



IN MEMORIAM

John C. Liebeskind
Professor of Psychology
Los Angeles
1935–1997

John Liebeskind came to UCLA over 30 years ago, as a new assistant professor, about a year after I did; our offices were adjacent, and we became fast friends. He stood out physically because of his amazing shock of prematurely gray hair and craggy good looks. And we were soon to find that he stood out in more important ways as well. Indeed, everyone who knew John will tell you that he was a phenomenon, special, a person completely different from anyone they have ever met.

John had an unusually successful scientific career at UCLA, as the accompanying brief descriptions on his scientific accomplishments demonstrate. Like almost all successful scientists he had a busy laboratory, filled with pre- and post- doctoral students and often with enthusiastic undergraduates as well. But John's relationship to his students had a quality that I have never seen elsewhere. They were everything to him; indeed, I think he was interested in doing science in significant measure because he found working with them such a joy. He loved planning new work with them, arguing with them about the validity, meaning, and importance of the things they found, gossiping about the findings and personalities in competing labs, and haggling line by line about the exact wording of each of the many papers they wrote together. John's students seemed to be as much a part of his family as his wife and children. Interestingly, John never took seriously his own contribution to what his laboratory accomplished. He truly felt that his students, not he, had done it all. It never seemed to occur to him that there must be some special factor that made his lab do impact- producing work time and again while other, larger labs produced work much more mundane. Of course the factor was John. But it was impossible to convince him of that.

It is a good thing that John had those students keeping the experiments going. For when he was not working with them he spent extraordinary amounts of time otherwise occupied. He was councilor to everyone. It sometimes seemed that every illness in someone's family, every broken relationship, every wrong that needed righting, and every Departmental conflict ended in his office where he advised, cajoled, consoled, or commiserated and also, when he thought it would be fruitful, reached out to his network of friends and colleagues for further advice and help. People came to John for so many things because he had eminent good sense, because they were sure he would react in what he considered their best interest, and because he made them feel comfortable.

Making people feel comfortable and offering good cheer were hallmarks of John's approach to life. They pervaded everything he did. A suitable joke, and an arm around the shoulder, a warm welcome were his stock and trade. He was fond of small pranks, tailored to his target. For me, who usually works with my door closed, John never seemed to tire of knocking and then, when I answered, holding the knob so that I was trapped inside.

Even in his last days, when he knew that his death was a certainty, he maintained his bonhomie, and in so doing displayed a strength of character that is a tough act for anyone to follow. I will never forget one particular incident. Having apparently conquered his first bout of cancer, having learned to cope magnificently with the loss of his natural voice that was the result, and now looking the picture of vitality, he suddenly started looking gaunt and troubled. Soon he took me aside and told me, as I had suspected, that he

had recently been informed that he had little time left. I was sure that that we had seen the last of John as we had known him, and I began internally mourning. But a few days later there was a knock at my door. I went to open it, and the knob would not turn. Finally he let me out. He was back to his old tricks, and he continued in that mode till the very end.

Frank Krasne