on writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

Remembering Herb Sargent

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

This issue is a tribute to Herb ~~Gardner.~~ SARGENT

— Arlene Hellerman

Front cover illustration by Herb Gardner.

Dan Aykroyd

Although I did not collaborate closely with Herb Sargent as some of the other writers on *Saturday Night Live* did, my affection for him was strong.

His was a Zen-like presence on a floor filled with darting human particles and adrenalin-fueled chaos.

We were always in such a hurry to originate pieces, get them written down, get them accepted and get them produced. The urgency of being "live" and competitive.

Herb taught us that sometimes waiting brings the best inspiration. That there is a moment when just the right words occur and they may not be the first ones you think of.

I remember long silences sitting on the couch in his office. Then just the perfect complement to what one was discussing would be born. More silence. Another session. Then the answer.

He was an oracular entity but of the gentlest, kindest and sweetest nature. From his comedic intelligence we have today the parody-news franchises as we know them: *Update, Jon Stewart,* etc....

I am proud to have been a staff member with him on the same credit roll. He made us all look good.

Anne Beatts

I worked on *Saturday Night Live* as a writer for the first five years and Herb Sargent said maybe five words to me in all that time—but they were the right words. When he did speak, Herb spoke quietly, making you lean in to him. Sometimes it was hard to tune him in amid all the static chatter of *SNL*'s larger-than-life personalities. I wish I had listened harder.

I think it was Michael O'Donoghue who first called Herb Sargent "the Boo Radley of comedy," quietly presenting you with little humor gifts. Like anything else that was witty and accurate, the analogy got repeated around the show till it became a standard point of reference. Surely Herb must have heard it, but he never said anything.

I know it was Harry Shearer who said, "If Herb wore contacts, he'd wear them on top of his head." Another remark that made the rounds. In the world of *SNL*, the number of personal comments made about you was a sign of your significance and staying power on the show. Herb had both.

When we started out in the summer of 1975, Herb seemed like the only grownup in sight. He was a benign father figure whose reassuring presence gave us the feeling that we would get away with what we were trying to do on television, which was basically to create a show that made us laugh.

At the start of that season, Howard Cosell—yes, that Howard Cosell—also launched a comedy-variety show called *Saturday Night* featuring "The Prime Time Players," one of whom was Bill Murray. Herb suggested that our cast must be the "Not Ready For Prime Time Players." It became a lasting part of the show credits.

When Herb became president of the Writers Guild, East, I had a familiar feeling of reassurance. There was a grownup in charge. Even though I live in Los Angeles now, I never switched my membership to the West Coast. When the West Coast Guild seemed plagued by leadership chaos, I still felt secure that Herb was looking after our interests back East.

When I heard that he had died, I was stricken. I had to call around to find someone from the old days who would understand what it meant to lose Herb. Boo Radley was dead and the world seemed like a less safe place.

Robert Benton

I would say I knew "Herb, the middle years." I first met him in the very early '60s when he was still married to Norma Crane, who was an actress. I was the art director of *Esquire* in those days—I had just broken up with a woman and was one of those miserable, lonely bachelors stumbling around the city. Herb and Norma took pity on me and would ask me out to dinner. When the three of us were all together we'd talk and have a great time. Then Norma would go off to make a phone call or go to bed or something—and talking to Herb was not the simplest thing in the world. He was content to be silent for days on end, and I come from a family where if you don't talk, everyone thinks you're dead. But he was extraordinary to talk to, he was really witty and smart, and I had a wonderful time. It was very difficult to get Herb to leave irony at home when he had a conversation: if I was head of a college I would've hired him to teach, not creative writing, but irony. He was a master of knowing how to say things with a kind of irony that made it very meaningful and funny and tough.

I assigned him a couple of pieces at *Esquire*. And then as we became friends, it was his example and encouragement that made me think I could write. I'm dyslexic—I cannot spell, I cannot punctuate. I had taken one creative writing course in college and I flunked that. But it was during my friendship with Herb that I began to work on the screenplay for *Bonnie & Clyde* with David Newman. Herb was really a genius at what he did: he was not only a great writer, but a great producer. He knew how to find people and get the best out of them. David Newman and I did a piece for him when he was doing *That Was the Week That Was*. He created an amiable and forgiving world in which you could risk a lot and knew you were not going to be put down about it. He was very generous—I never saw him be mean or cruel. I actually never saw him angry. There was a great willingness to entertain other people's ideas and other points of view and not insist on his own. He was not dictatorial in any sense.

Being a producer for television is a very different thing than being a producer in film. Because of the nature of the material, it's tied together by the writing; it's sustained over a period of time, week after week, month after month, year after year—hopefully. And the voice that ties it together isn't so much the performer's voice as the writer's voice. Herb was the best of what television had to offer from the '60s through the time he stopped writing for *Saturday Night Live*.

I'm trying to remember how he said he started, and how he sort of morphed into being Herb Sargent... I don't know. But he knew charm. And unlike many charming people, he never thought he was more charming than he actually was. And that's very rare. It's very corny to say, but that sort of person has, I think, passed from the scene because the requirements of television now are not as urbane as they were—MTV is very different from what *Saturday Night Live* was. In some way that's one of the great gifts of television, that it's constantly changing and it never remains the same. And I think Herb really understood the opportunities that were happening in television at that particular point for a certain kind of wit and a certain kind of style. There are a lot of people who have a sense of humor, but very few people who have a great wit. Herb had both.

Boaty Boatwright

Herb was a man of few words

And Herb was

Kind

Wise

Funny

Smart

Original

Generous

Loyal

And a friend (a good one).

James L. Brooks

Recipient of the first WGAE Herb Sargent Award for Comedy Excellence

Acceptance Speech

I'm so glad to be here tonight to receive an award which truly honors Herb Sargent. I met him tangentially in the early years of *Saturday Night Live*. It was impossible to cross his path and not quickly get that he was something you never believed existed, a charismatic comedy writer. He was by far the best-looking, oldest and calmest member of the *SNL* writing staff: the instant mentor, the guy who ran *Weekend Update*, who coined the phrase "Not Ready for Prime Time Players." He was classy. He was quiet. He was a one-man midwestern town. So great was the staff's respect for him that they regularly attempted to avoid doing drugs in front of him. People hired for their talent at ridicule worshipped him. And this Guild was so important to him. The prospect of receiving this award has mugged me with nostalgia—very sudden and distinct memories of how, as a teenager, without writing a line, I became a member of the Writers Guild, East.

I had messed up college in my very first semester there and, thanks to a secretary-friend of my sister's, got an entry-level job as a CBS page even though there were rules that you had to have a degree. Ominously, there was also a policy that if a reasonable amount of time passed and you failed to get some sort of promotion, you would be asked to leave. Time wore on… my uniform frayed—Friday nights were often devoted to attending farewell drinks for a promoted page. Slumped, I would witness the swagger of other people's lives and hear them falsely promise to keep in touch as I tried to exaggerate our closeness and ask them to do some job scouting for me. I was a wreck.

It's always tough when your anxiety is smarter than you are and, sure enough, the day came when the page manager called me in and said the end was near—but if I wanted to fill in as a vacation replacement news desk assistant for two weeks, the job was mine. I said yes, and thereby surrendered the one saving grace of early failure, where you never get to see what you missed out on and how the other half lives: I met my betters—my way betters—the other desk assistants who had graduated with distinction from graduate schools of journalism.

This was during the last days of Edward R. Murrow's tenure at CBS News. I was a news buff, I had read the collected scripts of *CBS Reports* and the autobiographies of every correspondent who wrote one—and there were many. We've recently had George Clooney and Grant Heslov's picture to evidence that there was a time when brilliant men of honor thought they were put on this earth to serve truth—and commerce would have to bend and yield to that calling. And I was to be in their midst for 10 working days—just 10, count them off—and then oblivion, some minor assembly-line job where my lack of coordination would clearly lead to a crippling industrial accident.

In the meantime, there they were, the CBS News correspondents—shirtsleeves and ties—greeting me, thanking me for getting them coffee, going off to a poker game at Ed's…. This wasn't just the other half, this was the point of it all. And in a handful of days, to dust I would returneth. It was too much for me. Anxiety was rocking my boat

and each day which ticked by was upping the ante. I was red-lining. My emotional state was also getting in the way of my work; little mishaps were giving me a higher profile than a fill-in wants.

The solution came as solutions often do: with the simple act of looking up. High on the board above the copy machines was a list of home phone numbers of essential CBS News personnel. I don't know any explanation why the act of memorizing Edward R. Murrow's phone number so thoroughly calmed me—but it did. Not that I would, but I *could* call him at any hour: hear that voice, maybe state a problem—who knew, maybe get some advice or just briefly shoot the breeze, "...What's Churchill like?"

Walking around with that phone number gave me a shot of optimism... PLaza7-8432... PLaza7-8432.... My work picked up, copy machines no longer ran out on my watch and coffee runs were unmarred by spillage. The mantra of Murrow's phone number was interrupted one amazing day by word that the vacationing desk assistant had decided not to return; the job was offered to me on a permanent basis and I became a member of the Writers Guild of America, East.

I was so caught up with my relative lack of preparation—living with some embarrassment about my background as I moved onto newswriter—that I failed to realize that the background which shamed me—dysfunctional family, alcoholic father and an isolated childhood—was actually a first-rate career track to comedy writing.

There is, I hear, a thrill which some feel when they arrive at a good college, a comfort from suddenly being no longer alone but in a world where everyone is smart. I had a feeling like that when I reached Hollywood where everyone was falling apart—I exalted. I was home.

I've heard from so many other writers how long it takes to master the answer when someone asks what they do for a living. Saying "I'm a writer" with a straight face and a steady voice is tough—I think because we love writing so much we think it is too good to be true.

I feel that way especially about comedy writing. I think there has been just a bit less of a revolution in comedy writing than in other forms. Yes, there are some wild swings which I have witnessed. On *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, we took a poll in the writer's room and just one of our large number had graduated college and just one was Christian—the same guy. We gave him a hard time on each count. One day not long ago, I found myself in a *Simpsons*' writing room and felt the wrong kind of tingle when I realized I was the only one who had not served as editor of the *Harvard Lampoon*. Profound change.

But some things will never change in comedy, like the smartest observation about it I ever heard. It was just before filming on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and we stood in a circle trying to come up with a better joke to end a scene. One of us kept pitching the same joke and, when the rest of us failed to react, he kept pushing it. "Come on, that's funny." "That works." "Doesn't it work?" "I think it works!" And someone else said,

“You’ll know when it works—the rest of us will laugh and walk away.”

Herb Sargent had a long life where he said things and the other guys laughed and walked away. I am therefore greatly honored to be the first recipient of the Herb Sargent Award.

Chevy Chase

Women adored Herb. Perhaps it was because he wasn't a "threat." In fact, this was not a posture Herb possessed. His physical posture could impart such a quality: that of a reconciliatory man who, shoulders stooped, still mumbled, "I may not be very sure of myself, but I know what I believe in; what I'm made of."

He possessed a peaceful nature, not weak, just strong enough for whatever a situation might call for. Women fell in love with him and so did I—as did, I assume, many other strong, heterosexual men.

It happened when I first met Herb. I was a fledgling TV writer of comedy in the early 1970s when I was summoned and sent to his office which was shoved in between several other offices and down the hallway, one especially large and demanding room that fairly shouted out, "needy!" That was Alan King's office. The whole floor was devoted to a comedy/variety TV show which was to star Alan. Every square inch of wall space—and in the big man's office, every free piece of furniture—was covered with photos of Alan and somebody recognizable from the showbiz world to the political (same thing).

During my meeting with Herb, who was the producer and head writer, I sat across his desk in an armchair, spewing out, unevenly, my resume. I don't recall Herb saying or asking anything besides "tell me about yourself." For the rest of the entire meeting he sat calmly staring out the window at 50-something Street, two floors below, while absent-mindedly tapping his pencil against the top of the desk. He smiled throughout, as if he knew a little secret that might be about me, which he would never share.

After an endless silence, during which I began to stare out the same window hoping something far more engaging or exciting was happening out there than in here, he almost made eye contact and said, "You're hired."

I believe that show garnered me with my first Writers Guild Award. In any case, I was delighted to see his lovable countenance on the 17th floor at *SNL* upon arriving there from California some three or four years later.

Guess what? We became fast and enduring friends within a day; and remained so until his passing. I'm sure when I pass on, I'll hear a tapping pencil and we'll meet up again.

