

## **Peter S. Albin 12/20/1934-2/20/2008**

My father Peter Steigman Albin died on Wednesday February 20, 2008 after a long illness. Below is the text of my Eulogy to him.

.....

First, his friend and colleague Duncan Foley, who continued to see light in Dad when so many of us could only see darkness. Duncan has also asked me to read a few words he wrote: Pete Albin had a big effect on my life both as my collaborator in scientific work and as a human being. I will leave the scientific issues for another time. What Pete lived through remains astonishing to me. His experience in the small way I was able to understand it, was uniquely cruel and powerful. I cannot miss his suffering, but I will miss him. As the Quakers say, let us hold Pete in the light.

To Gerard Trebot, who provided camaraderie under extraordinary circumstances and showed us all how to see not only what Dad needed from us, but what he could still give us.

To Doctor James Robilotti for his wisdom, compassion and friendship.

To Doctor Gary Inwald who saw hope where others saw futility.

To Doctor Chris Fabian, for his calm counsel

And most of all to my mother, Pat Albin. Those closest to our family know the heroic sacrifices she made. I can only marvel at her strength and kindness.

To all of you, I offer you my deepest thanks and express my admiration for the examples you have set as human beings. Many others helped, but without you, Dad would have died many years ago and would have had many fewer moments worth living.

....

It's tempting to talk about Dad from a particular perspective – colleague, family member, friend, teacher, but choosing any one of those seems not merely insufficient to me, but wide of the mark. As is true of anyone, Dad was of course more than the sum of his parts, but I think one of the things that set him apart from the rest of us with multiple interests is that in essence, there weren't any parts, only the whole. Whether he was delving into the most abstract of mathematical constructs, raising children, telling a joke, becoming a master go player, carrying on an ordinary conversation, or just staring out the window, he brought to bear the same combination of attention, rigor, eclecticism, humor, and Rabelaisian gusto.

Staring out the window is a particularly illustrative example, because it's something he did a lot, and it was for him an exceptionally fruitful activity. For many years, he would look out the picture windows of our 22<sup>nd</sup> floor living room and watch the landscape below him be transformed by construction. This culminated in the site excavation and then construction of the NYU gymnasium in the late 70s. As he watched the work unfold, he became more and more fascinated, eventually bluffing his way onto the jobsite

and getting to know both the labor and management sides of the operation. This led to a series of papers on the differences between the way engineers and workers approach problems of optimization and queuing.

His conclusion was that the traditional management-science approach of traveling salesmen and linear programs didn't capture the richness of what was going on and wasn't any more effective than letting the front-end loader operator decide by himself how many trucks were needed on-site. He laid this out with his characteristically idiosyncratic symbology. All while sitting around in his speedo-style underwear, drinking pots of coffee, puffing away on pipes of varying contents, while listening to WBAI on the radio and bullshitting with his teenaged son. There was no incongruity to this multi-tasking across the spectrum from sublime to ridiculous, though. No contradiction in any of his dimensions, habits, virtues, or vices. It was all simply Pete.

I think this captures the essence of how he approached his more theoretical and intellectually challenging work, too: First, he liked real-world examples. Second, he thought that cognitive and information sciences that try to model how people actually think have a better shot at representing the way people solve problems and interact than the "incomplete" formalisms of traditional models of rationality. Third, standard economics terminology never quite worked for him; he always needed his own. Fourth, he couldn't just sit in an office and crank things out. He needed coffee and conversation to develop an idea. He needed distraction, hustle, and bustle, before he could settle into his night-owl productivity.

The other thing, which is very hard to recognize if you didn't really know him in more than one context, is that there is an earthiness and whimsy in the way he presented his ideas. His writing is full of neologisms, circumlocutions, and odd constructs. In someone else, this might just be jargon, but in him it was a form of wordplay and a source of amusement. Dad punned and kenneled on paper and in person with abandon, regardless of context. I often sat with him as he worked, and watched a smile play across his face, or even heard him chuckle as he scrawled away in felt tip. Looking at these sentences after the fact, I can't say that I get the jokes, but I know they're in there. The verbiage in his later work is drier, but the whimsy comes out in the illustrations. The meaning of the images generated by his simulations was almost secondary to him. He got a big kick out of the idea that his equations could produce such pretty pictures, and he often just showed people screen shots without trying to explain what they meant.

