

Memorial Minute for Elizabeth V. Spelman
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Elizabeth Victoria Spelman

Born April 3, 1945 – Died December 26, 2025

Vicky Spelman passed away peacefully at home in Northampton, Massachusetts, on December 26, 2025, after a brief illness and under hospice care. She remained in close touch with several of her friends, colleagues, and family members till the very end of her life. She was 80 years old.

Elizabeth V. Spelman was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. She received her B.A. from Wellesley College in 1966 and her Ph.D. from The John Hopkins University in 1974. After teaching at Amherst College for several years, and a year at Carleton College, Professor Spelman joined the philosophy department at Smith College and taught generations of students from 1982 until her retirement in 2024.

Vicky was an eminent feminist scholar and world-class philosopher, and, in 2000 was appointed to the prestigious Barbara Richmond 1940 Chair in the Humanities. Her ground-breaking first book, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988), was named an outstanding book on the subject of intolerance in the United States by the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Human Rights in the United States. In 3 subsequent, widely-read books she turned her philosophical attention to topics as varied as what it means to regard human beings as objects – rather than subjects -- of suffering; to the notion of repair and to the variety of repair activities that humans undertake, from fixing cars to fixing friendships; and, in her 2016

book, *Trash Talks: Revelations in the Rubbish*, to an analysis of what it means to be a maker of waste and to relegate objects and peoples to the category of “trash.” There was no topic too seemingly mundane to warrant this remarkable philosopher’s scrutiny, written in accessible language and peppered with humorous and relatable anecdotes.

Among her professional honors were prestigious visiting fellowships in Vienna, the Harvard Divinity School and the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe.

Vicky was a well-known, beloved, and respected figure on campus, having served on many college-wide committees alongside faculty, staff and students. All those who knew her admired her astonishingly quick, irreverent, and sharp wit. I share with you some of the memories from her former students and colleagues.

First, from Michael Gorra, professor emeritus of the English Department: “I knew her for fifty years, ever since I was an Amherst freshman and she was my most memorable and charismatic teacher in a class that probably did more to show me the purpose of education--to teach you to think by making you uncomfortable---than any other. It was called The Nature of Deviancy, but really it was on the social construction of normality. A unit of theory, then sections on Criminality, Insanity, and Homosexuality. Massive reading list, lively, often contentious discussions, and Vicky handling it all with real grace.”

Next, Reyes Lazaro professor of Spanish and Portuguese: “Brilliant, generous, joyful, humble, out of the box, full of humanity and human elegance, generous, impish... she opened so many

doors in philosophy. She vehemently argued that emotions, Plato notwithstanding, are an important source of knowledge, and garbage, and repair, and women, and philosophy made by Latino women... (she continues ...) Just today someone who took a course with her when she was a high school student told me out of the blue what an influence Vicky had on her. She did not know anything about her condition. When I told her that she was not well she told me: “please, if you see her tell her how important she was for me.””

And finally, Anna Gyorgy, former Smith student of philosophy: “Vicky was an incredibly special – and hilarious! – woman, and I feel immensely blessed to have known her. I will never forget how she logged onto Zoom on the first day of Philosophy of Design in Spring 2021 (we were still having classes remotely) and, before even introducing herself, asked if we liked her "design" (a scarf she'd wrapped around her head so we didn't have to look at her scar from brain surgery). Always an aesthete and a prankster.”

Vicky’s joy at academic play bubbled over into a deep love of sports. She played on an all-women’s local softball team called The Hot Flashes for several years and was a basketball phenom.

Fittingly, Vicky was working on a book about mirth at the time of her death, aptly titled “Silliness: A Deadly Serious Exploration”.

Vicky retired from Smith in December of 2024. I spoke at her philosophy retirement party and here is an excerpt of what I said. “When I think about Vicky as a colleague, I invariably return to

my first encounter with her, during my on-campus interview at Smith way back in 1989. We had just finished breakfast in the cafe at the Hotel Northampton, when Vicky suggested that, rather than stroll back to her office on campus to talk further, we remain downtown and check out Roz's -- the women's vintage clothing store. As I thought about it later that day, and on the many subsequent occasions when I have found myself describing this unusual interview technique to my own students, this switch in venue had intriguing consequences, both for the content of our conversation and for the comportment of my very being. I recalled a felt release from the tight muzzle that I had placed, job candidate that I was, on what I said and how I said it; instead, we moved comfortably from topic to topic, from the serious to the hilarious. As we left Roz's, thanks to Vicky's brilliant indirection, she knew me--and, more delightfully still--I had begun to know her.

In all of these 30 plus years since, I have both trusted and delighted in that heady Vicky mix of quirkiness and wisdom -- to trust her when she said that my philosophical projects were worth doing, to believe her when she said that my voice mattered, and always to delight in her philosophical way of blending the profane with the profound, the ordinary with the extraordinary, the quirky and whimsical with the serious and the wise. It is no exaggeration to say that my entire philosophical career at Smith was refracted through the multicolored lens that was Vicky.

This bright and glittering light is now extinguished; she will be sorely missed.