

# Colby



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## Letters

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## Letters

### A Friend in Need

Most of you have probably heard by now the sad news of the death of Charlie Tenny '84 in December of last year [1999]. I first met Charlie in Japan during my junior year abroad. I have memories of him as a funny, smart, friendly man in a foreign land. He had chosen Japan as his adopted country, and we both befriended a couple there: a Japanese woman who was our language teacher and her dynamic husband, Mike, an expatriate American, who remained in Japan after his Fulbright scholarship had taken him from Hong Kong to Japan. I have these wonderful memories of traveling around the Japanese countryside in Charlie's van, with him and his collie, Peggy, looking at rural Japanese architecture. We all shared a love for the country and had chosen to study the language, the culture and the people.

Now, almost 10 years later, and after having not kept up a close relationship with them, except for phone calls, letters and sometimes e-mails, both Charlie and Mike are dead. Both from suicide. I cannot describe the sadness I feel for them, who must have felt alone in their adopted country. I feel sad for their families, who survive with painful memories of their lives and the inevitable feelings of "what could I have done to prevent this." And lastly, I feel sad myself, for these two men were so influential on my experiences and memories of a wonderful time in my life.

The Eastern philosophy looks differently on suicide than we do in the Western world. It is considered an honorable "way out" of a situation. It is not cowardly; it is not sacrilegious.

Our *theme* as freshmen, and throughout my four years at Colby, was the understanding of intolerance. And now a decade later, I have to say the one thing I remain intolerant of is intolerance. I hope I learn from this. I hope I am not insensitive to the feelings of those around me. And I hope I remember to take an extra minute or two to let my friends know they are not alone.

Ethan R. Wiesler '86  
Winston-Salem, N.C.

*Editor's note: Mike Swift '85 wrote about the life and death of Charles Tenny '84 in the October 1 Hartford Courant. The story can be read online (<http://courant.ctnow.com/news/special/ne/suicide1.stm>).*

### Focus on Social Ills, Please

I am writing this letter Nov. 6, the evening before the big election. For months now in Oregon it has been virtually impossible to go to work, go to the store or even walk down the street without finding myself caught up in conversation about the candidates.

In the past weeks I have listened to opinions and rumors about what will happen if either candidate becomes president. I, like everyone else, have my own ideas, formed by my experience and hopes, but also, for the first time, through the work I have been involved with this year as an AmeriCorps\* VISTA volunteer. I work with people in crisis, those who are most affected by the policies our government enacts. For them, changes in government and policy may affect whether or not they have enough money to buy food or whether or not they can see a doctor when sick. I have found that though they are often not visible to policy and policy makers, poverty and hunger do still exist in the United States. It is important to me that we make these issues known to those who have the power to create change.

In the past week, as the noise of the election has risen to its peak, I received *Colby* magazine and was seriously disappointed with its content.

The people I know from Colby are living across the United States and all over the world. They consistently amaze and inspire me with the work they do. I have Colby friends who have chosen to do the Peace Corps, Teach for America and the Jesuit volunteer corps and to work for Hospice. I know Colby alumni who are becoming teachers, who have worked on the part of AIDS patients, who are teaching English to refugees and immigrants, and who have been AmeriCorps volunteers for more than one year of service. All are engaged in addressing important issues in our society, issues that should be at the forefront of our minds right now but which are sadly invisible in the media and in candidates' speeches. They are working to alleviate poverty, to better our education system, to fight hunger, preserve the environment, improve health care, and advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves.

I question why, especially during such an important election, *Colby* is not highlighting these alumni. In failing to highlight them we have, as a community, missed out on

knowledge that will never come from the media or candidates' mouths.

Andrea Keisler '99  
Portland, Ore.

### More on Vietnam

The picture opening "A Turbulent Time" (*Colby*, spring 2000) caught my eye because I am the photographer. I can't remember what issue of *The Colby Echo* this was shot for, but I do remember many of the people in the picture. From left to right are Sheila Marks '72, Nick Ballas '74, Sylvia Jenkins '72 and Paul Ford '72. That picture resulted in some notoriety to the College (and me) as it was picked up by one of the wires (AP or UPI) and reprinted in newspapers across the country. Seeing this picture, and the one of the march through Waterville, reminded me what a heady time this was at Colby (and I mean that in more ways than one).

Michael Havey '72  
Hancock, N.H.

Messrs. Witthoft and Starkis take exception, in their own way, to my reaction to Gerry Boyle's *Colby* magazine article, "A Turbulent Time" (spring 2000), on the anti-war movement at Colby during the late '60s.

What Whitthoft may find laughable now surely wasn't laughable in those turbulent days. It is no simple matter, indeed, to gauge America's mood during that period, unless you were an active participant. Maybe that explains Whitthoft's circular reasoning that it was okay for Colby protesters to trample the Bill of Rights since it was assumed that the Nixon Administration was about to break them—or already had—anyway.