Jane Curtin

I met Herb Sargent the first week of rehearsal for *Saturday Night Live* in 1975. His office was almost a sane place to go—*almost* a sane place. The rest of the place was fraught with anxiety and apprehension, and bruised egos and inflated egos—which is par for the course when you're putting something like that together. And then Herb's office was calm. But then, of course, Herb didn't speak much.

I didn't get to know him well until I started doing *Update* the second year of the show. He would scour the papers and check the newswires to find stories he thought were interesting and put together something like a 200-page packet of clipped stories. Then the writers who were working on *Update* would go through it and pick out which ones they wanted to deal with. That's basically the way Herb worked on all of the shows he did subsequent to *Saturday Night*. He had a fantastic eye. And a fantastic ear. Herb's jokes were just impeccable.

After I left *Saturday Night Live,* Herb started another show and asked if I would do it—I couldn't because I was doing *Kate & Allie* but I was thrilled that he asked me. But after *Kate & Allie*, we started doing a lot of experimental kinds of things, all news related. We tried several different formats, but they were all basically the same—a different take on news stories. That's where Herb's interest lay. By all rights Herb should've produced *The Daily Show*—to have that kind of a show on the air was his dream. He was really interested in political comedy. As were we all—which is why it was so much fun to do.

I ended up working with Herb for about 10 years, along with Buck Henry, Robert Krulwich and Tony Hendra, doing an annual radio show for NPR. For all of us, it was our favorite thing to do—even though there were times we'd finish taping the show and walk out of the studio feeling we didn't do a very good job. But Herb would come out of the control room and say, "Oh, that was great, we've got tons of stuff." And we'd look at him as if to say, "You've got to be crazy. None of it made any sense."

The height of that particular era was when it was the 30th anniversary of NPR and all of the NPR regulars were invited to the White House. It was the most exciting offer, though we were certainly humbled by the notion of improvising in the White House. When you improvise, you turn off that "editor" for a bit so you're not quite sure what's going to come out, you really don't know. But the White House came up with a theme—it was also an anniversary of the White House—so it was a salute to the White House as well as celebrating NPR.

We got together a couple of times in New York. Robert had to do all the research because he was our question-asker. And he and Herb came up with this timeline of the White House. That was our framework. We would get together at lunch or something for an hour and talk about what went on at the White House at any particular point and was it funny. And most of the time we would talk about, "Oh, my God, we are so terrified."

But then the day came to go down to Washington and we were excited. We gathered in the lobby of the hotel to be escorted over to the White House. We were all visibly shaken. And Herb was just this pillar of calm—even LeGrand was nervous and she didn't have to do anything. The evening was set up so that there were going to be actors who were reading from A.E. Hodgner's play called *The White House*. And then they'd introduce the *Car Talk* guys, or Nina Totenberg or Bob Edwards.... Bette Midler was the host of the evening.

So it's our turn to go up on the stage. There were four stools with microphone stands in front of them—we sat on the stools, and two feet in front of us are the Clintons. We were all thinking, "My God, please let the editor work and let's not say anything so supremely insulting." But we pretty much knew our material, what the chronology was and what points we were going to pick up on. And we killed. We were incredible.

Herb was thrilled. It was almost like a tribute to him; it wasn't so much that we wanted to do a good job for NPR, we wanted to do a good job for Herb. We went out for drinks afterwards, and everyone had that rush of adrenaline you get when you've succeeded.

There was a tremendous amount of warmth in Herb. And if he acknowledged your presence it just made your day. I don't know what it was about him. All of his baggage, whatever that might have been, was never shown. It was the calm there. You bounced off of him. He was Teflon, he was Kevlar—you figured if you were around him, first of all, that whatever you were doing was legitimate. You were in extremely good company. You were with someone who was so knowledgeable about the business, about what's important and what's not important in terms of life—and in terms of writing. And getting to the point quickly. There was no bullshit with Herb, none whatsoever. No ego there. There was sort of like a perfection.

I'm not sure anybody really knew Herb well. He was never really forthcoming about his personal life. You knew nothing of his history except for things that were written about him. That's not the level on which he would deal with people. There may have been people who felt frustrated that they couldn't get closer to him, but no, he was pretty perfect the way he was. I loved my friend Herb very much.

Tom Davis

My Herb Sargent

In the last week of July 1975, Al Franken and I were offered a six-week contract for the position of "Writer" at the minimum wage (in those days you could pay a team as one writer) for an as-yet-unnamed live comedy show to be broadcast from Rockefeller Plaza. When we arrived from California, we had long hair and said things like "far out." This lasted less than a week in our new environment. I remember overhearing a conversation between Herb and Michael O'Donohue about *The New York Times* and *The New York Post*. Being Dippy the Hippy I blurted out, "What's the difference, man?" O'Donohue became apoplectic, but Herb held up his hand and remanded him, "So?... he doesn't know."

Herb also showed me how to put a script in a script binder.

On the fourth show, Franken and Davis got our first sketch on the air, thanks to Herb, who championed it. It featured Chevy as a young Texas serial murderer/rapist of teenaged boys who has one phone call home to his parents, played by Jane Curtin and Dan Aykroyd—who support their son no matter what:

> Jane: It didn't have anything to do with marijuana, did it?
> Chevy: Ah... no...
> Dan and Jane: Oh, thank God!

It wasn't a great piece, but it got us started. Thank you, Herb.

David N. Dinkins

I recall that, shortly after Herb's death, a National Public Radio commentator aired a tribute to his massive talents in a segment called "Herb Sargent Knew From Funny." I thought then that truer words were never spoken. Herb Sargent certainly knew from funny, and he shared that knowledge with many of us who were less talented. His humor was truly a gift, and he gave of it freely.

Herb was a direct descendant of some of this nation's best humorists—Mark Twain, Langston Hughes and James Thurber—his humor lacked the mean spirit of those who choose to denigrate instead of stimulate. He subscribed to a tradition that made his audiences laugh *with* their subjects rather than laugh *at* them. Herb knew the value of laughter, and he knew the difference between "laughing to keep from crying," and "laughing until you cry," and he knew when each was appropriate.

Those of us who were fortunate enough to call upon him to liven up our public speaking were spared what he considered the cardinal sin of dullness—without committing the equally offensive transgression of ridicule. Over the course of my mayoralty, Herb interjected a touch of levity into situations that often defied humor. His contributions were much appreciated—and often unsolicited. He instinctively knew when I needed his fine touch, and he gave it complete with a tutorial on the proper setup and delivery of his trademark punch lines. I remain indebted to his habitual insistence to follow his lead and "lighten up!"

I recall being invited to roast Tony Quinn at an event at the Palace Hotel and calling upon Herb's vast reservoir of light-hearted insults to do justice to our friend. Tony's friends Cindy Adams and Bill Cosby were there, and we all gave Tony a hard time. Herb prepped me with one-liners from his arsenal: he played on the fact that Tony had played so many hoods, gangsters, criminals and convicts during his acting career that when he went home from the studio, he had to stop at a halfway house. It was all in fun, and that room at the Palace was filled with affection for Tony and the tasteful humor that was Herb's signature. But Herb's signature was not limited to the world of humor.

Beyond his many Emmys and other honors for his craft, Herb earned the respect and regard of one of the toughest crowds in the business of entertainment, his fellow writers. He was, as Mona Mangan said, "exceptionally generous to all writers, and brought an unfailing sense of decency and good will to everything he did."

I can never repay Herb Sargent's generosity of spirit, but I take some consolation in the fact that I played a part in two of the most joyous moments of his life: I officiated at his wedding to LeGrand, and then did it again when they retook their vows 10 years later. Even then, what for many is a serious occasion was for Herb and LeGrand a celebration filled with laughter—and of course, Herb wrote the jokes for both ceremonies. Herb Sargent did, after all, know from funny. And we miss him dearly.

Below is a copy of what Herb wrote for Mayor Dinkins to read when he and LeGrand retook their wedding vows on their 10-year anniversary.

TEN YEARS AGO TODAY, OCTOBER 15th 1991,
LEGRAND AND HERB WERE IN THE OFFICE OF
THE MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY.
FORTUNATELY SO WAS I.

MANY PEOPLE HAVE ASKED WHY LEGRAND AND HERB,
WHO HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER SINCE 1965, WAITED
SO LONG TO GET MARRIED. THEY TOLD ME THEY
WERE WAITING FOR THE RIGHT MAYOR.

WELL, I PERFORMED THE MARRIAGE CEREMONY
AND IT CAME OFF WITHOUT A HITCH.
(NOW THERE'S AN OXYMORON)

AS A CITY OFFICAL I WAS NOT PERMITTED TO
CHARGE THEM FOR THE SERVICE. BUT NOW THAT
I'M A PRIVATE CITIZEN, I CAN CHARGE THEM
ANYTHING I WANT. BUT THEY ARE IN LUCK.
THIS IS MY ONE THOUSANDTH WEDDING, SO
IT'S FREE. AND I'LL THROW IN ANOTHER ONE
EVERY TEN YEARS.

OF COURSE, IF THE GARDNERS WANT TO
RENEW THEIR VOWS, I'M ON VISA, MASTERCHARGE
AND AMERICAN EXPRESS.

Tom Fontana

I spoke with Herb on the day he died. We had been developing, on and off, a concept of his for a comedy series with a political bent. He called to apologize for being laid up—the consummate gentleman—and to say that he was brimming with ideas for the project. We made plans to meet for lunch.

For those unlucky souls who never had the chance, let me go on record: lunch with Herb Sargent was a joy forever. During the course of a meal, he always managed—in a word or two, perfectly timed, sotto voce—to utter the funniest line possible.

Not jokes, mind you. Humor. True humor—barbed, perceptive and devastatingly honest. With a look and a mumble, he could wrinkle a roomful of stuffed shirts or, when he was really outraged, slaughter a herd of sacred cows.

Yes he was "soft-spoken," but brother, when there was bullshit flying his quick wit hit the bull's eye, skewering dimwits and half-wits alike. Whether writing political satire for *That Was the Week That Was* or running a WGA, East Council meeting, Herb's words were insightful, cohesive and wonderfully funny. Remarkably, he could be both cynical and optimistic in the same breath. How's that for a world view?

So here I sit, fondly remembering our "next" lunch which will never be.

Herb, old friend, a thousand thanks for a thousand laughs. We need 'em—and you—now more than ever.

Barbara Sproul Gardner

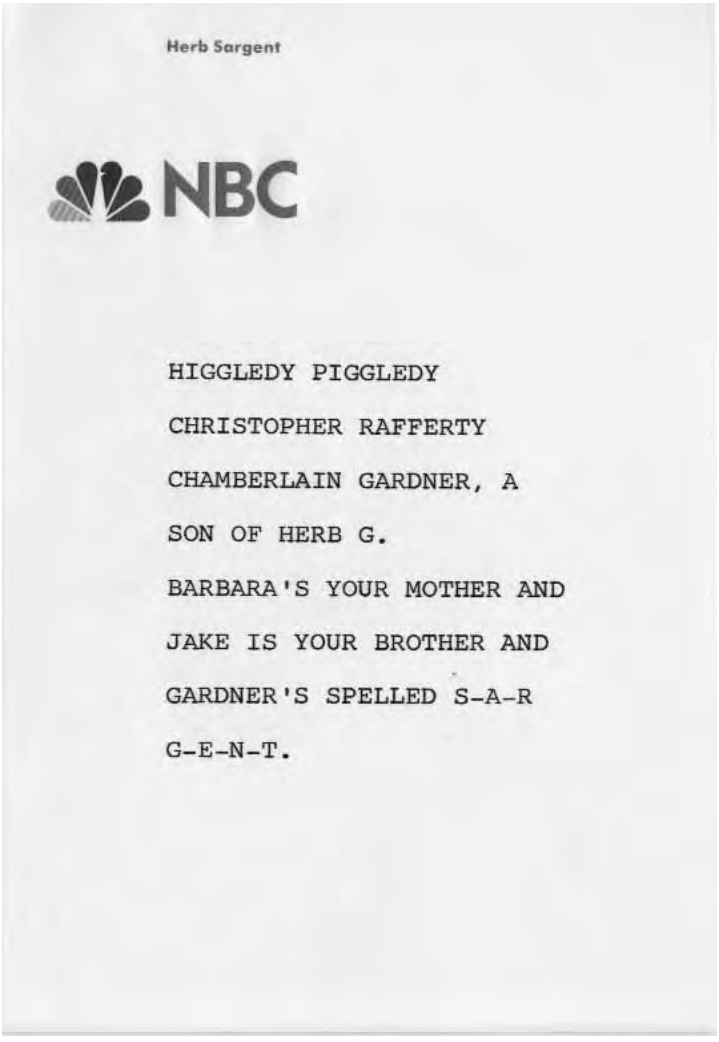
People were always confusing Herb Sargent and Herb Gardner. An obvious reason would be that, objectively—and if you didn't look too closely—they resembled each other. They were both tall, had a lot of white hair, were popular with ladies and had wonderful senses of humor. So one would think that the confusion was in some sense personal, but interestingly enough, it appeared to be general and generic.

