

Ken Taylor Memorial
Manuel Vargas
Stanford, April 5, 2023

I'm deeply grateful to the organizers for making this happen. One of the quiet harms of the pandemic was the loss of communal mourning of our friends, family, and community members who passed during, or adjacent to, that dark time. It robbed us those we loved and admired, but it also robbed us of the opportunity to celebrate and reminisce and commemorate the many wonderful people who have made our world a more beautiful and humane place.

So, I am especially grateful to have this opportunity to say a few words about a person and philosopher for whom I have so much admiration and so many fond memories.

First, though, I'm going to read some remarks on behalf of Quayshawn Spencer, who wanted to be here today but couldn't. (If it helps, imagine a taller, better-looking speaker, with a more compelling voice.)

My first interaction with Ken was in his capacity as the departmental chair during admit visiting weekend. I was thrilled to have been admitted to Stanford, but, as a budding philosopher of biology, I was worried that both Elliott Sober and Peter Godfrey-Smith would not be there once I arrived. However, Ken assured me that, on his watch, the department would put the "and" in Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences. And he followed through because not too long after I arrived, the department hired Helen

Longino. We all know that one woman philosopher is as good as two male philosophers, anyway (big smile).

I was also one of Ken's teaching assistants in PHIL 80: Mind, Matter, and Meaning; where I probably learned just as much about his wife and his son as I did about how to teach philosophy to a general audience. While I very much enjoyed interacting with Ken in a professional setting, and while I definitely learned a lot about how to be an exceptional teacher, scholar, and colleague from him; my admiration and endearment for Ken primarily came from non-academic sources.

Whether he knew this or not, I saw Ken as a very specific example of Black excellence. Specifically, Ken seemed to have an excellent balance between his professional life as an academic philosopher and his familial life as a father and husband. I got this impression not only from his PHIL 80 lectures, but also because my fiancée and I would regularly bump into Ken and his family at a local Chinese restaurant on weekends. There, we would chat for a bit and be on our way, but from those interactions I knew that he was very involved in his son's life. For example, once we bumped into them right after a little league baseball game they all came from.

This was stunning to me, and in a beautiful way. My mother raised me and my three siblings with little help from my father, so I didn't have an example in the home for how to be an excellent Black father and husband. Such examples were hard to find in my neighborhood as well. For example, for most of my childhood, my role model was my pastor, but, sadly, he turned out to be a drug dealer and adulterer. Before Ken, I wasn't able to find a suitable Black male role model in my educational setting either, but that was largely due to the scarcity of Black male teachers and professors in our country. For

example, I had only one Black male professor throughout my entire undergraduate experience, but he was not both a husband and a father.

Another reason for why I adored Ken was due to how he was there for me during a very difficult period during my Stanford experience. While I prefer to keep private what happened, what I will say is that it was a traumatic and racist experience that only a Black person would be subjected to in this country. The experience was so traumatic, that I contemplated dropping out of Stanford. Ken was not only a good listener throughout this period of my life, but he also gave wonderful advice. Also, the kind of support Ken offered to me during this period could not have been offered by any random kind-hearted professor, because of how Ken utilized his intimate experiential knowledge of what I was going through. It turns out that Ken had experienced almost exactly what I had experienced in his own life. So, while Ken was undoubtedly an exceptional colleague, teacher, and scholar; what I will miss most about Ken is how he lived his life outside of the ivory tower. His life was inspiring, and I'm still in awe of who he was.

Those remarks were from Quayshawn Spencer.

I now turn to a few brief remarks of my own.

When you are a grad student, you don't really tend to think of faculty as *people*, so much as embodiments of your professional aspirations. Of course, when you are faculty, you learn your colleagues are, alas, just people. And too-often, they **aren't** embodiments of your professional aspirations.

For me, though, Ken was always an implausible combination of personal and the professional: he was a very real, very alive person who also embodied so many of my own hopes for what I wanted out of a life of the mind. There was an almost superhuman fullness to him that outstripped the vision we tend to have of our fellow academics. I don't really know how to describe that overflowing vitality. It was not just his formidable presence and irrepressible personality, but a strange sense that he was in some way always just a little more real, a little more enduring than one could hope to be. The abruptness of his mortality will never make sense to me.

