

The Classification of Robert Kates

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Robert Kates had a gift for order, for lists and classifications, for taxonomy. He classified natural and technological hazards, the times required to rebound from a hurricane, and the sources and solutions of hunger. He classified the chapters in a book, members of committees, and students. He classified research for sustainability. Bob's classifications were durable, extensible, and cross-cultural.

Bob's balanced and comprehensive understanding of social geography explains the success of his classifications. He appreciated evenly the restless, autarkic ego-centered networks of elites in science, government and business; the complex, stable world of bureaucracies and the gradualists who work in them; the activist, egalitarian minorities worried about hidden agendas and the clubs of the rich and powerful; and the populist everyman who usually wants to get lost in the shuffle, whose motto is that of Melville's scrivener Bartleby, who responded to opportunities and orders alike, "I would prefer not to."

Bob preferred to live beyond the Great Wall of Framingham that protects the Harvards of the world. He lived in Worcester MA and Bangor ME and earlier in Gary IN, and saw and appreciated and celebrated a world richer in categories and democracy than most of his intellectual peers. While they traveled in an ecologically diverse but culturally homogeneous world, Bob inhabited a world in which the useful and fascinating production of differences continued.

From his modest shelters, Bob watched and classified. And he smiled, because he saw and shared order invisible to those with high satellites and powerful computers.