My thoughts about Dad as an intellectual often center around a conversation we had about the word "discipline," in the sense of an academic discipline. This word represented everything he found most frustrating about academia. Working within a discipline meant restricting yourself, punishing your own mind when it strayed outside the boundaries set by the arbiters of the field. Deep down he was very ambivalent about the label "economist." He was proud of the field's intellectual rigor and admired many of its practitioners. He wanted to be known as someone who worked in the same tradition as, Keynes, Arrow, Galbraith. However, he kept being told (in reviews, grant

applications, and job interviews) that he wasn't working within the discipline. Maybe it was good mathematics, or linguistics, or computer science, but it wasn't economics. He didn't really understand why academics put themselves in bins like this. And though he craved the validation of his peers, he grew weary of the chase. Because of these frustrations, it never bothered him that his children didn't follow in his footsteps. I think I've said enough about the serious side of Dad, though, and I'd like to return to what I started to say about gusto. Here are some of the things Dad loved to do:

Swing a tennis racquet

Swing an axe

Eat haute French cuisine

Make Chinatown waiters bring him the dishes written on the walls in Chinese

Eat in greasy spoons, and declare that there is no such thing as enough bacon

Give talks on highly technical subjects

Consult with captains of industry and finance

Tell shaggy dog stories

Play absolutely any game

Listen to Bach, Wagner, and Beethoven

Sing "Barnacle Bill the Sailor"

Go to foreign movies

Go to plays

Go to the opera

Hang in out pool halls

Listen to Phil Rizzuto call a Yankee game

Read the great books

Read mathematics and physics texts

Read Linguistics journals

Read Gargantua and Pantagruel

Live like Gargantua

Organize anti-war protests

Read the Nation

Listen to WBAI

Listen to right-wing talk radio

Hang out in cafes

Hang out in museums and art galleries

Explore the wonders of cities

Sleep out under the stars in the country.

Come to think of it, he really liked to do almost anything, go almost anywhere, and talk to almost anyone because all knowledge was good, and to him, accessible. Any activity offered new skills to be mastered, new people to meet, and new places to explore.

Growing up with someone so filled with wonder and fascination at the world around him, who was also equipped with such astounding powers of understanding and

communication was an extraordinary privilege. It was also an extraordinary to privilege to feel my esteem being reciprocated, a feeling I'm sure many of you share.

I'm not going to say that he was a saint, or that there was never friction between us, or that he wasn't at times enormously frustrating to deal with. But I knew from very early in life that he had rare gifts as a parent and human being. As I grew into adulthood I recognized more in the way of feet of clay, but I never really lost the sense that he was sui generis, and above all, fun. He remained the person I most enjoyed spending time with, up until the moment in August of 1991, when so much of that was taken away, not just from him, but from all of us.

It has been very hard to find perspective on Dad's long and brutal illness. It is hard to imagine a crueler fate than to be a polymath and athlete who retains only enough of his mind and body to know what he has lost and be unable to do anything about it. The last 16 years have been a punctuated equilibrium of decline, with each crisis bringing lower baselines of health and function and erasing more of what Dad once was. In this context I have struggled to maintain my best memories of him, but this is a struggle that has to be taken on. I believe in a sort of life after death. By this, I don't mean that I believe in god, or the spirit world, or any metaphysical sense of "soul." Trust me, it is impossible to imagine that the grandchildren of Joe Albin or the children of Pete Albin would.

What I mean is that the influences of the people in our lives are not simply winds or waves that knock us one way or another as they pass. As much as a child carries the DNA of his parents, we all carry the words and deeds of those who shape us physically, emotionally, and intellectually. These can be a burden, or they can be a blessing. Dad's influence was overwhelmingly the latter for me. I have a mind that he in large measure taught me how to use. I have a love of the intellectual, the physical, the aesthetic and the comical. Most of all I have memories of his shaggy grin as he picked me up from school, joined me on climbs in the four corners, or walked up to me after a gig and said "now I know how Keith Richards' mother feels!" I would like now to leave you all with a simple request. Keep the best of Dad alive inside you, the whole thing.

Posted by John Albin at [2:53 PM](#) 

**0 comments:**

[Post a Comment](#)

**Links to this post**

[Create a Link](#)

[Older Post](#) [Home](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)