Philosophers are sometimes a hermetic lot, content to limit their engagements with the literature in their own subfields, and reluctantly, if pushed, one or two very proximal subfields. Ken wasn't like that at all. Or, maybe, Ken just thought every field was proximal. His classes and seminars were marked by a cool, confident faith in a broadly naturalistic conception of the world. But he would meet you where you were. Talking shop with him meant that at one moment there was a Kant reference; the next some reference to evolutionary psychology; then a thought about reference; then, some remark about norm-mongering biologies, or what have you.

Ken probably didn't fit the public mold of a philosopher. He was neither bald nor prone to pipe smoking, nor given to beards. I never once saw him in a toga, although perhaps that happened after my time here.

However much he confounded whatever popular stereotypes there are about philosophers, he was undoubtedly a philosophers' philosopher. He loved a good philosophical wrangle more than anyone I've ever met. In graduate school, an argument with him never involved just a single idea, objection, or counterexample. It was always a swarm, an armada, or an avalanche of objections, counterexamples, ideas, and

reframings. He delighted in the give and take, and he was implacable when it came to chasing down the arguments.

When I was writing my dissertation, meetings with him were always friendly but also (at least for me) all-out intellectual brawls. I'd float some idea, and he'd stare at me for a couple of seconds completely unpersuaded, and then the objections would begin to flow. We'd spend an hour or two going at it. I tapped out quite a bit, but he only ever did if he had another appointment. I kept coming back to get worked over, and Ken kept teaching me things. We were, I suppose kindred spirits in our shared enthusiasm for this kind of philosophizing.

One of my fondest memories of this was when it spilled over into a context that scandalized everyone else, but that was very much in keeping with how we did philosophy together. At the department's ceremonial hooding of newly minted PhDs, Ken did the honors for me because Michael had to be out of the country. At the time, the convention was that the faculty advisor said a few things about what the dissertation was about.

So, Ken got up and started to sketch some of the main ideas, and he began to talk about why he thought they were philosophically interesting. He was excited, and he *really* wanted to show everyone that the project merited serious philosophical engagement. And, he was going to show us how. A few minutes later, he was explaining to us where he was sympathetic with the project, and where he wasn't. There was this potential objection there, but there were these other possibilities left in the wake of the project. Visibly excited, Ken was lavishing a mini-APA session on my work at the graduation ceremony. I was astonished and moved that he clearly had further thoughts about things,

and he wanted to talk about them even after his committee member obligations were already very firmly discharged.

The nonphilosophers were baffled about what was going on. My in-laws were visibly concerned that I may have done something wrong. My mom fretted I might not get my PhD.

My classmates, though, were laughing and having a good time with it. Ken was taking me seriously, and treating me like a real colleague, and doing so much more than merely pro forma congratulations.

Meanwhile, I was trying to find a notepad, because he was making some really good points.

In later years, I would drop by his office when I was on campus, and we'd catch up. Fifteen minutes in, we were back at it. I'd be trying to make some argument for something I'd been thinking about, and Ken would be chucking bombs at it. The only way I ever got out of those discussions without a workout was by cheating. Whenever I was stuck, I just ask him about Kiyoshi, and he'd get a big smile and launch into stories about baseball and his adventures with Claire in the raising of their son.

It goes almost without saying that if you are a young philosopher of a visibly underrepresented demographic, you don't have a lot of role models in the profession. But I was lucky to have one, and doubly fortunate to have him on my dissertation committee.

These kinds of things matter, in often silent but profound ways. We don't always explain to others, or admit to ourselves, how much concrete individuals stand in for the possibility that some things are not closed off to one. Ken was such an amazing beacon of the highest possibilities.

It wasn't just that he was an actual, honest-to-goodness philosophy professor in the first place I ever thought of as an intellectual home. It was also his omnivorous interests. It was proof of possibility that being a philosopher was compatible with being interested in everything else, too; that one could teach, that one could mentor, that one could lead, and one could serve, and that yes, one could be a person, too.

I miss him.