One time, Herb Gardner got a terrible review for *Goodbye People* in *The Post* or *The Daily News*—whichever—and on the second page of the review it said, "Herb Sargent should never write another play." So Sargent called Gardner and said, "I feel terrible, how about you?"

It got to the point where one of the industry papers congratulated Herb Gardner for winning the WGA, East election—when, of course, it was Sargent who had done so. And Sargent sent Gardner formal congratulations for that occasion.

Sargent would also send Gardner letters he'd received at NBC addressed to Herb Gardner asking for a job on *Saturday Night Live*. Sargent would forward them to Gardner saying, "If you wanted my job, you should have just asked for it." And when he'd send such things to Gardner, he'd send them from *Gardner* at NBC, to *Sargent* at our address. And the mailman seemed to be in on the entire thing because he would deliver them.

So when our second son, Rafferty, was born, Sargent sent Gardner the following poem:



Herb Sargent

NBC

HIGGLEDY PIGGLEDY
CHRISTOPHER RAFFERTY
CHAMBERLAIN GARDNER, A
SON OF HERB G.
BARBARA'S YOUR MOTHER AND
JAKE IS YOUR BROTHER AND
GARDNER'S SPELLED S-A-R
G-E-N-T.

Larry Gelbart

It's not often that we get to know someone whose life is so much more than just a first draft.

Herb Sargent was one of those exceptions. Not in the sense that his character and his values had undergone so many revisions, but rather that he stood among us in such a complete fashion. Tested. Mature. Guided by and grounded in a consistency that yielded only to someone else's irrefutable logic. If any deed or decision of Herb's ever surprised anyone it could only have been because they hadn't been paying attention—or that they simply had a tin ear when it came to quality.

A New Yorker to his core, there was always the feeling of the opposite coast about him. Not so much the other water's edge, it was more a feel of the dusty frontier, embodying the lean and lanky, not-one-word-wasted type of Westerner—only Herb chose to remain and represent, for whatever his reasons, Gary Cooper, East.

For Gary Cooper, courage was a stage direction, a parenthetical. Herb needed no such cues; for him, courage was a state of mind; for him, courage was the basis for action.

His commitment to improving the plight of the writer was as deep as it was long. Decades of success had not cured him of a terminal case of responsibility. Unwilling to take so much as a short nap on his laurels, he was indebted only to his sense of rightness.

Writing about Herb—in what seems to be the wrong tense altogether—is a very tough assignment for a practitioner of the happy ending, or for those of our calling who, by providing others with the opportunity for laughter, become enablers of denial.

Far too many people like Herb, who did so much to help get us through this test called life (a test so designed that none may pass), are no longer around to lift our spirits—to say nothing of our sights and standards. The void that their absence creates grows, almost daily now, from one newspaper edition to the next, the overworked but uncaring bell tolling with an ever-increasing, ever-insistent frequency.

Friends like Herb (and you didn't have to be one of them to benefit from his labors on your behalf) spoil us with the generosity of their spirits. They make us greedy, make us feel entitled to the lifesaving humor they inject into our daily existence.

If brevity is the soul of wit, it's more than a little disturbing that it's also the soul of life. Short, for sure, and not always sweet; admittedly unfair and sometimes downright mean. What a treat it was that Herb was here to lighten the load—not just for those who knew him, but for the millions of faceless strangers he entertained from his own faceless vantage point. Considering his vast contribution to our society gives you the inescapable feeling that having the last laugh is vastly overrated.

Add this to his dedication to his fellow and sister man, and you get a portrait of a very rare individual, indeed.

It is right that we honor him. It is unavoidable that we will miss him.

"Calling in the class" is one of the countless euphemisms for any generation whose turn it is to answer the roll for its mortal retirement. As surely as each member of my generation, of my particular class, will be unsparingly called, Herb was in a class all by himself.

It is clearly certain that, in this least certain of worlds, Herb Sargent's absence cannot possibly make our hearts grow any fonder.

Charles Grodin

I first met Herb Sargent in the ’70s when I hosted *Saturday Night Live*.

I don’t remember any exchange we had at that time. He seemed very nice and very quiet.

I ran into him over the years, here and there. Again I don’t remember any exchanges, but he seemed very nice and very quiet.

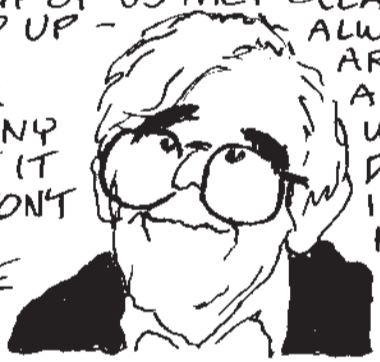
Sometime maybe 10, 20 years ago, he asked me to emcee the Writers Guild, East Awards Dinner, and I’m sure we must have had some exchanges, but again all I remember is very nice and very quiet.

Over the years he asked me to do the emcee thing once, maybe twice again. I did it last year. Very flattering.

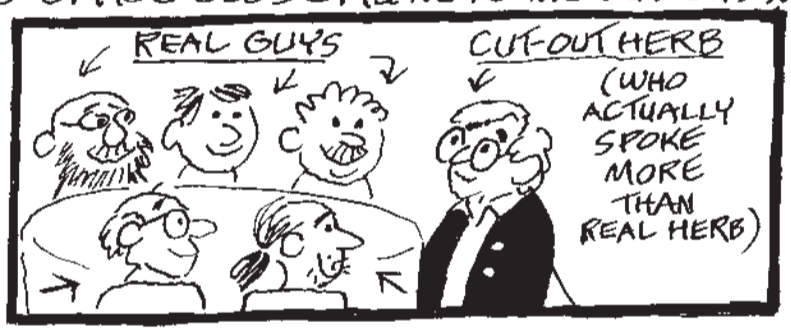
We writers can be besieged. Sometimes for better, often for worse. In my case with Herb, there was no besieging—just very quiet, very nice, but he obviously got the job done. That’s extraordinary.

A MAN OF FEW WORDS

SPOKEN, THAT IS. (HE WROTE MANY.) HIS PHONE MESSAGE: "YA GOT SARGENT." A MERE 3 WORDS. HE FIGURED YOU KNEW THE DRILL, SO HE SKIPPED IT, AS HE SKIPPED ALL CLICHES, EXCEPT THE CLICHE "FRIENDS COUNT." A GROUP OF US MET OCCASIONALLY FOR LUNCH. HERB, WHEN HE SHOWED UP – ALWAYS COVERED THE TAB, SECRETLY, BY PRE- ARRANGEMENT WITH THE JOINT. BUT NEVER ADMITTED IT. (WOULD HAVE REQUIRED TOO MANY WORDS.) HE LIKED THE CAMERADERIE, BUT IT DISCOMFITED HIM. ULTIMATELY, HE SAID, "DON'T INVITE ME ANY MORE." TO FILL THE VOID, WE FASHIONED A LIFE-SIZE CUT-OUT HERB, WITH THE ICONIC BAGGY BLUE BLAZER. THE BUTTONS BORE THE LIKENESS, NOT OF THE TRADITIONAL ROMAN EMPEROR – BUT OF LUNCH ORGANIZER AND THEN-EMPEROR OF WGAE, EDDIE ADLER. NEXT TIME YOU'RE AT THE GUILD, VISIT THE FAUX HERB – WHICH RESIDES IN MONA'S OFFICE CLOSET (& NOTE THE BUTTONS).



A SAT. NIGHT LIVE WRITER SAW HERB AS THE RETIRED GUNSLINGER WHO PROTECTED THE WOMEN FROM THE HIRED MALE GUNS WHO TERRORIZED THEM. LONG AFTER HE LEFT THE SHOW, SHED CRY OUT, "SHANE, SHANE, COME BACK, SHANE!"



MY SHANE WHILE I PUT TOGETHER A BOOK AND T.V. MUSEUM SEMINAR ABOUT FRED ALLEN, HERB NUKED EVERY OBSTACLE I MET, OPENING DOORS TO GET ME INTERVIEWS AND VALUABLE MATERIAL. WHEN THE EVENT WAS NEARLY CANCELLED DUE TO LACK OF PANELISTS, HERB PHONED: "YA GOT ALAN, KURT & ADOLPH," HE SAID, LEAVING OUT "KING, VONNEGUT, GREEN," SAVING 3 WORDS.

Bobbie Handman

Herb offered to help People For the American Way and I took great advantage of him for 20 years. We were required to do a large fundraising dinner every year, and I couldn't begin to think about it without Herb Sargent. He helped with the concept, the performers and ultimately, with the text. He would come to all the technical meetings, and after I got him a typewriter, pencil and paper, he would come to the rehearsals. Norman Lear, our founder and chairman, of course had such respect for Herb's talent and felt that we were in a good place if Herb was there with us.

It's not possible for me to start thinking about new political activity without Herb to suggest the title, some of the people who might perform and then be there on the typewriter when we needed him. He never came to any of the performances, no matter how much I would try to persuade him. He was shy, reluctant and maybe bored. I am sure the story I am telling about Herb's support of good causes is just one of many, because Herb's political being was very concrete and generous. Though he was so soft spoken I could rarely hear what he was saying, somehow I did whatever it was he suggested. It will never happen again, and I miss him.

Tony Hendra

Herb Sargent – American

Many of my friends and colleagues who are paying their last tributes to Herb in these pages will revel in his genial, intelligent, beautifully articulated and targeted humor. But I'd like to pay my last tribute to him for something a bit different. Hilarious times though we had in the almost 40 years I knew him, I could never really tell him what it was that made him so important as a friend. It would have embarrassed him, I think, he would have gotten a little flustered, wagged his silvery head in that self-deprecating way. But this is my last chance to say it, so here goes.

Herb Sargent was the kind of American I came to America to find.

I got to know him in the New York comedy milieu of the mid-'60s, when I was half of a comedy team: the link was *That Was the Week That Was*. (He wrote the U.S. version; I'd contributed a little to the original U.K. version.) I took an instant shine to him: he was a one-off who didn't fit into any of the categories I was accustomed to. He wasn't a manic tummler from the Catskills (where my partner Nic Ullett and I cut our comedic teeth); he wasn't a blandified, "keep-it-light" guardian of good taste from variety television; he wasn't a Kennedy-college-kid of the Second City mold. He could navigate all those areas, but he was different. He wasn't ashamed to be intelligent and his material always had a point. He was the best-read and best-informed humor writer I'd ever met.

Vietnam was heating up at the time, along with a debate in comedy circles about whether there was any way to deal with it comedically or indeed, whether there was any place at all for comedy in a world that included such folly. It was also a time when many guys in comedy had a war under their belts or at minimum a stint in the Armed Forces, something that in discussions of such issues they would never let you forget. But in all our conversations about Vietnam and all our subsequent conversations about matters military, it wasn't until almost 30 years later in 1993 that Herb let slip one night that he'd fought in the Pacific.

That was Herb. Modest to the point of self-effacement, never pulling rank, never trying to shut you up by asserting some kind of moral or professional superiority. Respect was the fuel that drove Herb in everything he did, respect for others' opinions, others' talent, others' work, even respect for the effort expended if the work sucked. In all the years I knew Herb I never once heard or saw him put down another writer. He found kinder and more constructive ways to critique.

For someone my age who came to consciousness in the ultimate "Me Decade," the 1950s, Herb was a link to that greatest of American generations, the one that came to consciousness in the man-made disaster of the Depression and resolved that the advocates of greed and privilege who were responsible would never again corrupt the Republic. It was a generation that saw clearly the head-on conflict between profit and people and came down solidly on the side of people. Other than their victory over fascism, their greatest weapon in that never-ending struggle was the union movement; it's a source of great pride to me that I knew someone like Herb who, despite the brutal

attacks on working people over the last quarter century, never—till the day he died—lost faith in the union, in its power and its validity.

So where's the funny? What about Herb's brilliance? I'll leave documenting that to others, but I will say this. It may not be cool to assert that humor has meaning, but the fact remains, meaning informed every word Herb wrote. He specialized in topical humor, which is to say humor about anything in the news; but in an area where a lot of what passes for humor simply reflects the pack mentality of the latest news cycle, Herb was always at great pains to get it right. Not cheap, not easy, not what the pack thought. And it always had a point to make, quietly, playfully, gently, subtly. Herb never raised his voice however loud he was making you laugh.

