

In Memoriam
Alan J. Friedman

The Alan Friedman who telephoned to ask to be excused from working on the SENCER-ISE project for a while so that he could focus on his medical condition was the same Alan Friedman who called on numerous other occasions to say he had a glimmer of an idea or a fully imagined project in mind that would help move the work we are doing from being “nice to necessary.”

Two weeks ago, Alan reported that he had received a “very bad diagnosis” but that he had consulted with people he trusted. He expressed confidence in the people at Sloan Kettering and had hopes for a plan of attack that sounded equally audacious and arduous.

Though there was a thin curtain of sadness and apprehension in his voice, Alan’s general tone and style differed little in our last call from the many other conversations we had had about other ambitious, arduous, and audacious plans. “I think we have an opportunity,” he would say. And then he would go on to describe an idea he had to encourage formal and informal educators to work for the common good, to strive for what some have called a “perpetual dream” to improve the human condition by enlarging what we all can come to know.

Our last conversation happened on the same day we had previously been scheduled to have lunch. We were to meet at the Century, where of course no business is conducted, so we just planned to talk about the future. Instead, we had that phone call.

On the call with Ellen Mappen and me, Alan spoke with his usual calmness, his usual clarity, in his usual cadence, and with that same curiously wonderful musicality that inhabited each one of his sentences. (Without knowing for sure its source, I have always attributed that sonority to the benefits that come to someone who is as comfortable speaking in French as English.) He even mustered some humor.

Sensing our shock and our fear, I suspect, Alan took great pains to assure us that getting back to work on our mutual project was a high priority for him. As always, Alan exhibited more concern for our feelings and needs than he expected us to pay to his.

He said he would call us as his health permitted. He asked us to carry on and to share word of his call with only those who needed to know. We were to await further word from him before telling others.

Late last week, when “news” started to come out that Alan was gravely ill, I entertained the comforting illusion that this could have been an extremely bad example of something starting in facts—facts I knew to be true—and descending

into rumor. I prayed for an email from Alan bearing the subject line: “News of my demise has been greatly exaggerated.”

As the numbers of people close to Alan began to contact one another to share thoughts, tributes, and memories, my hopes grew fainter. We now have word that Alan died yesterday on May 4th.

There will be times and occasions for proper memorials befitting a man of as many parts as Alan possessed and whose career spans so much intellectual space and so many phases in the history and development of informal education.

We will each have our opportunities to add our own meager contributions to what I am sure will be a panoptic body of tributes—a museum of its own, you could say.

For today, however, I only want to let you know that when we spoke that last time, just two weeks ago, I did get to tell Alan that I loved him. Indeed, Ellen was able to say the same and to let him know that Hailey and all in our community who had the great good fortune of working with him closely did so as well. We told him how much it means to us to work with him and we said we would miss his temporary absence from our work. We promised him that we would carry on in his absence. So now, in the face of this profound loss, we will keep that promise.

I need time to collect my thoughts, but something I don’t need time to think about is my first impression of Alan, an impression that has grown only in intensity in the several years we have worked together.

I remember the day and place I met him. Eliza Reilly had invited us to a SENCER regional meeting she had organized at Franklin and Marshall College. I did a talk, as did Alan.

I had become entranced with something called “informal science education” and had had a chat with some folks at NSF about an idea I had that they, and I am speaking of Al DeSena here in particular, had been particularly encouraging about. I liked my idea (as I tend to), but I knew just how little I knew about the world of informal science education.

It so happened that Alan, Ellen, and I got seated next to one another at the tables at lunch. Listening to Alan’s ideas, responding to his gentle inquiries, and hearing myself reframe my thoughts in response to his, I had an overwhelming sense that an adult had finally entered our conversation!

Though I now know he was only a few years older than I am and though I am blessed to have wonderful colleagues, Alan seemed to me then as he does now to be uncommonly sage, a truly wise man.

I know I am not alone in having that sense of Alan: Alan as the adult, the wise man, the friend, the understanding and patient parent figure, the man willing to lend his luster to your unpolished idea, the man rigorous and demanding of high quality first in himself and then in others, but relaxed and comfortable in manifold and diverse social situations, and, above all, the man who was a quiet, tireless, and amazingly effective worker in the causes that had the extra benefit to be ones that he shared.

The last thing Alan would want is for our memories of him and his legacy to become enshrined or, worse yet, encased, in some old-fashioned specimen display. If ever there were an occasion for a living museum, it is the celebration of Alan's life, his work, and his place in our lives. We will need to become the "living exhibit" of Alan's work.

It is hard taking this in. For many of you, getting to know Alan recently—as recently as it was for me, too—seemed to be more the beginning of what we expected would be a long time of working together, not the premature and abrupt end that confronts us today.

Consolation eludes me.

Perhaps because of its title, but more for what it says to me about the human condition, as well as our need to take time to observe death and mourn, and still to keep going, I think now, not of science, but another way of knowing that was dear to Alan. I recall the words of W.H Auden:

Musée des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully
along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

I know you will join me in extending our sympathy to Alan's wife, Mickey, and to the remarkable family of Alan's many friends and admirers of which we at the National Center, the SENCER-ISE project, and the SENCER community constitute another small part.

David Burns
May 5, 2014