

Talk for Department Memorial

KENNETH TAYLOR

1954-2019

John Perry

Ken Taylor was an extraordinary individual. He deserved the title “larger than life”. Whatever the task at hand, whether it was explaining some point in the philosophy of language, coaching Kiyoshi’s little league team, chairing the Stanford Philosophy department and its Symbolic Systems Program, debating at the Academic Senate, or being President of the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division, Ken went at it with ferocious energy. He put incredible effort into teaching and graduate advising which was greatly appreciated by his students. Ken was one of the last Stanford Philosophy professors to always wear a tie when he taught, to show his respect for the students, who make it possible for philosophers to earn a living doing what we like to do. His death leaves a huge gap in the lives of his family, his friends, his colleagues, and Stanford.

A number of years before Ken came to Stanford, I thought I had a great idea. One of my favorite radio programs for a long time was NPR’s “Car Talk” with Click and Clack. It occurred to me one day, if lots of people like to listen to an hour of two guys talking about problems people have with cars, wouldn’t even more people like to hear a couple of people talking about philosophy problems. We could call it Philosophy Talk. I asked a couple of colleagues if they would like to team up with me for such a show. The answer was a loud “No”, accompanied by raised eyebrows that suggested it was one of the stupidest ideas I had come up with, a high barrier. So I gave up.

Then, a while after he arrived, I asked Ken. He thought it was a terrific idea. Then I learned what a powerhouse Ken could be. Within about two weeks, he has gotten some money from Etchemendy, our provost, to send us to the NPR convention in Portland to explore the possibilities. By a week or so after that he had found a producer, Ben Manilla, and we had our first dry run, with John Searle. A week or so later we were on KALW in San Francisco and NPR in Portland, with more money from Etch to get started. This was all due to Ken. I just sat back amazed. As I said, he was a powerhouse.

Maya Angelou gave some advice that I think Ken followed:

“Try to be a rainbow in someone’s cloud.”

I'm going to let Maya Angelou have the last word here, from her poem
"When Great Trees Fall"

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

....

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

...

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.

Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

— Maya Angelou

Thank you.