In the howling dog pound of today's public discourse and the raucousness and crudity of much of the humor that reflects it, Herb's approach might not seem valid or practicable or—direst of putdowns—funny. But Herb's humor was funny—fall-down funny, pointed as it might have been, well-informed though it might have been and never demeaning to anyone who didn't deserve richly to be demeaned. It's the memory of laughter Herb leaves behind, the laughter of countless meetings and countless evenings, evenings which unfailingly left you wanting more of his company, smart laughter, kind laughter, generous laughter, laughter that never left you feeling the less for having joined in, laughter which sprang from the same source which made him so fine and memorable a human being: that fundamental decency which was once synonymous with America and which, some day soon, will be again.

So long Herb. Man, I miss you.

Buck Henry

"You've got SARgent!" That's what his answering machine said. That was all it said. For at least the last 20 years. No "leave a message at the sound of..." Or, "we'll call you back as soon as..." Or, god forbid, "have a nice day." Three words—that was generally enough for any Sargent communication—short and sweet—or short and funny.

He had a great wife named LeGrand and a great brother named Alvin. Those are the facts. The rest is opinion.

He deeply disliked two things: verbiage and Los Angeles. The ultimate hell for him was the necessity of having to go to Hollywood for "talks." I once sat in an office next to him and when he hadn't said anything for two or three days I told him that sometimes I call his answering machine just so I can remember what his voice sounds like. "So do I," he said.

I have no idea how many television shows I worked on with him. *That Was the Week That Was* and *Saturday Night Live* and a dozen network "specials"—usually more or less topical satires—and about 10 year-end radio shows for NPR where Jane Curtin and Tony Hendra and Robert Krulwich and I would sit in a recording studio improvising endlessly until Herb would finally open the control room door and nod encouragingly and when we bitched about how lame we were would always say, "It was—GOOD," and that made us happy even if we didn't really believe him. When we had trouble finding anything funny about a particular subject Herb invariably had a terse witty play on words that would give us something to work with.

In a business built around very large, needy egos Herb was an anomaly. I never heard him claim credit for anything he ever wrote—and there were dozens of funny people and hundreds of shows and god knows how many political events that Herb provided material for. I was at a dinner with Herb after one of those events and a clever guy came in and quoted a funny line that a second clever guy had "invented." I knew that Herb had made up the line and had told it to the second clever guy because I was there when he did. Herb just chuckled as though he was hearing it for the first time.

He had a devastating effect on women. I often asked him whether he'd been married five or six or was it seven times. "Not that many," he would say.

There's a story—possibly apocryphal—but I've always liked it. It goes like this: once upon a time Herb took a very fashionable lady to a very classy restaurant where she ordered for herself an impossibly complex and demanding meal—-specific temperatures at which various exotic foodstuffs should be cooked, certain ingredients to be left out and others to be added, side dishes prepared in difficult ways and a special unusual wine for each separate course. The order took five minutes. The waiter then turned to Herb who smiled and raised two fingers. Short, surprising, funny.

"You've got SARgent." I wish we still did.

Barbara Howar

Herb Sargent earned many awards in his illustrious career but never for creative lying. Empty praise, like idle chitchat, was as alien to his nature as bigotry and disloyalty. Frankly, just getting him to talk at all was a monumental feat, and if you weren't looking for an honest answer you didn't press for his opinion. Even when he didn't actually speak, which was most of the time, he could convey the unvarnished truth with a cocked brow, a wry smile, or, God help you, that withering glance over the rim of those black half-frame glasses.

Sly asides and keen observations were more his style—deadly accurate, yet couched with a quirky humor that was neither mean-spirited nor cruel. Before anything escaped his lips it was first gristed through the mill of his conscience and soul; when warranted, however, encouragement of someone's talent spurted like a geyser. With a sense of the absurd rivaling Kafka's, his grasp of human foibles included his own, but he didn't volunteer his private peccadilloes, nor expose those of others. Fools were ignored rather than suffered, and little really riled him except injustice, particularly that of the powerful against the weak.

Although remarkably well informed and astute, he wasn't disposed to posture or lecture. Instead, he would quietly zing the pompous moralizer with a hilarious one-liner that simultaneously mocked political correctness while reinforcing the verity of it at a gut level. Potshots weren't in his arsenal; when he had something to say, he just flat out said it, lacing the deeply held convictions with devastating drollness and in as few words as possible. Such restraint was rare in comedy writers.

Reluctantly egged into a dueling contest one Sunday with *The Washington Post*'s Ben Bradlee to complete *The New York Times* crossword puzzle—in ink and timed to a stopwatch—Herb was silent throughout. Neither contender would claim victory, each giving the other that accolade, but later, when I took the newspapers out to the trash, I saw they'd filled in all the answers accurately. Start to finish in precisely eight minutes.

Probably every generation has a different concept of what it takes to be an exceptional person, but I will always have those two men inextricably linked in my mind: one a commanding journalist delivering newsworthy facts; the other farcically unmasking the newsmakers' hypocrisy on *Saturday Night Live*. Each in his separate sphere, and despite divergent backgrounds and educations, exercised enormous influence on public opinion. Both managed to remain famously modest and incorruptible.

Herb had an uncanny knack for subtly persuading you to rethink a situation, and though possessed of a low-keyed voice and a stubborn refusal to ever repeat a comment, he could argue, albeit taciturnly, until he got the point across. Whenever he shoved those half-rim glasses atop his leonine head of hair, I knew I was about to learn something I needed to know whether I wanted to or not. "Think of yourself as transparent, Barbara," he advised in an unusually long burst of conversation. "And let petty jabs float right through your body and out the other side." "But you fight back!" I countered.

"Only if it's important," he said. "When it's about something that matters more than false pride and hurt feelings."

Since his death, I often wish I'd saved more of those Herbisms, stockpiling them the way he collected things: old matchbooks, theater programs, manuscripts, postcards and all the rest of the memorabilia he kept sentimentally stored away in a spare room. Often he'd joke about maybe being a distant cousin of the Collier brothers, once saying that, beneath all that accumulated clutter, he'd probably unearth Amelia Earhart or the mysteriously disappeared Judge Crater.

Herb's brain, while uniquely adept at original thought, was a veritable Google source for bygone as well as current events, and he took great delight in dredging up the trivial likes of Judge Crater—about whom I was clueless, though I pretended otherwise. But Herb never once called my or anyone else's face-saving bluff over something he didn't consider a serious breach of integrity. Shading the truth for vanity purposes was acceptable; distorting it for political or personal gain wasn't.

I told that to Alvin Sargent, Herb's only sibling and an equally exceptional man, on the morning he woke me with a phone call to say, "Herbie's gone." Although riddled with grief and loss, Alvin and I began to fondly reminisce, reminding each other of vintage Herb anecdotes until we began laughing. "He was the most honest person I ever knew," Alvin concluded. "In his entire life, he never told me a single lie." "Not to me either," I said. "Even when I really wanted him to."

Murray Horwitz

Write something about Herb Sargent.... As with most writing assignments, my first impulse is to pick up the phone and call Herb. "Ya got... Sargent," his voice on the answering machine would say, with that tiny ellipsis between the second and third words. And I would leave my plea for help.

Very often, months and years after people die, situations arise when you think, "I know just what so-and-so would say." But I have no idea what Herb Sargent would say. Nobody could. I know it would be original, very funny and laconic.

Ed Kleban, Herb and maybe Peter Stone were driving out to the Hamptons one time in the 1970s. They passed a Long Island duckling farm—thousands and thousands of ducks enclosed by a chain-link fence with barbed wire on top. "Geez," said Kleban. "Looks like a concentration camp for ducks."

"Duckau," Sargent said.

He was terrifyingly fast—and accurate. At our very first meeting, after giving me a sobering assessment of my poor chances of making the *Saturday Night Live* team late in its first season, he asked me what else I was working on. I told him I had been researching a lot of Fats Waller tunes (for what became the musical *Ain't Misbehavin'*). The phone rang, and he excused himself as he took the call. After he hung up, the following exchange occurred in exactly the time it will take you to read it:

Herb: "Well, I'll talk to Lorne, but the staff is pretty much set."

Me: "Well, Mr. Sargent, in the words of an old Fats Waller tune, 'My Fate Is In Your Hands.'"

Herb: "Yeah, but your fate's too big."

I walked out trembling.

There was no need to tremble, as it turned out, because speed and accuracy were only part of Herb's greatness. He was a generous collaborator. He always had an open mind and very high standards. He was often impatient, but not with the work. He was impatient with people and things that got in the way of the work, like bureaucracy, incompetence and Los Angeles.

We tend not to talk about it much, but Herb was handsome. He had an instant attractiveness that made you want to be liked by him. He was like the coolest guy in your high school class, only the class was all of America.

Coupled with that cool was a fierce integrity. Everybody sought him out because of it, and a recommendation from Herb would get you to just about anybody in show business

and, often, politics. That integrity informed his comedy, and quietly kept American broadcast satire going through some very bleak times.

Broadcast satire is alive and mostly well these days, but we have to remember that there have been times when it was sick and almost dead. For over 50 years, Herb kept it going—sometimes almost single-handedly—on television *(Tonight, That Was the Week That Was, Saturday Night Live, The News Is the News* and maybe hundreds of specials) and radio (NPR's *Backfire!*). He was an activist (as WGA, East members know), and his comedy was suppressed on more than one occasion.

He hated talking about himself and he would have hated all this praising prose. Once, we submitted a show for a Peabody Award (that we didn't get), and I sent him the application to sign. I had written a description of our show, saying how great it was. He called and said, "This is terrible. You can't send this. It's like ad copy. Just say it's a one-hour satirical show."

So I'm sorry for the ad copy above. And in fact, I have now written to the point where I know exactly what Herb would say. He would say, "Stop."

Norman Jewison

Herb Sargent was tall, handsome, gentle and a true humorist.

Women adored him. Men envied him.

Everything he saw around him or read in the daily newspapers or watched on television became his material. His wry, ironic sense of humor could make anything funny, especially very serious subjects. His comments were always original and insightful. If he were still around today he would probably be the head writer on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

I worked with Herb on several live TV shows back in the late '50s, before I left television for the movies. It was when television was wild and unpredictable. Every show was like opening night on Broadway. Frantic, desperate and filled with terror. But there was Herb. Tall, quiet and cool. Always had a great line at the last minute before airtime. Always found a better capper or ending for the sketch.

Herb was never excited, nor did he ever "lose it." He was the coolest. While Selma Diamond was shouting at Buddy Arnold or Goodman Ace was explaining a line, Herb would sit alone in the corner at his typewriter. Hands dangling. He sometimes would sit for a very long time, shaking his hands while his mind was focusing—then suddenly, he would begin to type very fast—a burst of thought. Everyone would stop, waiting. Sometimes he would pull the paper out of the typewriter and throw it in the wastepaper basket. Other times, he would hand it over to be read.

Herb hated the West Coast. "I could never work there," he said. New York was his town and his humor somehow belonged there. Like Woody's or Doc Simon's. For many years he almost lived at the NBC Studios at Rockefeller Center. As a writer and script consultant on *Saturday Night Live* he continued to delight everyone with his wit and sardonic smile—year after year.

He was devoted to the craft of writing and served his Guild with distinction. God, how I miss the laughs.

Steve Koren

For a year and a half, Herb Sargent wouldn't talk to me. Today I can't get his voice out of my head. It was 1990 and I was working as a tour guide at Rockefeller Center, birthplace to some of our greatest comedy shows. Among them—*Saturday Night Live*. Herb was one of the original writer/producers, and for several months I'd left him phone messages begging for advice on how to become a writer, sent him unsolicited writing samples and had the audacity to show up at his office for several unscheduled appointments (when I could sneak past the receptionist). Despite my persistence, I couldn't corner him. Herb had perfected the art of eluding me.

It was late summer when I finally managed to make Herb-contact by leaping out from behind a parked car as he walked down 50th Street. In typical Herb fashion he was unfazed, nonchalantly said, "Excuse me," and strode past me up the sidewalk. At least we had spoken. Inspired, the following week I made a last-minute jump onto a closing elevator he had boarded. Unable to escape, Herb was as polite and helpful as anyone would be to their stalker. He kept his distance, told me to keep writing and wished me luck. He also suggested I stop following him or he'd call the police. I wasn't sure if he was kidding. Sensing my distress, Herb cocked his head down, peered over his glasses and gave me a sly glance—similar to Clint Eastwood when he found something amusing in a Sergio Leone movie. No laugh, just an intimidating squint and barely perceptible upturned corner of the mouth. This look meant Herb Sargent was, in fact, joking—although he positively found me annoying.