There is also a simple answer to Witthoft's question about why it is okay for the Colby veterans to "put that military portion of their lives behind them" and not okay for Colby's anti-war students. It is obvious, of course, that the Colby veterans went, after graduation, to fight a war for what they thought was just. They then, after four difficult years, went on with their lives—frequently with physical and emotional scars. The anti-war protesters, on the other hand, fought what they thought was an unjust cause but stopped upon graduation—ultimately driving their "BMW's to their kid's soccer practice."



That same question seems to trouble Starkis. I did not imply that the Vietnam veterans were all good guys and that all anti-war protesters were felons. (His experience is proof that they were not.) Nothing from that period is that simple. I made no mention of, or implied, a lack of stout-hearted men and women at Colby during that period. There must have been many, Starkis evidentially included.

But it is overly simplistic to draw Starkis's conclusion that "good-guy, bad-guy thinking" led us to the Vietnam War. We only wish "the War" had been that simple. This writer, as he wrote in the summer issue, is consistent. Boyle wrote of—even glorified—the anti-war period at Colby. Why not give equal time, in a manner of speaking, to the Colby Vietnam veteran? He or she may have something to teach us, too.

*John Brassem '64*  
Bedford, N.Y.

When I read in a recent issue of *Colby* an opinion that I had been "timid" about expressing my views on the Vietnam War I was a bit taken aback. I could be criticized for many things in those years, as most of us could, but "timidity" was hardly one of them.

The young man who made this remark professed to have been a peripheral part of the occupation of the AFROTC offices in the spring of 1972. He upbraided me for not joining in that protest instead of trying to bring it to an end. If I disapproved of the war why didn't I support those who were demonstrating against it, and so on. But if he had been listening to me in my discussions with those involved in the occupation he would have heard me argue that AFROTC had nothing to do with the Vietnam War or a militaristic stance. Indeed, the point of our maintaining AFROTC was to encourage those who would some day lead our military to read history and poetry and philosophy, listen to music and appreciate works of art. I had nothing against the military academies but felt that liberal arts colleges had a special role to play in educating young people who might later have a chance to influence military thinking. It never would have occurred to me to join or not join such an occupation, for I thought it not only

pointless but barking up the wrong tree. This was not timidity but principle.

And I still think it would have been inappropriate for someone in so public a position of leadership as the presidency of a college to demonstrate against the war. In a later year, in my retirement, I thought the Gulf War a great mistake but did not think it proper to demonstrate against it. The country, rightly or wrongly, was supporting it. I believe in supporting decisions the country espouses, whether my own feelings follow the reasoning of those who made the decisions or not. Attempting to influence decisions not yet made is another story. That is the time for signing petitions and joining demonstrations, whatever one's official position or profession might be, for it is through such avenues that democracy can express itself.

The College supported AFROTC through the Vietnam War, and it was only afterward that the Pentagon removed our program from its list. We were small and considered economically of too little significance. After all, the military judged the importance of our program in the national picture on the same scale as that of a big place like Texas A&M, who graduated 2,500 ROTC officers annually in contrast to our 15. Officials in the Air Force expressed regret that we were being terminated because the quality of our graduates who also earned commissions was consistently high. But we just could not compete in the number.

All of us will continue to be in debt to all those who are listed on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, and especially to those from Colby who took part in that tragic war. It is gratifying that they too have been remembered at Colby in their own special way.

*Robert E. L. Strider*  
Boston, Mass.

### **Beyond the Stigma**

I would like to thank Bob Gillespie for describing the work I do as an art teacher at Shalom House. As stated in the profile (*Colby*, fall 2000), "our goal is to help people with mental illness live as independently as possible." Our focus is the client's recovery, and along with the art program, there are several client-run groups whose aim is to

educate the community about mental illness through personal presentations.

I'm concerned that one sentence in the profile was taken out of context and does not accurately describe the people I work with. The statement "they need attention almost like a child would" is misleading and can feed common stereotypes about the mentally ill. While I work with a few individuals one-on-one who require a higher level of assistance, the majority of adults who attend my classes are competent and gifted people capable of making independent choices and decisions. Throughout my seven years in the mental health field, both as residential counselor and art teacher, I have worked daily to overcome the stigma and discrimination directed at those with mental illness, and to treat all with dignity and respect.

It is especially important to clarify the language in my profile in light of a recently defeated ballot measure in Maine. Question 5 would have finally reversed an antiquated law that denies the right to vote for adults with mental illness who have a guardian. The only state in the nation with such a law still on the books, Maine effectively singles out the mentally ill while allowing others under guardianship with disabilities such as mental retardation or Alzheimer's, to vote. I believe the measure failed due to society's lack of understanding and acceptance of mental illness and the persistence of inaccurate stereotypes.

Over the years I have learned so much from the individuals I work with. I am continually moved and inspired by my students' courage, talent and ability. They have taught me about the language of mental illness and how existing negative images in our culture affect them personally. I appreciate the opportunity to clarify my own words on this very important issue. My experience at Colby, especially in the Art Department, was very positive and I know helped prepare me for the job I do today. We just finished a very successful mask exhibit at the Portland Public Library and were told it was one of their most popular shows ever. Thanks again for the nice article!

*Carolyn Treat '82*  
Portland, Maine