

Reflections on the Passing of Jay Edelman

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In early 2008, our friend, classmate, and former ESG member Jay Edelman died. Jay was a member of the first, or founding, class of ESG students at MIT. His brilliant mind, youthful determination to be responsible for his own education and choose its path, and sheer iconoclasm made him a natural person to participate in turning the ideals of ESG founder Professor George Valley into reality. Jay did not disappoint, either in achieving academic success, or in impressing his personality on the development of ESG.

ESG was perhaps best known, in its early days, as a haven for students with a liberal arts or interdisciplinary focus, who wished to expand the undergraduate curriculum, based on engineering and science, to allow study of these subjects in their broader implications.

But many early students, including Jay, and me, and Aaron Roberts, my undergraduate physics tutor, were finding ways to use ESG to pursue an intensive and focused study of advanced science topics in a way more appropriate to graduate students. In particular, Jay obtained a Masters degree in molecular biology in four years at MIT. During this time, he studied advanced particle physics with me. He had a vision that the abstract models and mathematical methods developed by particle physicists could be profitably applied to understand the extremely complex problems faced by theoretical biology. Time has shown that his vision was correct, although many of his ideas have yet to achieve fruition.

In the last year that we spent at MIT, Jay and I, along with several other MIT students who were dedicated to this type of very intensive, very personal study of advanced science got an apartment together off campus. This was my first experiment in creating my own living group, i.e., in taking responsibility for living together with a group of people with whom I shared important goals. I think this would have been impossible for us without the example provided by ESG: ESG served us much as a College in a European university; it was both a living environment and a study environment. After many of the regular MIT students has deserted ESG for their residences, we cooked meals together in the ESG kitchen, and held discussions, often into the late hours, about the science we were studying, and about all the other vexing, challenging aspects of MIT life. (There was a rule against sleeping on ESG couches, but sometimes we bent that rule.)

Like many of us, Jay presented a unique appearance to undergraduates new to the ESG program, with his long hair, wire-rim glasses, worn clothing, and thin, green canvas book bag, always bulging with research-level textbooks and state of the art journal papers in

chemistry, physics and biology. They admired him for his sometimes painful honesty, his indifference to opinions people had that they could not defend, and his dedication to advanced science. (Like me and a number of others, Jay experienced science not merely as a course of study that would lead him to a good job, but as a spiritual discipline; as a way to know the Universe and thus, to understand his own life. In a very real sense, we were science monks.) I remember that Jay and I struggled together for several weeks to understand the Wigner-Eckhart Theorem, a very abstract theorem in theoretical physics. Working with Jay provided me both with some of my early intellectual victories, and a lot of the interpersonal satisfaction I experienced as a student at MIT. ESG made many of our accomplishments possible and also contributed immensely to their meaning.

I think the combination of Jay's brilliance, his honesty (about himself and others), and his painful shyness, made him a figure that other students admired, but found rather unapproachable. To fight this, Jay used his sense of humor, and natural desire to be a performer. ESGers will recall Jay using a megaphone to yell out the sixth floor window of ESG at students on the ground, "Jump!" This kind of edgy attempt to break social conventions was common in Boston in the early 1970's, but Jay was a master at it.

At the end of the summer of 1973, Jay obtained his Master's degree, and left for the graduate program in Biology at Caltech (he never got a Bachelor's degree.) I applied to the five best graduate programs in theoretical physics, was accepted by four of them, and left for Princeton (I never got a Bachelor's degree either). Jay and I exchanged letters, but I quickly lost touch with him.

I didn't find out that Jay had died for a while. He had quit academics. Finally Holly found out and notified us. I managed to interview Jay's Dad. Norman Edelman is a retired physician. He called me on the phone and we talked for about an hour. It was a profoundly moving experience. Both of us realized that we had been privileged to know and love the same person; a very shy and difficult man. Norman told me the following facts.

Jay's mom died young. (I only know one story about her: When Jay and his sister were young, they used to fight over the family dog at bedtime. They both wanted to bring the puppy dog to bed with them and cover it with blankets. Puppies don't like this. Jay's mom insisted they not force the dog to stay with them; she told them, "The dog is a free agent".)

Jay was brilliant, but rebellious. He was difficult to get to know, a "closed person". He didn't make friends easily. He always had a "wild sense of humor". I told Norman that

Jay would claim to be radical in all sorts of ways, e.g., a Communist, but that I never knew him to act on these claims. Norman agreed. In a high school study unit on religions, a rabbi gave a talk in their class. Jay immediately asked him, "Why do you believe in God?"

But there was serious anger boiling underneath, an extreme form of the stifling influence that many of us experienced in the suburban lifestyle of the 1960's. In high school chemistry class, Jay became very angry at the instructor. He set out chemicals and turned on the gas jets, hoping to cause an explosion. The explosion was stopped, but Jay was institutionalized for much of his senior year in high school. He was released to go to MIT because of his high academic achievement and obvious brilliance. (I have a notion that Jay was diagnosed as "schizophrenic", but I cannot substantiate this. One must ask just what such a diagnosis amounted to in the late 1960's.) Certainly, Jay was my close friend and I never experienced him as anything but kind, gentle, fully rational, and very responsible. The nurturing environment of MIT allowed socially challenged people like Jay (and me) not only to meet the requirements of undergraduate life, but also to excel creatively.

Jay was an epileptic. I'm not sure how far back the symptoms went, but he was diagnosed, and began taking medication, in 1982. Jay didn't like the medication because of its side effects, and in classic manner, often did not take his medication. Jay died from a violent epileptic seizure. They found him with the bottle of his pills in his hand. He was only 55 years old.

"I want to ask you one last question," I told Norman. "Was Jay a happy person?"

"In his own way, I think he was," was the answer.