Why stalk Herb? I wanted to be a comedy writer and the only person willing to read my jokes was my mother. Her response involved law school applications. So, one night I went to a party and bumped into a friend who was really just an acquaintance (technically a complete stranger) who told me that Herb Sargent was a great comedy writer. Perfect. A friend of a stranger. I'd made my first big showbiz connection. Now all I had to do was let Herb know.

Getting to the point—something Herb often advised—after two years of chasing him as he chased cabs trying to escape me, I was hired as the *Saturday Night Live* receptionist. Poor Herb. He had no idea. Marci Klein, who years later would help produce the show, had taken pity on me and granted me an interview.

It was my first day "recepting" (answering phones). I was thrilled. Around noon I was basking in the glory of refilling the *SNL* stapler when I heard a "ding." The elevator doors opened. Off stepped Herb Sargent. His wardrobe alone intimidated me. He wore a classic white trench coat over a sharp suit and carried a cool umbrella. I wore ripped Levi's, a stained T-shirt and the closest thing I had to an umbrella was a plastic garbage bag that I kept in a knapsack to throw over my head in case it rained. So there he was and there I sat. My heart sank. The jig was up. I assumed Herb would have me fired. He had every right. I had spent over a year annoying the man. I was a human deer tick that he couldn't dislodge from his life. I guess I was so overwhelmed at getting the chance to refill famous staplers that I

hadn't put two and two together: becoming the *SNL* receptionist also meant that I answered Herb's phone.

So how would I avoid losing my dream job? I quickly came up with the brilliant plan of looking down at my feet, shuffling papers and pretending to search for something in my empty desk drawers. Herb walked towards me. I looked closer at my feet. Herb moved towards his mailbox. I reshuffled. Herb turned towards his office. I prayed. Open door and... shut. Yes! Made it. Still had the job. I could only assume Herb didn't recognize me without a bad-joke-filled manila envelope dangling from my arm. Oddly, I felt sorry for him. This man won Emmys, produced legendary TV specials and helped create *Saturday Night Live*. The one thing he couldn't accomplish was my disappearance. An hour passed. Then, achingly slow, Herb's door cracked open. A shock of gray hair poked out and swiveled in my direction. No, not my direction. Oh, shit.

Herb made a gesture towards me that under any other circumstance meant one person wanted another to approach. Couldn't be. I was so used to seeing Herb's back speed away from me that I wasn't used to interpreting movements from his front. He waved me over again. "Yes, you," he impatiently said and shut his door. Dumbstruck. Herb Sargent initiated a social interaction with me. My mouth went dry. I approached his office.

I had stood outside his door, shoved submissions underneath it and once considered jimmying the lock. Now I found myself standing inside the inner-Sargent sanctum. It was filled with boxes and papers—the wall behind his desk was covered in a large map. The map's purpose, I assumed, was to keep track of my movements so he could consistently move the other way. I gulped a throat full of nothing and turned to him. All I could see was the top of his head. Herb wasn't looking at me. He was peering down at his desk, focused on some sheets of paper. Without looking up, he grunted, "You work here now?" My voice quivered, "Yes, sir. I'm the new receptionist. Sorry about bugging you. I was just—" He tersely cut me off. "Some of this is good," he said. Terrified confusion. *Good?* Some of *what*? Had I missed something? The man finally wants to talk and I'm lost. Then it came into focus. Specifically, the sheets of paper Herb was studying while I floundered: it was the last writing sample I had shoved under his door. His last sentence replayed—"Some of this is good." One of the great moments of my life. "Keep writing," he continued, "I'll look at your stuff. If things work out, maybe we can make you an apprentice." An even greater moment. Then he added, "Any phone messages?" Not such a great moment, but a quick reminder that I had a long way to go and a lot to learn.

Over the next year, I wrote as many jokes as possible between answering phones and sorting mail. The next year, Herb got me promoted to researcher for *Weekend Update*, allowing me to work directly with him. Throughout, Herb read and critiqued everything I wrote. Hundreds of jokes—most God awful. And God bless him, he made time for them all.

A slew of wildly talented performers and writers gave me advice at *Saturday Night Live*. I like to think that I learned from them all but I consider Herb Sargent my mentor. I'm

not sure he would agree. I think Herb helped anyone who he believed truly wanted to be a writer. But he never lectured me about writing. No "in my day" speeches. If he liked something, he nodded, half-smiled and passed it on to the real writers. If he hated something, he'd give me an impatient look and say, "You can do better." And sometimes if he liked one of my ideas but not the execution—and I was having a lucky day—we rewrote one of my jokes together.

When he thought I was ready—or maybe because I couldn't pay my rent—Herb actually convinced someone to give me money in exchange for my writing. Who? The Mayor of New York. He was just one of dozens of public figures who called Herb's office seeking barbed commentary that they could pass off as their own wit. Technically, I should point out that the Mayor hired Herb and I assume Herb tricked him into also hiring me. Herb guided me through that first writing job and I will never forget it. He gave me much needed confidence at a tough time. Thanks to Herb, I found another six-month supply of faith—plus the rent.

Eventually, due to Herb and some other generous people who I'll always be indebted to, I was hired as a writer on *Saturday Night Live*. After several dream years on staff, I moved to the West Coast to try my hand at sitcoms and movies. Herb moved on to be president of the Writers Guild, East.

At first, whenever I returned to New York, I made sure to stop by and say hi. Later those visits turned into "tell him I say hellos" through mutual friends. Did I forget him? Never. To be honest, I guess I was always worried that Herb would disapprove of something he'd seen that I'd written. The kid inside me still wanted my mentor's approval. I feared another one of his "you can do betters." I promised myself to ditch the paranoia and just call the man. Sure, I had told Herb how much he meant to me dozens of times—and he truly hated seeing me emote—but I always felt the need to thank him once more. With his passing, I missed that chance. I will always regret it. One of his lessons echoes; I should have just gotten to the point.

But Herb still helps me. You can say he's my editor in chief: when I write I can hear his voice in my head. Sometimes he likes my work, sometimes no. (He thought this entire article was too sentimental.) Surprisingly, nowadays, because I'm more experienced, I even dare to argue with Herb. And he listens, peering over his glasses, still cool as Clint, waiting for me to shut up. When I finally do, I start rewriting because, thanks to Herb Sargent, I always know I can do better.

Robert Krulwich

My Boss, Herb Sargent

For 10 years, who knows why, maybe he won us in a card game, Herb Sargent was executive producer of our improvisational comedy group. There were four of us: Buck Henry, Jane Curtin, Tony Hendra and me. And from the beginning we were (how shall I put this?) not very manageable. Buck liked to stay asleep till afternoon, Jane had a TV job so she'd call in from California (try doing improv when you can't see who you're doing improv with) and I was an economics reporter with no theater training. And I was in charge.

We didn't have time to rehearse. Herb would order sandwiches, relish trays, sodas; there'd be legal pads, pencils—all sharpened and ready to go.

We'd arrive. ("Buck? Is Buck there? Hello?" asked Jane.) We'd munch nuts. We'd talk about our kids.

Herb would take a seat in the glass booth with the engineer. He'd given each of us a pile of news stories, sports, politics, business, movie items—all to get us going. But we didn't go. We'd sit there, rustling through the items, and when the silence grew a little too long, he'd offer starter jokes: "Did you hear what the president said to the pope?"

We were, we knew, expected to catch a wind, find our rhythm, but try as we might, there were moments—long, long moments—during our studio sessions when even our engineer sat quietly staring at her hands. But not Herb. He'd be jotting, he'd be nodding, he'd pace, he'd giggle, he'd feed us lines, he'd feed us sandwiches, he'd be all happy, then all quiet, he'd be tense, he'd relax; I'd see him behind the glass, listening intently, his eyes closed—then he'd smile. Herb was having a good time. Why, I don't know. And that's what sticks with me, now that he's gone. We, his team, were so acutely aware of what wasn't working, what wasn't even close to working and yet Herb was a picture of hope. Of possibility. Imagine Hansel and Gretel deep in the woods, no way out, no hint of which way to go, crumbs scattering on the forest floor and Hansel turns to Gretel and says, "Now what?" And just then, from the other side of a bush, there's this white-haired guy waving a pad and pencil saying, "How many Democrats have pet turtles named Monica?" He broke the mood. He believed. Often, he was the only one.

Our original assignment was to be a recurring segment on Connie Chung's prime-time TV magazine show. We were told to riff on the events of the week. That didn't work too well since we would regularly invent facts. One time, Buck Henry bumped off Nancy Reagan. (She weighed 100 pounds. Her new mink? Three hundred. The poor woman was smothered by her own fur coat, he explained.) The session never aired. In fact, nothing we did ever aired—but the tape got to the president of CBS News who called me to say, as long as he was president, there would never ever be any misstatements of fact on a CBS News broadcast. I tried to explain that what we were doing was not, in the strict sense, news, but the network president had his standards and we had, well, Herb.

So Herb moved us to National Public Radio, an organization not entirely comfortable with Polish pope jokes, but Herb had a friend and the friend got us onto the schedule. We were hoping for something monthly, maybe even weekly, but what we got was one hour per year—the hour being around New Year's Eve, not the most desirable slot, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that Herb wanted us to do this thing and how do you say no to a guy whose face kept saying silently that we were getting close, so close, all we had to do was... what?

One time, we hit the moon. NPR had been invited to present an evening at the White House and we were asked to contribute 10 minutes. Herb called, delighted. We called each other. We were frightened. He took us to the Plaza Hotel, got us a table in the Oak Room, poured on the sandwiches, the relish, the pencils.... We wrote. He listened. We re-wrote. He ordered more pads. And every so often, in the midst of it I'd glance at his face. What a face! Sometimes puzzled, sometimes delighted, sometimes squinched, pained, slackjawed, his glasses on, then off, then on again, most of the time Herb said nothing. He was a quiet man. But his eyes, his eyes said, "don't," his eyes said, "do," and following those eyes, we finished our outline, we went before the president, the president laughed and so his guests laughed, and when I looked up across the room—past the president and the senators and the guests, past Hansel and Gretel and the grim-faced engineer, past Buck missing, Tony despondent, Jane on the phone, past my own "I can't, I can't...."—there was Herb, his eyes saying: "Yes you can."

Gail Lee

Remembering Herb

Here's the interesting thing about Herb Sargent: the writer who launched a thousand comedy sketches was, in real life, a man of few words. Often he was the quietest guy in a room. During WGAE Council meetings—which Herb chaired in his capacity as Guild president—the banging gavel sometimes made more noise than Herb. But when he opened his mouth—well, the man was insightful. The man knew funny. A team of writers locked overnight in a room could not top the jokes that sprang from his head.

Most of my contact with Herb came from serving with him on the council. I'll remember him as a leader who provided a calming tone to discussions that could at times turn raucous. He was a gentleman who kept meetings on an even keel and on the moral high ground.

One more thing: Herb was modest. If you did not already know about his impressive resume—the fact that he worked as a writer and producer with the giants of the entertainment world—if you did not know that, you were not going to learn it from Herb. He was reticent about his accomplishments and always gracious to acknowledge the contributions of others. That's why he was such a good mentor. He was generous with his time and praise. He made people feel good about themselves and their work. He infused people with confidence.

Herb's death came so suddenly. We thought he'd survived the tough part—the heart surgery—and was on his way to recovery. So when the Guild e-mailed the sad news, the radio newsroom where I work was in shock. Normally we don't make a big deal about reporting the deaths of TV/movie writers. (Because the public only knows the actors, not the talent behind the scenes.) But Herb's death got on the air immediately and loving tributes to him were put together by Guild newswriters in the hours to come.

The Guild's Awards Committee, of which I am a member, also wanted to honor Herb in some way. So we have established an award that will be given to comically talented men and women who, like Herb, have motivated and inspired others. It will not necessarily be given every year because special people like Herb don't stand on street corners.

It was Herb who coined the *Saturday Night Live* phrase, "Not Ready for Prime Time Players." Sadly he was very much in his prime when he died. His passing is a big loss to us all.

Sidney Lumet

Many years ago I received a script from Herb called *Bye Bye Braverman*. It was based on Wallace Markfield's book *To An Early Grave*. It was as perfect a script as I'd ever received. My only suggestion was that we could cut page one because its point was taken care of further into the script. Herb agreed.

