures that we adopted the nicknames Butch (he) and Sundance (me) in our correspondence. Apart from sponsoring me at UNR, Bob introduced me to the game of golf, which remains one of my passions. I was witness to one of his happiest moments: hitting a hole-in-one on the Mountain course at Tahoe. The card, signed by myself, was featured on the wall of his self-described “vanity room.”

Bob had a lust for life and lived it to the full. He was never one to be intimidated by political correctness. People gravitated towards him because he made them feel good and because he helped them have fun. None of this was at cost to his professional development; he was a most talented researcher, writer, and teacher, always intellectually stimulating. He stayed on top of new developments into his senior years, enabling him to revise his highly successful textbooks — such as that on cognitive psychology, which is a market leader.

I am particularly grateful that Bob saw value in the niche that I was developing on the psychology of performing arts, supporting my course at UNR through phases when student numbers were thin. I like to think that this was partly what prompted him in later years to develop his own very popular course on psychology of visual arts, thus linking his own areas of academic and personal interest.

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Bob and miss him greatly.

## **Patrick Ament**

*Central Missouri State University*

I first met Bob at UNR when he assumed the chair position in the mid 1980s. My impression of him after that first meeting was one of excitement and optimism. Grad students commonly, after all, “evaluate” new incoming faculty, especially someone who assumes the perceived role of leading the direction of a department. At the time, I was in the midst of completing my master’s thesis in the area of visual deficits and their impact on the processing of brief visual stimuli. However, it occurred to me (and a variety of journal editors) that my work was in need of some good cognitive-psychologist mentoring! Bob fit the bill perfectly. His unending inquisitive nature, openness to ideas from young, fledgling, inexperienced students, as well as his rare ability to have fun with research and with life, resulted in Bob eventually serving as a co-chair of my dissertation committee. I’ve been told that I was his first PhD student. I didn’t hear that until some years after I had finished. I would never have guessed. Bob was a pro at it.

One standard by which an advisor/mentor can be judged is the ability to keep students engaged, motivated, and excited about what they are doing. Bob was a master in all three areas. His influential work in cognitive psychology coupled with his tremendous social spirit, allowed him to make many important friends and colleagues in the field who I, as a young graduate student, had only read about in textbooks or knew from their published works. I was introduced to many of them at numerous conferences when Bob would go out of his way to bring these powerhouses to a poster or a session so that he could introduce me and other students to them. Bob also often opened his home to invited speakers and students for more informal discussions and rubbing elbows. He made us feel important and worthwhile. He put a face on psychological science, he made it human, and he made it fun! For example, I especially remember the opportunity to assist Bob with one experiment that involved an unusual subject cohort. I and another student were asked to test subjects at one of the large local casinos. The “subjects” we found out, were showgirls who we would test between segments of the show — and, they would be dressed in their full (or not so full) show costumes. Our response was immediate ... we can do that! Bob could not have offered a better opportunity for two young male graduate students to learn the importance of concentration and attention to detail during a subject-testing session! This particular opportunity was due solely to Bob’s love of the arts, his curiosity regarding how art is represented as a cognitive process, and his enduring ability to establish contacts and relationships.

On graduation day from the University of Nebraska, where he received his master's.

Another standard, and perhaps the most important one in terms of intellectual influence, is that the extent to which early exposure to a mentors' thinking influences a grad student as he completes his training and moves through his own professional career. Bob's work in prototype-abstraction memory mechanisms became a focal point of my dissertation work, and I continue to pursue research questions in that area. I've introduced many of my own students to that area as well. After almost 20 years, I still find that most rewarding, challenging, and stimulating.

Thank you, Bob!

## **Elizabeth Loftus**

*University of California, Irvine*

I first got to know Bob Solso through our common interest in eyewitness testimony. Many people may not remember a wonderful study that Bob published in the *British Journal of Psychology* in 1981 on prototypes and memory. He showed how subjects would routinely falsely claim that they saw a prototype face that embodied previously viewed individual features. The subtitle of his publication was apt: "A case of pseudo-memory." That's when I first learned how well Bob could think and write.

I also had in common with Bob the job of teaching cognitive psychology. At first I used a text I co-authored, but then I came upon Bob's book and liked it better. There was more than a moment of indecision — stick with my book, or switch to his? Setting aside self-interest, I used various editions of his textbook throughout the years, most recently the 6th edition in 2001. I would sometimes impress my students by telling them that if they had a question on the text that I couldn't answer, that I would write the author and get an answer for them. Especially after e-mail flourished, answers came back quickly, and the students were duly impressed that I personally knew the author of their text.

I'm happy that I used Bob's text for another reason — a very personal one. I like what Bob did with his book royalties! Not long ago he gave an endowment to Stanford University to benefit graduate students. Not only did he give to a school that I love, but he named the endowment for two people who have been very important in my professional and personal life: Gordon and Sharon Bower.

My professional friends often become personal friends with whom private joys and pains are shared. I had the privilege of being able to share "unrequited love" stories with Bob. Let me just say, without saying too much, that even when going through that awful experience that most of us would just as soon avoid, Bob found humor. He was even able to find humor in his daily activities when going through the really, really awful experience that took his life.

