

A Tribute to Leon Knopoff May 5, 2011

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I want to express my gratitude to Joanne, and to Katie, Rachel, and Michael for giving me the opportunity to offer a few reflections on Leon. Though I had heard a number of glowing things over the years about him, I knew him only in the most casual manner before his and my retirement. However, for several years now as emeritus professors we have lunched together for wide-ranging conversation once a week with another eight or nine emeriti. We came to treasure these occasions in which there was spirited talk about topics in the sciences or religion or politics or law or morality or education or countless other matters that might have aroused our interest because of books or articles we had read or films or concerts we had attended and, of course, given our average age of at least 80, health problems received, perhaps unduly lengthy, attention as well. A friendship blossomed between Leon and me largely in that setting and also because of our families being engaged in similar challenges.

I have always found especially moving the Chorus' words in Shakespeare's HENRY V that describe the King walking among his soldiers as they sit before their camp fires the night before the Battle of Agincourt. These words have come to me as I recall Leon and my feelings about him. The King appears,

*With cheerful semblance and sweet majesty;
That every wretch, pining and pale before,
Beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks;
A largess universal, like the sun,
His liberal eye doth give to every one,
Thawing cold fear, that mean and gentle all
Behold, as may unworthiness define,
A little touch of Harry in the night.*

My friendship with Leon was shaped, then, not by the length of years we knew each other or the frequency of our interactions so much as the quality of the moments we shared, the powerful impact upon me of many of Leon's "little touches" during luncheon conversations and his warm and kind words as we were engaged in parting from each other and that served to thaw, as Joanne's words have also, some of my own cold fear. How remarkable it is, the impact upon us sometimes of a word or two, a look, a touch.

I admired and cared deeply for Leon. There were many occasions when I wanted to hug him. I admired him for his brilliance of mind, his boundless curiosity and his vast knowledge, his capacity for listening attentively and for reflecting before speaking, his invariably judicious observations, his naturalness and his total absence of pretense or any need to impress others, his humility and his complete ease in acknowledging his ignorance about some matter, his warmth and generosity of spirit, his humor and the not infrequent twinkle in his eye, his extraordinary courage and self-command. I cannot imagine a mean thought grabbing hold of him. There was also a quietness about him that enchanted me. I was perhaps most affected by his capacity for and many manifestations of love.

It is not unusual at times such as these also to feel some anger – anger at what, one often does not know. Perhaps it is at so strange an object as our world in which such grievous losses are inevitable. But, unless I am deceiving myself, I feel no anger over his death. Well, perhaps some anger directed at myself for not

making more of an effort to be with him and further enriching my life. Still, my feelings are principally of sadness, my extraordinary good fortune in my life having intersected with his, and awe when I reflect upon the expansive scope and depth of his life and his rewards in living such a life.

It is a familiar truism that with time's passage all disappears. This is, when it is the loss of someone we love, a horribly disorienting and painful experience. Proportionate to the depth of our attachment is the pain experienced when there is separation. It can feel as if something has been cut out of or off of us. A compensating thought, as we know, occasionally arises as one struggles to regain one's balance, to regain attachment to life as a changed person. The thought is that, after death, there might be eternal life, a life of endless duration and one in which there might be a rejoinder with our loved ones. The ravages of time and time's vicissitudes would then be overcome. Leon would have had none of this. I do think, though, that he would understand the powerful pull people feel to this thought and sympathize with those who give into it. It was not, I believe, in his nature to sit in judgment with how people handle monumental loss. But he would have had boundless suspicion for beliefs that satisfy powerful wishes rather than beliefs grounded in evidence. I would guess, without having spoken to him about it, that one of the greatest evils for him was to waste the life granted to one, to fail to take in that one's own life will end and that the lives of loved ones will as well and, as a consequence, endlessly defer the living of the life one has and to the fullest. I visualize him as gently shaking his head in puzzlement when learning of someone wasting the time granted to them of a life they already possess while dreaming of a life after death about which they can know nothing.

Leon's life illustrates for me how one can live a life without an oppressive sense of time's inevitable flow, a life that takes in the inevitability of death but that overcomes fear of it. I simply cannot imagine Leon vulnerable to boredom, as being oppressed by time weighing on him or time running out.

Leon's life, in the manner of his living it, was an expression of his answer to the puzzles with which time and death confronts all of us. His answer lay in his capacity for and manifestation of love – his love for Jo and for his children, his love of truth, his love of beauty, and his love of goodness. He was extraordinarily capable of passionate love. When he was connected, as it was his good fortune to often be, with the objects of his love, life could not offer him more. He had, I am inclined to say, innumerable glimpses of eternal life, not a life of infinite duration but rather moments, familiar to us all, of being insensitive to the passage of time, moments of complete absorption in something other than oneself. Many of the moments I spent with him provided me similar glimpses.

Leon struggled with grace, fortitude and courage to remain alive. His life to his and our good fortune was lengthy; it was a life as worthwhile as any life could be; he contributed in major ways to making the lives of others more worthwhile than they would otherwise have been. Dylan Thomas, in his well-known poem, urges the dying old man whom he is addressing, "to rage, rage against the dying of the light." The light that was in Leon's life shown, for him and for those he touched, as brightly as any light could. More could not be expected of a human life. Rage need not have been urged upon him. Nor need there be any need for flights of angels to bear him to Heaven. He already had possessed something closely akin to it while alive.

Leon knew that all lights, however bright, are with time extinguished, and he knew that we are now receiving light from stars that no longer exist. I feel certain that Leon, similar to these stars, will continue to brighten not only the lives of those now living but also countless lives of the yet unborn.