The script was a funny, moving tale of four guys looking for a cemetery in Brooklyn. Their best friend had just died and, in keeping with Jewish law, he had to be in the ground within 24 hours. The desperation was increased by the fact that he was the first contemporary, the first of "their bunch" who had died—so there was even more urgency in being at the funeral. Despite the funniness of the script, it *was* about a funeral and we all know how well that goes down with movie companies.

However I was coming off a hit and, using my temporary hotness, I submitted it and miracle of miracles, it was accepted.

Having gotten a beautifully written script and having, against all odds, gotten a go-ahead to do the movie, I then proceeded to fuck it up.

I cast it badly (in most parts), directed it with my heavy Jewish hand, overdid some parts, underplayed others—in short, what should have been a soufflé came out a latkeh. (For those of you of the Gentile or Muslim persuasion: a potato pancake that stays in the digestive tract for four days minimum.)

Over the years, I kept apologizing to Herb for my bad work. I never heard nor felt any reprobation from him. In fact, he never tired of telling me how grateful he was that the picture was done at all. Considering that this was his first movie production and had flopped critically and financially to the detriment of his film future, it showed a generosity of spirit that I haven't seen since. And as I got to know him over the years, it was typical of him.

Even today I can see that slightly cocked head, a twinkle in the eyes—but the face never giving away that he was about to say one sentence (and only one) that would cut to the heart of the matter and also be uproariously smart and seriously funny. And never mean. That gentleness, that unselfishness is something I miss every day.

LeGrand Mellon

It took four hours for Herb to fall in love with Haiti. On his first trip he had survived the chaos of the airport customs and baggage areas, waded through the beggars—the crippled, deformed, blind unfortunates who surround the airport—and made it to the little red jeep where our best friend and partner, Luqueèce Bélizaire, waited to travel with us to Deschapelles, the site of Hôpital Albert Schweitzer. It is a 100-mile trip—70 miles north up the coast on a one-and-a-half lane blacktop string of potholes—then 30 miles inland on a dirt and gravel mud slide.

Almost as soon as we left Port-au-Prince, we were in absolute darkness. No street lights. No electricity. Once in a while, way off in the distance, we could see the flicker of a small fire or candle. Otherwise, except for the car's erratic low beams, we were in black soup. Suddenly a great *whoosh* whipped by Herb's window.

> Herb: "What was that!!!!!"
> LeGrand: "A bourik" (kreyòl for donkey, pronounced boo-reek.)
> Herb: "A BUICK?????"

And with that, Herb fell in love with Haiti—with a whole new language full of delightfully wacky words that were obviously created specifically for his enjoyment.

He did learn the language well enough to play with it and to make friends—and he began to collect all things Haitian. Of course books: rare or new dictionaries, histories, novels, poetry.... Paintings and sculptures by masters as well as contemporary artists. Maps, old and new. Autographs and documents signed by notables. He subscribed to the *Haitian Times* weekly newspaper.

And Herb adopted nine children. Not legally as we know it, but he became their "moun responsab," or "responsible person." This is a serious commitment. Herb is taking care of their health and welfare—and their education. He visited all of their schools, met their headmasters and teachers and guaranteed that he would provide for their schooling as far as they wanted to take it. Rosekarly may not make it out of grammar school, but Belex deserves to go to M.I.T. Oliancy paints and sculpts but is fascinated by architecture. All are learning to use computers—on gifts from Andrew Smith who has contributed more laptops than I can count.

Herb really did love Haiti and went with me as often as he could. I always think of him sitting on the terrace in the late afternoon as he looked out over the lush Artibonite Valley to the mountains beyond—surrounded by his children.

Lorne Michaels

When I think of Herb Sargent, I think of the New York I fell in love with when I moved here. He was sophisticated, kind and gentle—but with a real sense of how the world worked and of New York City, where anything could happen. This international city, which he loved.

I first met him when I was working on a special for CBS with Lily Tomlin—I was a writer, and Herb was brought in from New York to be the producer. All I knew about him at that point was that he was a legendary New York writer. But that's where I got to know him. Of course he was funny, but he was also very kind and encouraging. I didn't quite understand how the network worked, and he seemed to have a good instinct for both supporting the writing and keeping the network stuff away from us.

So when I got to New York to do *Saturday Night Live*, I got a call from Herb and we had dinner. He took me to Elaine's—there were pictures of him on the walls and Elaine adored him, I couldn't have had a better introduction. Since he was one of the few people I knew in New York, I told him a lot about what I was planning to do and why I was excited. The next day I was at my office at NBC and I got a call from him. He said, "I want to talk to you. I'm going to come over now." I said, "Okay…." When he got there he said he wanted to work on the show. I told him that the top money for a writer was $700 a week—it was a late-night budget and there was absolutely no money. He said he didn't care. And that was it.

There was a show announced a month or two after ours called *Saturday Night Live with Howard Cosell*. They took our title, because we were the late night show and they were a big prime-time show—we fell back to the title of *NBC's Saturday Night*. The other show was the expensive version of what we were trying to do. And I know that they wanted Herb for that. But instead he chose us.

Obviously it was a decision I never regretted, but to say he was overqualified was an understatement. The phrase "Not Ready for Prime Time Players," was Herb's. We didn't really have a name. I was going to bill the cast by name, just put them as a list and say: cast. But he said, "I think they should have a name, what about the Not Ready for Prime Time Players?" And I said, "I don't know…." I couldn't quite gauge it. And to this day it's still a part of popular language. Every now and then you'll see "not ready for prime time" in a headline somewhere. The fact that Herb was working on our show gave it absolute credibility; it was just understood that we were serious.

That Was the Week That Was was a definite influence on where I'd hoped to go with *Weekend Update*—only we were going to be doing it in seven minutes as opposed to a half hour. So Herb naturally went to *Update*—began looking after it and helping to shape it. He made sure that *Weekend Update* looked and sounded like a real news broadcast. He brought a standard that was made out of steel. There was no betraying that. He was gentle and funny, but very strong and unyielding on what was important. Sometimes Chevy—or others after him, Dennis Miller, whoever—would say, "I'm not

getting a laugh with this story." And Herb would say, "But that has to be the lead—it's the important story and we have to deal with it. We'll make the joke better, but we're not pulling that story." Because it couldn't just be a series of jokes. It had to be real and credible and smart.

Herb was the one who led me through much of the "how to do a show in New York" and helped me make the choices which kept us on the air. Davy Wilson and Audrey Pert—who were the backbone of the control room—were Herb's recommendations and choices. I could bounce things off of him. And when I was preoccupied or overwhelmed, people would talk to Herb and ask his advice. So, particularly with the beginning writers, he was a tremendous influence and teacher. He always seemed to be incredibly encouraging. He was never dismissive. He was the steady hand that said, "You're going to be all right." And he did all that without really talking that much.

Herb was the opposite of the comedy writer who's always on. He was somebody in a room that would throw in a line, as opposed to dominating the room. But one-on-one, it was easy to talk to him. He and I would have dinner alone and just talk; he'd tell me stories, I'd ask him for his opinion on things.... He was very smart that way. I think he just wasn't very good at confrontation.

I remember once, Herb was going out with an actress who was very verbal. He was in his office talking to her on the phone when she was in Los Angeles. The writer's meeting was called at something like five o'clock, somewhere around that time, and somebody went to get Herb. He put the phone down on his desk and stood in on the meeting—because he never sat, he'd just stand at the door. The meeting always took about a half hour. And when it was over, he went back to his office, picked up the phone and continued to listen.

Marilyn Suzanne Miller

On Thursday night, May 6, 2005, Herb Sargent, seven-term president of the Writers Guild of America, East, died. No more like Herb will follow. He was a special-version Gentleman Comedy-Writer/Blazer-Wearing Subversive who said almost nothing aloud, but was responsible for more political (and other irreverent) humor—from the mouths of Steve Allen, Johnny Carson, Alan King, Lily Tomlin, Mort Sahl, virtually every liberal presidential candidate since Stevenson, the cast of *That Was the Week That Was* and every "anchorperson" on *Saturday Night Live*'s *Weekend Update* for almost 25 years—than any American comedy writer.

Herb (whose unique style it was to appear daily—for almost 50 years—in the exact same tasteful wardrobe: navy blazer, rep tie, Paul Stuart shirt, saddle shoes) went right under the network radar with his handsome, affable, old-shoe air and just-like-the-network-guys wardrobe, but he was the first true network TV comic anarchist. Dapper, well-read, brilliant, he tiptoed through a network's halls but set off firecrackers on its shows, toppling sacred cows and political villains (who he named, even showed in photos on *Update*). In this way, Herb got his silent opinion out to millions—and it was more rebellious, politically and comically cacophonous than a thousand badly dressed, sneaker-and-jeans-wearing staffs of the many shows today which are styled after the manner of Herb Sargent and provide Herb-style jokes in Herb-invented formats.

His good friends—some of whom included screenwriter Walter Bernstein, Mort Sahl, playwright Herb Gardner, Norman Lear, David Dinkins (who officiated at his wedding) and (yes!) Huntz Hall of the "Dead End Kids" '40s movies—could be found lounging (where there was room amidst the "Collected Newspapers Of All Years") in his *SNL* office. Here he reigned as the King of *Update*, appropriately seated at a desk/throne before a map of the entire world across one whole wall which staked out precisely his domain—the turf that Herb could, and did, make jokes about each week on *SNL*.

Lorne Michaels had the class to hire Herb when he was more than twice the age of anybody else on the first season of *Saturday Night Live*. With a lifetime of show business (and a library so vast it ultimately overwhelmed his office, his desk, his bookcase, his couch, the floor....) he was the great uncle every *SNL* cast member and writer went to with questions like, "Where is Thailand?" and, "But how do they get the TV picture into your house?" which he patiently answered, repeatedly, for years. How we intuited what Herb was like, I don't know, but some vibe magnetized all of us to him in those early years and compelled us to take liberties with this mild-mannered, Esquire-cover-type person.

At the early *SNL*, we worked all day and all night and still had energy to burn. One night at about 3 a.m., Alan Zweibel and I decided it would be funny to empty the office of Tom Davis and Al Franken, pull out their phones from the walls, their lamps, desks, chairs and leave absolutely nothing but a note that said, "See me. Lorne." But where to put the furniture? About 3:30, we had Security unlock Herb's office and shoved desks, chairs and file cabinets on top of each other, filling the office to the ceiling. Only hours

later when Herb began unlocking his door did we exchange looks in a panic, realizing we forgot to ask (or tell) Herb. He just looked at the stuff, said, "How'd you hire movers in the middle of the night?" and got some coffee.

He was married a number of times, had various girlfriends during *SNL*, but we all worried about him: someone reported he'd been in his office Thanksgiving Day (and how would *they* know?). But he ultimately married the marvelous LeGrand Mellon who regularly flew to Haiti to work in a hospital, and sometimes took the phobic-to-leave-New-York Herb with her.

Herb was the first of those New York macho/executive types who won't wear overcoats in under-zero temperatures I had ever met. One time I was with him when he casually left 30-Rock in nothing but that blazer and a cashmere scarf in a below-zero, driving blizzard. As a novice trying to get a cab, I put up my arm and yelled, "Cab!" He pulled it down (in the driving wind) and said, "Never call 'cab,' call 'taxi.'" Not only was it a word more understandable in a blizzard, but (worthy of note even in a blizzard) it was more "de rigueur New York."

When Herb was president of the Guild in the East, he sat at negotiating tables head-to-head with the studios and networks in grueling negotiations on both coasts and went to AFL-CIO receptions at the White House (which he enjoyed more than he admitted). When you'd ask him how negotiations with management were going, (and it seems, during his four terms as president, he was in negotiations all the time), he'd snarl about those things that still hold writers down in show business: age discrimination, payments for DVD usage, network "double dips" (showing shows twice in the same season, second time free).... Most strikingly, he used the very last years of his life fighting those battles, as he had fought, through the comforting gauze of humor, for the things he believed in years and years before.

He loathed leaving New York, and I'll bet he loathes it now. Still I have faith such a quiet, polite figure might be accommodated—given something like his regular bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel wherever assignments for accommodations are made. And knowing how that tender trap of comedy he used brought network executives, audiences and people at home to his cause during life, I can't imagine things could be different now. We miss you, Herb—there'll never be another man like you. And as the waiters at Elaine's can attest, whoever in Heaven took your bags to that bungalow would be in for a nice tip.

Phyllis Newman

I can't remember Herb standing four square facing me or any one else. Do you know what I mean? His body was always at an angle and his head at another one. Is that because his thoughts, his sly humor, his original wit came around a Herb-corner that he had dibs on? Original and unique are not good enough for Herb words.