## **Vicki Silvers Gier**

*Central Missouri State University*

It was fall of 1998 when I arrived at UNR to study under Bob Solso in the Experimental Psychology PhD program. I vividly recall the first time I met Bob in his Teaching of Cognitive Neuroscience class. I was excited, nervous, curious, and in awe of a man whom I had admired for so many years. You see, I had taken cognitive psychology as an undergraduate in 1994, and the author of our textbook was a man by the name of Robert L. Solso. Never did I dream that I would have the good fortune of studying under that world-renowned author and cognitive psychologist; but more importantly, never did I imagine that one day that I would call him my mentor, my advisor, and my friend.

I remember Bob as having a mischievous smile and eyes that were both bright and wide, yet reassuring. He was a robust, energetic, enthusiastic, and vibrant man who loved to ski and to live and breathe the outdoors. He was just as passionate about cognitive psychology and any research involving the brain or hemispheric lateralization, which would become part of my dissertation question.

Bob served as my dissertation chair — the last dissertation that he would chair. He had just been diagnosed when I was preparing my prospectus. We would exchange my paper back and forth by overnight mail (I was living in Missouri) so that he could critique, correct, and make valuable recommendations. Bob was a perfectionist and adamant that I be the same. Two years later, July 2, 2003, when I defended my dissertation, Bob was there, frail and weak, but gleaming with pride.

Bob also saw me through the deaths of my parents, my mother passing only one month prior to his own death. He comforted me with these words: “May the sweet peace of dawn bring joy to your household in the realization she lives in your heart.” *Bob, these consoling words I now say to your family, friends, colleagues, and students: You will live on in our hearts.*

## **Gerald P. Ginsburg**

*University of Nevada, Reno*

As a close personal friend, Bob’s death leaves a gap that never closes but to which we become accustomed. Writing a few words about Bob brings the relationship back to life and brings to the fore some of his very special qualities, one of which stands out for me.

That special quality was his love of life. He engaged it actively, energetically, appreciatively, and creatively. This was reflected in his remarkable and creative productivity, his appreciation of the intellectual and artistic accomplishments of humankind, his travels, and even in his personal relationships.

Bob had other qualities that also stand out. One is the warmth and depth of feeling of his personal relationships, reflected in his social ease and his many friends, and also in his nurturance of his graduate students in their creative endeavors. Another is his commitment to psychology as a science, and particularly to cognitive science as the science of the mind. Most of his books reflect that commitment, particularly his volume on cognition in the 21st century. His creativity is still another quality that stands out; my two favorite examples are his extension of prototype analysis to the movements of dancers, and his wonderful book, *Cognition and the Visual Arts*. But what weaves all of these together for me is his energetic engagement of life.

Life is finite, and it is best to engage it as actively as one can. He did that, and it should stand as a lesson for us all.

## **Phil Zimbardo**

*Stanford University*

Bob Solso was a friend, a colleague, a gentle man with a unique sensitivity to others' needs. We worked together on the board of the WPA and got more intense contact when he visited Stanford some time ago. We also socialized at his home in North Lake Tahoe and at mine in San Francisco.

Bob Solso, chairman and 21-year faculty member in the department of psychology at the University of Nevada, Reno.

A remarkable experience occurred a few years ago when Bob was on death watch by doctors at the UCSF hospital. I visited him several times with the expectation that he had barely a week to live. I told him about an earlier time when I visited my sister, Vera, who also was given a week to live from her spreading breast cancer. I tried some hypnosis on her, mostly giving her images to develop about being in charge of her body, of being the commander of her immune system in its battle against these foreign invaders. At the end of the week, she had improved enough for me to take her home where she lived happily for another year. Bob was intrigued by the story and so invited me to do some of the same magic with him, which I did, and lo and behold, he improved slowly, enough to live several more rich years with friends and family. Who knows if my narrative had any causal impact on Bob's recovery, but who cares? He told me recently that my hospital visit was very important to him and made a difference in his life. I will miss him deeply.



# Otto MacLin

*University of Northern Iowa*

Bob was our advisor, mentor, and friend. In many respects he was also a father to my wife Kim and me. We miss him deeply. Bob was a gentleman, he was a historian, he had a sense of humor, he hated conflict, he loved good wine, and he was devoted to his students. When Bob took you in, he took you in for life.

Those who knew Bob will agree that he was humble, but if you visited his home you would find a “secret hiding place” for his many accomplishments. They were framed and displayed in his “vanity room.” It was literally a vanity room — his guest bathroom. Insert Bob’s humor about here.

Many of Bob’s proudest achievements were displayed in the vanity room. In particular, there was the golf score card when he got the hole in one with Glenn Wilson, his Fulbright Scholar certificate, and framed dust jackets from his numerous books including his Loyola Symposium series. Bob was an artful photographer and a few of his pictures were displayed as well. Fortunately, the room had high ceilings, as it chronicled the achievements he was proud of.

When Bob died, Kim and I helped his family pack up Bob’s belongings. In the vanity room everything came down. His accomplishments, now holes in the wall to spackle over. The end of a rich life. We were fortunate to be given a few of the “vanity items,” which we will hang in our office. New holes filled with bright memories of a man we cherished.

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