

Tribute to George Higgins

By Tom Weiner '71

It is impossible for me to overstate the role Dr. George Higgins played in my life. The same must be said about the role Dr. Higgins played in the life of countless Trinity students during his 40 years as professor and college counselor. It is with these crystal-clear realizations that I both mourn his loss and celebrate his life.

I began my association with George, as did so many of my fellow Trinity students, by taking his “Psychopathology” course. The course, originally titled “Abnormal Psychology,” was not titled as George wanted it to be. Hence the renaming to “Psychopathology.” This fit much more accurately with one of George’s principal tenets, which he gleaned from the work of Harry Stack Sullivan: “All of us are much more human than otherwise.” It was this belief, which George adhered to in every facet of his professional and personal life, along with his charismatic and enticing teaching style that invariably garnered a good one-third of the College’s total enrollment to sit in what was then Kriebel Auditorium and is now Cinestudio to soak up his ideas, his deep understanding of his subject matter, and his acquired wisdom. He certainly paid homage to Dr. Freud, whom he saw as the ultimate originator of what had become his professorial work. He even had a pair of Freudian slippers!

The next arena for my experience of George was far more personal as I began to see him in his other capacity as counselor. Struggling with identity and family issues, I sought out what I had heard from others who had been counseled by George was his perspective and support. He helped me to reframe, re-vision, and ultimately accept many aspects of my life and myself that I had neither embraced nor integrated as well as encouraging me to let go of maladaptive ways of thinking and acting, including self-effacement, which he named and called me on on numerous occasions. I received these invaluable insights along with reality checks, much humor when appropriate and occasionally when not, and great caring.

George spotted in me someone who might be good with his children, and thus began my connection to his wife, June, and their children, David and Amanda. As their babysitter, I spent considerable time at 69 Vernon Street and began what evolved into a central friendship that continued for over half a century.

There’s one more component of our relationship requiring mention. George taught me how to swim on my back. Back in the day—circa 1971—a graduation requirement was the ability to swim a mile with at least one lap on one’s back. I had had a most unfortunate freshman-year experience that led to my decision to try to avoid the requirement, and it wasn’t until senior year that I got a notification that my diploma was in jeopardy unless I completed the swimming requirement. That same day I received a second notice from George letting me know, in the spirit of our already rewarding counseling relationship, that he would accompany me to the pool and teach me how to swim on my back. At the first session, when he tried to assist me in floating, I will never forget that when he held me up only to have me immediately sink when he let go, his comment was, “Did your mother drop you when you were an infant?” I swam one length on my back that day with his expert and loving

instruction, half the required distance the next time out, and the whole mile the third time. Thanks to George, I graduated.

There were two other gifts George gave me during my undergraduate years. The first was one he shared with many—a letter to my draft board supporting my conscientious objector application and a second encouraging the Army psychiatrist to grant me an interview since George documented that I should be disqualified based on mental health issues. The latter letter worked as I describe in the introduction to the book I wrote, inspired by my own experience thanks to George and the many stories of how men and the women who loved them coped with the draft. Titled *Called to Serve: Stories of the Men and Women Confronted by the Vietnam War Draft*, it was later adapted by Peter Snoad into the play *The Draft*. I got the interview, which consisted of two questions. The first was, “Have you ever smoked marijuana?” and the second was, “Have you ever had a suicidal fantasy?” I answered yes to both and was rewarded with a 1-Y classification, meaning I would only serve “during a time of war or national emergency.” I only learned while getting that quote while writing this tribute that the 1-Y classification was eliminated for reasons of ambiguity on December 10, a mere three months later.

George and I participated in a 2021 Zoom webinar, *The Draft at Trinity*, which you can watch [here](#).

After I essentially flunked the physical, George made another contribution to my post-Trinity life. I had been nominated for the Watson Fellowship, and I needed letters of support. Of course, I turned to George, and I am convinced his words regarding my performance both academically and socially with the program I created, The Od Squad, for South End inner-city children and Trinity students, were instrumental in my being awarded the fellowship, which, having been classified 1-Y, I was free to experience.

One less life-changing but nonetheless significant offering I received from George was related to one of his major passions—opera. I had determined early on that yet another way to experience his rich and full life was to open myself up to his love for this art form. This resulted in my decision to study opera with Professor of Music Clarence Barber. Though I never became an opera buff like my dear friend and classmate Norden Gilbert ’71, whom I learned recently attended Richard Wagner’s full *Ring Cycle* with George and June twice at Ravinia in Chicago, I had several memorable experiences during my Watson year at some of Europe’s exquisite opera houses, once again because of George.

But Trinity was just the beginning of what became the friendship we were both devoted to for 56 years. Below I list highlights of the ensuing years.

- George and June opening their Swiss chalet A-frame home in Ludlow, Vermont, on numerous occasions to either me alone or my children and me. Perhaps the most meaningful and impactful was the weekend that I spent with them and the children when my first wife took her leave of our home and I needed comfort, support, and kindness.
- George and June coming every summer for decades to Northampton to see a New Century Theatre play, enjoying drinks and hors d’oeuvres on our deck, seeing the always entertaining and often outstanding performance by our Northampton theater troupe and taking us out for dinner.

- George bonding with my wife of 39 years, Susan, over her breast cancer diagnosis/treatment, sharing about his prostate cancer compassionately and openly.
- George being there for me for years and years about the challenges parenting one of my children. He gave me the priceless metaphor of what I was trying to do by referencing a tightrope walker for whom falling on one side would be disabling and falling on the other side would be enabling. I knew from that moment on that my ultimate goal was to stay the course and walk that tightrope, which I believe I have done thanks to his constant support, wisdom, and belief in me.
- George and June's endless welcoming and hospitality on countless visits to their homes in Hartford, Glastonbury (if memory serves), Ludlow, and Columbia, Maryland.
- George's wide-ranging intellect, which led to so many memorable conversations on any number of topics, almost all related in one way or another to either the arts or psychology.

The visit in 2020 to Maryland was our last time together. It was a rich but too brief visit, and I saw how already diminished George's energy was, but not his spirit, which shone through with his love and appreciation for me. Our email exchanges became less frequent and much shorter, and I missed him as a result. His passing was a very sad day but also has led to my seeking and finding access to what I have written here in tribute to one of the most important men in my life. I am confident from reading the Facebook tributes that poured in after his passing was made known by his daughter, Amanda, that I am far from alone in feeling that George made an enormous difference in the person I have become.