We worked together on a live prime-time network satirical show, *That Was the Week That Was*. It was based on a highly successful British TV show. I auditioned for Herb and the eminent Broadway producer Leland Hayward. I did an over-the-top, deeply insane impression of Barbra Streisand singing *Happy Days Are Here Again*. Herb's shoulders heaved up and down. His laugh wasn't loud—nothing about Herb was loud—but his eyes were wet.

I loved working for and with him during the years of that show. He was a brilliant writer/producer—whichever he chose. He might make the most outrageous suggestion with the straightest face and then laugh at the thought of its outcome. He was inspired at his typewriter or his writing pad—but it was fun seeing the ideas coming out live. We worked together on many other things over the years, many of which were political. His sense of justice, his passion for truth and respect for democracy will be documented by people more qualified than I.

After my husband, Adolph Green, died, this is the note I got from Larry Gelbart: "The sound you hear is of a mold being broken." I plagiarize.

Walter Pincus

Herb Sargent was the kindest, most gentle and quietest funny person I have ever known. Our dinners, when it was just the two of us—and we had many of them over the years when I would come to New York for a project—had conversation gaps. They were long gaps of sometimes up to five minutes. Herb was even less a running conversationalist than I and the pauses between spoken sentences were extensive. I'd come home and my wife would ask what we talked about and I could never remember the really funny stories and jokes he told, I could only remember the gaps and that warm feeling of having enjoyed the time. Our most "raucous" dinner was at Elaine's one night when Mel Brooks stopped by our table to greet Herb. Brooks sat down for what became a 10-minute, nonstop, hilarious monologue after he learned I was with *The Washington Post*. When Brooks finally left, we both sat for minutes in silence.

Herb and I first bonded in the late 1960s or early 1970s, brought together initially by an unusual situation at a Hamptons summer party. We had both in previous years individually developed a friendship with Gloria Steinem and at this party found ourselves pulled together with several other male Steinem friends in a conversation devoted to figuring a way to protect this woman who needed no protection from an upcoming *Esquire* exposé. The only thing that emerged from that conversation was the beginning of what became our warm, long-lasting friendship. It had a commercial side, of course. Herb is the only person I have known who thought I could be funny, or at least I could come up with material he could make funny. Herb got me involved with *That Was the Week That Was* because he knew I had worked with David Frost on his first documentary on American presidential candidates. Herb even encouraged me to write some not very good material for *The News Is The News*, another of Herb's pet projects.

But Herb created for me the best time I have ever had in my brief Sargent-driven show business career. It was in the late 1970s. He knew I was covering the shady side of Washington for *The Post* and at the same time was a consultant to NBC News. So on Tuesday nights he got me to come up for the initial *Saturday Night Live* writers' meetings in his office that began at 9 p.m. and ended many hours later. Herb had a bottle of champagne on his desk that he and I drank from. Others in the room had their own stimulants, as I learned later on. Herb got me to give a brief resume of the previous week's shenanigans in the nation's capital, after which the writers would present ideas for sketches with Herb playing the role of ringmaster. For me it was a jovial, multi-hour, wise-cracking but intellectual circus. One of my memories is that, after the first few weeks, someone in the back with a guitar began picking up some of my dry sentences and turning them into satirical tunes with a few lyrics actually making it into the show.

We kept in touch over the years, whenever he came to Washington to contribute to a politician's speech or in the last decade to do business for the Writers Guild. On a few occasions our wives, LeGrand and Ann, would join us when we would go out to a dinner. But to my regret, these now seem never to have been enough.

Mort Sahl

In 1954 the boss at the Blue Angel (on East 55th) sent me over to the Hudson Theater to do my first television show. It was the real *Tonight Show with Steve Allen*. They were on the air when I got there so two of the writers, Stan Burns and Herb Sargent, took me into the lobby to do the routine for them. Herb said nothing. One of the jokes referred to blacklisting: "Every time the Russians put an American in jail, *we* put an American in jail." Stan laughed. Herb just said, "Powerful." When I hit the air, he laughed for six minutes—the dam broke; it was a hit. I called Herb and thanked him for the opportunity. He said, "No, it's good."

Then he began to come to the club. One night one of the owners, Herbert Jacoby, thought I didn't speak loud enough but he was self-effacing, so he'd go to different parts of the club and say, "I can't hear you." I said, "What? I can't hear you." Herb said, "He said he can't pay you."

Once he asked a girl out. "Let's go have some laughs," he said. She was a pre-feminist and said, "Just what do you mean, 'laughs?'" Herb said, "Dinner, you know, funny food."

He was in La Scala with me and he kept saying "waitress" as they whizzed by. "Waitress." Finally in desperation he said "actress," and they all came over.

Sometimes he'd wander into my dinners after his had played out. On one occasion I was dining with Bob Kaufman. Herb walked over and said, "I haven't got any money, I haven't got a job and I don't have any talent. You think I'm in trouble?" I said, "Herb, this is Bob Kaufman." And Herb said, "I've declared a moratorium on meeting any new people. You're probably a great guy, but a rule is a rule."

We used to wander around Manhattan buying Gucci wallets, through stationery stores (don't laugh: Rabin signed Camp David with a Pilot P-7), and when things were really grim Herb would say, "We're going to Burberry to get a raincoat."

He was a guy who called when you were at your most depressed. He'd say, "How's Kenslea?" (my wife). Herb-speak for "Be thankful."

When Mort, Jr. was born on July 15th, one day after Herb's birthday, Herb sensed his aloneness. Once when Mort was 14, they disappeared all day. "We went to Burger King for lunch and Johnny Rocket's for dinner, dad," Mort said. "Did Herb like those hamburgers, Mort?" "Yes," my son said, "he likes hamburgers, he just needed permission."

Herb was seeing a steady girl and she began tactically seeing someone else. "She wants to shake me up," Herb said, "that's what an agent would do, not a woman." But most of our exchanges were nods and sighs and throat clearing.

I sent him a script and this otherwise charitable man said, "That's the worst thing I've

ever read." "The author has a gift," I protested. And Herb said, "It's not the gift, it's the thought behind it."

He was most proud of being a writer. He was proud especially of those seven terms as president of the Writers Guild, East. He was at an AFL-CIO convention with LeGrand and was looking around for the most esoteric union. And then he found it: "Look," he said, "there's a Horseshoers' Local. Is that a union?" "Well," LeGrand replied, "they shoe horses, don't they?"

He didn't yell like me, but it was all inside.

Herb left on May 6th, Freud's birthday. I may not have gotten close to the secret, but he always let me in on the joke.

Later, Herb.

Rosie Shuster

Impeccably well informed, Herb Sargent was a man of few words, hilariously chosen and strategically placed. My bet is that, if such things could be measured, Herb had the highest ratio ever of words spoken to words broadcast. A master of concision, Herb's minimalist-verbal style may well have been shaped by his reticence. But if, as Michael O'Donoghue duly noted, Herb reminded us of Boo Radley (did he leave *Update* jokes in a hollowed-out tree trunk for the anchors to find?), then he also had an E. F. Hutton side. When Herb spoke, we all listened. His was a stealth wit, which started out quietly then gained momentum as it got repeated around the 17th floor of 30-Rock. Back in those early days of *SNL*, there was plenty of: "Did you hear what Herb said?"

Operating behind the scenes, Herb hovered above the fray, a bit in soft focus. Resident grown-up, wise tribal elder and true veteran of live TV, his unflappable presence—steady as the bass fiddle in a jazz combo—somehow reassured us that our crazy mission was doable. Back then, we were contenders and Herb looked out for us. And now, as I conjure Herb back up, the tune playing in my head—which also fits his time at the Writers Guild—is "Someone To Watch Over Me."

Classy and sophisticated, Herb Sargent seemed like the consummate New Yorker. Legend had it that Herb was much married and had a rich romantic resume that included the likes of Gloria Steinem. (Of course Herb liked smart women. He knew they'd be doing almost all the talking.)

From time to time, I'd go to Herb for one of his encapsulations—he was a brilliant encapsulator. I'd be bleary-eyed and scruffy and pot-stinky, whereas Herb, with that gorgeous head of silvery white hair and ubiquitous navy blazer, looked like he'd just been boating in Southampton. (Note: if Herb resembled a "suit," inside beat the heart of a gentle subversive who observed the game with x-ray vision and who had a well-cultivated appreciation for the radical, the paradoxical, the sick and surreal.)

Sitting in Herb's print-stuffed office, I'd explain where I was stuck and then lean back and watch as his brain whirred, compacting massive quantities of digested zeitgeist and whittling it all down into one pithy line—like a haiku, only shorter. What sticks in my mind is Herb's ineffable expression. He'd look at me with this mildly pained look as many different emotions fought with each other upon his face—appalled, amused, exasperated and in awe at the scope of human idiocy all at once. Then finally, with a windy sigh, he'd mumble some delightful line. And as I leaned in, straining to make it out, his glasses would slide down his forehead and land on his nose... ba da bing.

Not above a little mature mischief, Herb once filled out an expense receipt in the name of a black production assistant on the show back when Dick Gregory was on a hunger fast as a protest. The slip of paper simply read: "Lunch with Dick Gregory: four cents."

When we all went to New Orleans to do a live show from Mardi Gras, one night

Buck Henry, Herb and I did an exhaustive tour of all the titty-bars on Bourbon Street. Although it's mostly lost in a liquored-up haze, what has not sunk down the memory hole is this quaint, courtly sense of Herb amidst vigorously shaken breasts and booties, opening up doors and pulling out chairs. Even amidst the raunch and sleaze, Herb Sargent was quite the gent.

Thinking about Herb's legacy, there was a golden thread running from *That Was the Week That Was*, through all the performers he wrote for—like Mort Sahl—plus all of the democratic candidates whose speeches he spiced up, through nearly three decades of *Weekend Update* anchors, all of which leads inexorably to *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report*. And so what a collective debt we all owe Herb Sargent, not only for being the godfather of *Weekend Update*, but also the holy ghost of the fake news. Thank you, Herb!

What occurs is that our unarticulated motto at the start of *SNL* could easily have been, never trust anyone over 30… except Herb.

Andrew Smith

I dialed Herb's number to hear his voice one more time before I wrote this. "You've got... *Sargent*!" It reminded me of a) his natural reluctance to talk and b) the absolute necessity that you better have something worthwhile to say if you forced him to. Rob Schneider told me a line attributed to Jim Downey: "If Herb could talk, oh the tales he could tell." He was a man of few words but, as Spencer Tracy would say, they were "cherce." Or as Gwen Davis put it, "Herb was so 'no bullshit' that bullshitters who were in his presence felt compelled to tell the truth."

But anyone who was brave enough to actually talk directly to Herb was immediately the beneficiary of the fastest comic mind there was, wrapped up in one of the most charming of men with an almost courtly demeanor. Herb could create and deliver a quip at the speed of light—a perfectly formed joke—a gem—dropped into the middle of a conversation without a breath that would have taken anyone else a day to fashion. I wish I were facile enough to recreate some of them now. I never spoke to, or even knew, anyone who was his equal. Once he asked me to fill in for him to do some material for Jane Curtin for a fundraiser. I did what I could, but Jane needed a line about John Ashcroft at the last minute and I couldn't come up with anything. I called Herb at the 11th hour just as the show was starting. I think he was sick in bed. I told him I didn't have anything on Ashcroft. He said, as if reading it off a script, "John Ashcroft wanted to be here tonight, but he couldn't make it. So please just speak directly into the flowers on the table." When I remarked to him once that it seemed everyone kissed Elaine both coming and going from her restaurant, Herb said the CDC was thinking of closing down her cheek. According to LeGrand, his wonderful soul mate and wife, someone once brought up *The DaVinci Code* and, without hesitation, he named the two descendants of Jesus Christ who were alive today: Jerry Springer and Angelina Jolie.

To say Herb was a giant would be to diminish him. He was such a singular gentleman; he would not be comfortable lumped in with all the other "giants," no matter who they were. He was dear and scary and eccentric and an unashamed cheerleader all at once. I was his friend, but I can't say I was close to him. I think Herb Gardner was. He once showed me a fake New York telephone book listing which had his name where Gardner's should be, and vice versa, to celebrate the fact that people were always confusing them. "Even my mother doesn't know the difference," he told me. I'm sure there are many others who were close, and none was closer than LeGrand; but I always got the idea that most of us occupied a circle just outside that of intimacy. I spoke to an old girlfriend of his with whom he had lived for eight years who said that she had never once seen him eat in all that time. She was sure he *did* eat—he was healthy enough—she just had never *seen* him do it. He was married five times, I think. Six, LeGrand insists because they did it twice. His first wife was the daughter of a carnival barker in California and her job was to sit in a dunking seat on a pier while patrons threw baseballs at a target. The marriage didn't last much longer than a dry change of clothes. His second marriage also ended early, and he told me he had been sending alimony checks every month to an accountant for over 60 years but was convinced the

ex-wife had died long ago and the accountant was just cashing the checks. He was too much of a gentleman to actually find out.

