During the summer of 1979, I was riding with Dr. Denning in his Ford Mustang on our way to Waterville, Kan., with our theater department’s touring production of “Dracula.” It was harvest time and wheat kernels that had blown out of trucks gathered on the blacktop. Strangely enough, wheat on the blacktop is very dangerous and can cause vehicles to lose traction as easily as an icy road.

Needless to say, the Mustang was slip-sliding down Kansas Highway 77, Dr. Denning was swearing up a storm and I was praying!

He remarked several times how unbelievable that wheat would cause the roads to be so slick. I turned to him, pointed in the air to emphasize my matter of fact tone and said, “Well, you know, slippery when wheat.”

Well, the man burst — and I mean the Denning laugh burst: guffawing, chortling, spitting — the works. Then he pointed that finger at me and said, “Kinen, you are a very clever and smart guy! And you need to do something with it!”

Now mind you, I was 18 years old and had only just finished my freshman year at Marymount College. I knew the pun was silly, and certainly did not see anything clever or smart about it. I was a wet-behind-the-ears farm kid and did not recognize the qualities in me that Dr. Denning clearly did.

But the pun was never forgotten and Dr. Denning would bring it up regularly during my next four years at Marymount. He and I constantly bantered and joked back and forth. When I had the opportunity to best him or get the final word, he would take a quick pause, point at me, and say, “Slippery when wheat!”

And the phrase was always pronounced in criticism of some of my unorthodox approaches in theatrical rehearsal and performance.

I thought the pun would be put to rest when I graduated in 1983, but rest it did not! For the next 32 years, Dr. Denning would use it when signing off on a letter; and in our many phone conversations or visits. He even managed to get it in — twice! — the last time I saw him in the hospital last August. “Slippery when wheat!”

I really didn’t understand during my college years, and even years after that, why Dr. Denning latched on to what I saw as a spontaneous pun uttered by an 18-year-old kid. It was not until years later that I would understand that pun’s significance.

In the year 2000, I was in the midst of a dramatic life-changing situation. I visited Dennis to seek his advice. I knew he wouldn’t tell me which option to take; instead, I knew that he would weigh all the options and outcomes, present them and then say it was my decision. And that he did.

Then he did something out of the ordinary: He tacked an addendum to his analysis.

He told me “not to let the worry and anxiety of making a decision get in the way of the decision. Make your decision and then move with it. If you do that, it will become the right decision because you are a very clever and smart man. Slippery when wheat.”

Some clever and smart man I am! It only took me 27 years to realize that Dr. Denning was actually using the silly pun as a very individualized metaphor.

Teachers have an uncanny ability to recognize talents and attributes in a student long before the student sees it within him- or herself. Teachers also have an ability to draw those attributes from their students.

That summer day of 1979, Dr. Denning first recognized a very powerful talent in an unwitting 18-year-old farm kid. He also clearly recognized specifically how that kid needed to be guided and taught. And he gave that particular experience a title, a metaphor: “Slippery when wheat.”
Dennis Denning had a sharp, analytical and creative mind, and he could remember everything. He also had an unusual practice of throwing in a random tidbit or comment into conversations that seemed to be of no relevance. Many of these arbitrary insertions were quotes from plays, movies, people... just about any source imaginable.

I often noticed those quotes would strike a chord with one person in the crowd, while the others — me included — would fail to see even a remote connection.

A case in point: Dr. Denning and a classmate of mine would occasionally end their conversations by exclaiming, “Ah, Lucretia!” Its significance was never shared with anyone else.

I understand now his seemingly indiscriminate comments were actually metaphors he used to mark significant moments in his life with his students and friends, thus giving the relationship special meaning.

The romantic in me would like to believe that each student and friend of Dennis Denning knows or is at least aware of their own shared metaphor. Alas, I am sure that is not the case.

But I do believe he did have a metaphor for everyone — he just didn’t share it.

Dennis Denning was a storyteller and a teacher. As a storyteller, he knew where to look for significance in story and people. And as a teacher, he provided the ways to bring it forth.