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Chapter Author: Manuel Trajtenberg

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Remembering Ken, Our Beloved Friend

Manuel Trajtenberg

It has been almost three years since Ken succumbed to a long, protracted illness. Three years too many of void and longing for an exceptional human being who shone radiantly in our horizon, only to leave us, his countless friends and disciples and colleagues, far too soon, when he was still in the midst of making economics a better discipline to grasp, and this world a better place to journey.

“*A beautiful mind*” is not just the successful title of an inspiring story, but also a powerful conjunction of words that conjures the image of a great intellect trapped in the grip of mental illness. To paraphrase it, Ken was “*a beautiful soul*” trapped in a treacherous body, which ever since childhood challenged him with pain and ailment, until finally it did him in with precipitous rage. “*A beautiful soul*” made of overflowing kindness, of boundless empathy, of thoughtfulness and softness and loyalty toward his friends—so many of us, so fortunate that fate brought us within the radius of Ken’s life.

A beautiful soul and a beautiful mind, for Ken brought to bear to our profession as much as to his daily life a powerful intellect, which encompassed far more than that of the run of the mill economist: literature, history, politics, science. There was no subject that was alien to him, no corner of human knowledge or art that escaped his attention and curiosity. As amply demonstrated in this volume, Ken’s contributions to economic history left an indelible imprint that will surely reverberate for generations to come. But that is just part of the story: Ken was a great intellectual in the good old sense of the word, far greater than the mere count of published articles or prizes

Manuel Trajtenberg is head of the National Economic Council at the prime minister’s office of Israel; professor at the Eitan Berglas School of Economics, Tel Aviv University; and a research associate of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

received or talks rendered—it was through the interaction with students, colleagues, and friends, that the radiance of his beautiful mind showed the most, illuminating our shadows.

I had the tremendous fortune of meeting Ken over thirty years ago, as I arrived for the first time to the United States to study at Harvard. We roomed together for two years: his last two, my first. Our relationship developed into the closest it comes to brotherhood without actual kinship. For virtually all of my adult life Ken was a main pillar of my existence, of my conception of the world, of my notion of what humanity and friendship and affection are.

We had endless hours of discussions about politics, about ideas, about the why and the when and the how, some strident and vociferous, some soft and quiet, always, always inspiring. He was a staunch believer in some basic principles such as democracy, fairness, equal opportunity, liberty, the capacity for progress, the value of knowledge and of the intellect. Even in the darkest days for the polity in America, Ken passionately loved his country and what it stood for, but he could be equally acerbic in criticizing excesses of power at home and abroad, the shortsightedness of government, greed, corruption, unfairness. Having grown up in a less fortunate country, I typically tended to be more skeptical and doubtful than Ken, but he managed to instill in me a set of beliefs that greatly helped me cope over the years with this confounding and cynical world.

Ken followed closely the lives of his friends' families, becoming for our fortunate children the fabled good uncle who arrives every time from distant places, showering them with well thought presents, with tender smiles. As much as each of us would like to think that Ken was uniquely special just for himself or herself, in fact very many of us felt exactly the same. That was one of Ken's greatest gifts: that he managed to be so much for so many, and yet each felt that he was uniquely his . . .

Even as his body shrank to the minimally possible, even as he contemplated the coming end, his worries and thoughts were with us, with the many friends who came to bid him goodbye. As always, Ken wanted to be as fair as possible in allocating his precious last hours, in making sure that each of us got enough attention, even in consoling us. It is impossible to figure out how he managed, in the midst of his tenacious battle with the cruel disease, to display such generosity of spirit, such unselfish love.

Ken was no believer; his was too rational a mind to accommodate religion, and yet there is something almost divine about his life, his qualities, his touch. We all knew he was very special, but it is only when he is no more that we realize how much. "*A beautiful soul, a beautiful mind,*" that is the way we ought to keep his radiant memory in our firmament—perhaps the flame will last for many lifetimes.

With immense sadness but equally boundless love,
Manuel Trajtenberg