What has never been specifically mentioned in all the writings about *Saturday Night Live* is that Herb personally wrote most of *Weekend Update*. Certainly, he was the author of all the anchor material, and he edited or wrote many of the features. He would accept some outside material—I think, only not to break our spirit. But that body of work, for something like 20 years, will stand as a lasting tribute to his unique ability and talent.

He was always the best dressed writer any other comedy writer had ever met. He wore a pressed dress shirt, khaki twill slacks and a blue blazer. When I worked with him, he wore his glasses on his head and would flip them down and up for timing purposes as well as to read whatever you were submitting. More often than not he would hand it back and say, "You can do better," or, "Make it *about* something." Those were his mantras, and God help you if you tried to slide some bathroom humor past him. He would look off, sigh a deep, plaintive *Herb Sargent* sigh, and then turn away abruptly without a word.

His office at *SNL* was like Herb himself: mysterious, intimidating and filled with arcane news and memorabilia. I don't know how he moved out of there when he did, but it took several apartments around the city to hold it all. He rarely initiated a call, but he would always call me back. And it was almost as if he considered himself a *real* sergeant. He would bark my last name when I answered, and I would know it was him. The conversation that ensued was always somewhat strained. I would cast around for something worthy to say to fill the long pauses. He would always ask, "What're you *doing*?" when he knew perfectly well what I was doing. His greatest conversational dodge was to say, apropos of nothing in particular, "*Now* what?" which meant *you* had to come up with an answer, not him. When the conversation was over, it was never "good-bye" or "so long," it was simply an incongruously bebop, "...Later." And then he would be gone. A bit of a gray ghost, he was.

I once visited him in his old apartment in a townhouse on 74th for a glass of what he was drinking then: Bombay Gin. There were packing cases all over the place, some opened and some sealed, and at least a hundred framed paintings, photographs and posters leaning in stacks against the wall. I mentioned that I thought he'd lived there for 40 years or something. He said he had, he'd just never bothered to unpack. His place with LeGrand was the same. Wherever Herb lived or worked became a magnificent curiosity shop.

When Herb died, I got an e-mail from Margaret Oberman. She wrote that she thought *SNL* should have put together some of Herb's best *Weekend Update* stuff. She said, "A personal favorite of mine from our era was a picture of Barbara Bush as a pretty co-ed, and then as a First Lady, captioned: 'If George Bush could do this to Barbara, imagine what he can do to this country.'"

Then I got another e-mail from Tim Kazurinsky: "When I first heard the news about

Herb, I got weak-kneed and thought, say it isn't so. Men don't come classier than Herb. Forthright, honest, contemplative, measured in thought and deed. All the things my father wasn't. Herb was a shining example of what the gender could be. When the flap with the WGA, west began, I sent him a short note. Just to thank him for his past kindnesses and stewardship over all these many years. So glad I did. I would feel even more miserable right now had I not. Michael O'Donoghue may have been fun to have a drink with, but Herb was the guy I would try to impress. The one whose style and humor I would try in vain to emulate. A compliment from Herb would fuel my gas tank for months. I remember so many times trying to put my glasses on my head like he did. It never worked. They would always fall down. It only worked for him. He was an original."

...Later.

Rusty Unger

Once, Herb Sargent gave us an egg squarer. (You pushed this little metal contraption down on a hard-boiled egg and... you get the idea.) Another time, among the presents he gave my daughter for her 10th birthday was a book called *How To Look 10 Years Younger*. Those two gestures summed up a great deal about his original, generous and consummately funny perspective.

Everyone knows that long past his prime, Herb Sargent was still the sexiest and wittiest man alive. They know about the softly uttered, trigger-quick bon mots, the five wives and the 5,000 glamorous girl friends. And it is a given that he knew everything there ever was to know about TV. Yet there are misconceptions and little-known facts. For example, Herb Sargent really loved to talk, at least late at night. Of course he wasn't exactly *voluble*. But he was full of anecdotes about his past: being in the advance team walking into Hiroshima after the blast to set up the first landing strip, broadcasting *The Steve Allen Show* from Havana, interactions with every luminary of every decade who appeared on the variety and talk shows he produced or wrote for—you couldn't shut him up, sometimes. You didn't want to.

Also:

He was very good at judging the gymnastic contests of an eight-year-old's dolls.
He was unbeatable at Scrabble.
No one ever actually saw him chew and swallow a piece of food in public.
He was extremely romantic.
He gave the original Writer's Block Party.
The malaria he caught stationed in New Guinea in WWII never quite went away.

Anything funny in any speech made by any liberal candidate for the past 35 years may well have been written by Herb.

He had a peculiar agoraphobia that caused him extreme anxiety when forced to venture absolutely anywhere outside of 30-Rock and The Russian Tea Room to the south, Elaine's to the north and The Writers Guild, East to the west. Late in life, he was able to help some of the saddest, sickest, poorest people on earth—not at the Writers Guild, but in Haiti. He often said that the one thing he couldn't tolerate was enjoyment, which was the only reason he gave up smoking.

One of the secrets of Herb's charm and magnetism was that he only associated with people who were smart and talented, and he often saw those qualities in people before they saw them in themselves. There was nothing more flattering than to receive the impression he gave that you, too, were in on the joke, some larger joke no one had yet told and that only the ultra-cool few would understand. Cool, hip: that was the aura of this tall, smooth, shy guy with the black-framed glasses atop all that white hair. In a Herb-less world, the words cool and hip should be retired.

Donald Westlake

Herb Sargent was droll. It wasn't so much what he said, though he had about the fastest brain for *le mot juste* I've ever met, but it was an aura about him. When he walked into a room the Muse of Comedy strolled in with him, concealed in a fold of shirt or tucked behind an elbow. It appeared to be effortless; I hope it was.

Here's what it was like. You know there's a genre of story or song that's about waiting for the guy to show up so things can really get started—Godot, Quinn the Eskimo—and I always felt that guy was Herb. His entrance meant that, from that point, everybody else present would be at their sharpest. Often you might not even know he was who you were waiting for until he arrived, and then it was, oh, of course. Like that moment when the bars open in Scotland.

In the last 10 years or so, I've known Herb mostly in his role as president of the Council of the Writers Guild, East, where he never seemed to be actually presiding over much of anything, and yet anarchy almost never broke out. When, on a rare occasion, someone would become testy, Herb would gaze on the emoter with such perfect patience that the brawl never had a hope of existence. And if, on occasion, he had a comic thought to share, it was never to draw blood, but only to draw attention. "Look at it this way," he was saying, and we did.

Alan Zweibel

We had just started *Saturday Night Live*, I was an apprentice writer, 24 years old and I felt intimidated. Chevy was hysterically funny. So was John and Danny and Gilda and Franken. And Michael O'Donoghue, well, Michael O'Donoghue simply scared the shit out of me. So I stayed pretty much to myself. One day I came to work, and on my desk was a framed cartoon. A drawing—no caption—of a drunken rabbi staggering home late and holding a wine bottle. And waiting for him on the other side of the door was his angry wife, getting ready to hit him with a Torah instead of a rolling pin. I had no idea who put it there. I started looking around and out of the corner of my eye I saw a white-haired man in his office, laughing. He had put it there. That was the first communication I had with Herb Sargent—which was significant given that he never spoke and he gave me a cartoon that had no caption.

I had seen him years before. Or at least I think I did. When I was a kid. My father manufactured jewelry and he had his shop on 52nd Street between Fifth and Madison. I used to come into the city from Long Island and run errands for him during the summer. And no matter where the delivery was supposed to go, I made sure I got there by going through the lobby of what was then called the RCA Building, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, with the hopes that maybe I would see Johnny Carson (whose show was upstairs) or some of the people from *That Was the Week That Was*: BuckHenry, Bob Dishy, David Frost—or Herb Sargent, who was the producer. I knew his name from the credits. As a young boy who wanted to be a TV writer some day, this was like hanging around outside of Yankee Stadium waiting to see the players going through to the clubhouse.

And now, now I was actually working with Herb Sargent. We gravitated toward each other (or should I say I forced myself upon him?) because my background was in joke writing and he was basically in charge of *Weekend Update*, which was all about jokes. So I found my way into his office and we would go through the newspapers together and write jokes for *Update*. We made each other laugh. The silence was comfortable. And over time, the relationship grew deeper.

I believe that you choose people to fulfill roles in your life. And I cast Herb in the role, not only of mentor but—there's a Jewish expression called tzaddik. If someone's a tzaddik, it means that they're "just." That they embody wisdom and integrity. I cast Herb in that role. He was the oldest person I knew, and I treated him with the kind of respect usually reserved for people who symbolize a person's private definition of truth—to the point where he was the one guy I knew that I couldn't lie to. And as the show became more successful and I started making a little money, he was the only one I didn't do drugs in front of. Still later on, when I was having problems with a girl I was going out with, I went to Herb, who was married 34 times, for advice.

As a native New Yorker, I was also drawn to Herb because, to me, Herb was New York. But an older, more romantic New York that took place in black and white like the kind of TV I grew up on and wanted to be a part of some day. Comedy with a

conscience. And mindful of its power to influence. From the silly "Franco is still dead" jokes to softer ones about global warming, Herb taught us about the equal weight they carried.

When Lorne founded the show, he said that our generation was not being spoken to on television. So the politics on *SNL* were addressed to our generation—the baby boomers who had grown up watching television and went to Woodstock and thought it was absurd how Gerald Ford fell down so much. But here was Herb, a charter member of the older generation, who validated us. And encouraged us. And quite often led the way. What a curious hybrid he was—a man who was older than my father, at the same time younger than my Republican brother—who wasn't trying to be preachy. Or controversial. But he lived in that place where he was writing about those things that he genuinely felt. Herb was grounded in his beliefs. So when he wrote, he wrote from within.

And when I left New York and moved my family to Los Angeles, I knew my city was in good hands because Herb was here. And that I was still connected here because to know Herb Sargent was to be two degrees of separation from anyone on the planet. It was in his office that I'd met Mort Sahl and Herb Gardner and Art Buchwald and Avery Corman and Ed Koch and Bella Abzug. So in my mind, even though I was now living a full continent away, all I had to do was call Herb, remind him that I disliked L.A. as much as he did, and I was home. It was as simple as that—and all he asked in return was that I not join the Writers Guild, west.

So our relationship continued long distance. I still tried hard to please him. Make him proud. I sent him a copy of anything I wrote or produced. Poor Herb, I actually sent him 72 videotapes of *It's Garry Shandling's Show* because his neighborhood didn't get Showtime in those years. I also sent him first drafts of plays, movies, magazine articles and manuscripts for books. He'd call and give me notes. And in those pre-Internet days he'd send reviews from New York papers. "Did you see this one about the Jon Lovitz special you did? Congratulations," he'd write. And whenever I'd get a bad review, he'd say, "Don't read *Time* magazine."

But after awhile, for some reason, I lost touch with Herb. I'm not sure why. He may have been mad at me. I'm not sure of that either. For some reason I never asked. Never called to clear the air or simply reconnect. Years passed. Until I saw him at the memorial of a former *SNL* associate producer. Herb had been sick and now looked, well, now looked his age. It threw me. He never looked his age.

I moved my family back to New York and started calling him again. Tried to jumpstart a friendship, make up for lost time. Calls were returned—but not as quickly as they once were. I misjudged the situation and took it personally. Figured it to be nothing more than the vestiges of our estrangement. A sign that things between us were not yet back to where they were. But I was determined to remedy that. I wrote a novel. And when it came time to submit the names of people on the acknowledgments page, I mentioned Herb and tried my best to figure out how and when I would let him know about it. Should I send him the galleys and have him come across it? No, too much

had transpired for me to give him that kind of homework. Should I call and tell him? Let him know outright how grateful and indebted I felt? No, I knew that would only serve to embarrass him. Make him blush. Herb hated recognition. Hated blushing. So I waited. Decided to send him the published product once it came out and put a bookmark in the page that his name was on. It proved to be yet another miscalculation on my part. Herb died about a week before I had the chance to do so. I never got to tell him how much he meant to me. Somehow, some way, I hope he knows.