

# Remembering Alice M. Isen

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Alice M. Isen was a true scientific path-breaker. In an era of scientific psychology that was just overcoming the blinders of radical behaviorism to discover cognition, she nearly single-handedly initiated the modern scientific study of positive affect, presaging the now thriving emphasis on positive psychology. Isen received her BA in Russian Language and Literature in 1963 from the University of Pennsylvania, followed by her MA and PhD in Psychology, in 1966 and 1968, respectively, both from Stanford University. Isen's dissertation, chaired by Walter Mischel and published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, tested her intuition-based hypotheses regarding the "warm glow of success." Using clever behavioral measures, she found that people randomly assigned to experience success were more generous, helpful, and attentive to others, relative to those randomly assigned to experience failure or to receive no performance feedback whatsoever. Her dissertation thus launched her more than four decades of meticulous empirical work on the social and cognitive effects of positive affect, carried out across her faculty appointments at Swarthmore College, Franklin and Marshall College, the University of Maryland, and most recently Cornell University. Beyond documenting the many ways that positive affect "gives rise to an enlarged cognitive context." Isen was famous for extending her findings into attention-grabbing applications within organizational behavior, marketing, and health care interactions, including her famous demonstration that physicians who receive an unexpected bag of candy make better medical decisions. Isen's work was indeed inspirational for my own next-generation research on positive affect, as she had provided foundational evidence to support my first articulation of the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. I came to know Isen in the early 2000s as we were drawn to symposia and topics of mutual fascination. As did so many others, I found her to be an unfailingly kind and supportive senior colleague, generous with her ideas and feedback. I valued our friendship and camaraderie. She was a courageous and creative scholar who will be missed by many.

-APS Fellow Barbara L. Fredrickson  
Kenan Distinguished Professor of Psychology  
and Principal Investigator of the Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Lab

## **Jin Seok Pyone**

One thing I remember about Alice is that she always had this warm smile on her face. Whenever I walked into her office, she gave me the warm smile even when she was extremely tired and exhausted! She welcomed all the students who knocked on her door with open arms without judging. She was also very patient. During our research meetings, I often asked her so many questions about so many little things, especially in my first and second years. I kept asking “why?” and “why?” to her responses, but she never dismissed any of my silly questions. In fact, she complimented me, saying that I am curious and thoughtful. Not only that, she would give me the very best, well-organized answer to all my questions. She was like a walking dictionary: if you asked any questions on any prior research, she always had an answer for you. It is amazing how much she knew, and further she enjoyed sharing her knowledge with people. I really miss the intellectual and fun meetings with her.

## **Kyle Emich**

*Assistant professor of management  
Fordham Schools of Business*

When I envision Alice Isen I picture her seated in her office. Her desk always contained a mountain of edited manuscripts and journals. However, what I will remember most is the collection of children’s toys she kept in front of either. The reason I remember these toys so vividly is that she often encouraged myself and other students to play with them during the four- to five-hour meetings she often held to brainstorm projects, review data, and meticulously edit pieces most others would consider complete. I thought this memory of Alice was worth mentioning because it contains two core facets of her personality. First, she believed in her work. Alice created implications for her findings that positive affect facilitates cognitive processing by giving her colleagues toys to play with and candy to eat in order to create a more innovative research environment. Second, she had a deep passion for science. To Alice every word in every manuscript, manipulation, or measure was vital to the overall message of the investigation. This passion and dedication was infectious and helped to inspire many students and colleagues to push themselves to do creative yet focused research. So, I will remember those meetings because I will miss her passion; I will miss the opportunity to exchange ideas with someone so knowledgeable; I will miss her playfulness; and I will miss the toys.

## **Sigal Barsade**

*Joseph Frank Bernstein Professor of Management  
The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania*

Alice Isen was a star researcher and one of the groundbreaking scholars in the field of emotions. Her research influence was felt very strongly in the organizational behavior field, and served as the base for so much of what followed later in the study of emotions and organizations. I vividly remember how excited I was to meet Alice given how much I respected her work. We stayed in contact over the years

and I very much looked forward to bouncing around ideas with her, and to getting to spend time at the Academy of Management meetings. I was always amazed at how accessible Alice was and how generous she was with her time. I will miss her and am grateful for the encouragement she gave me, and for all that she contributed to our field.

## **Johnmarshall Reeve**

*Professor of education  
Korea University*

All of my spontaneous memories of time spent with Alice are retrieval cues for joy and a gentle, understated laugh. These are memories such as the pleasure and satisfaction she would flash upon coming up with a clever title — like “cookies and kindness” and “the person with a large canoe has a large worry.” These are memories of her pulling out that bag of candy wrapped with a red ribbon at each of her presentations. All of my reflective memories of time spent with Alice are retrieval cues for respect and gratitude. More than anyone else, she modeled for me what excellence in academia is. She did this mostly by modeling what a strong argument is. Her thinking and writing always started with clarity, as she would lift that worn-out dictionary off her desk to look up every ambiguous word I uttered. This gentle act would always get our conversation back on track and heading somewhere. Her thinking and writing continued with objectivity, as no utterance and no sentence could pass comfortably by until and unless it had sufficient empirical evidence behind it. My memories of Alice M. Isen are among the most meaningful memories I have, and those interactions and that time spent with Alice have gradually formed the basis of who I am as a scholar, as an editor, and as a friend and colleague. I was lucky to be one of the many people whose lives she touched and inspired, and I will always remember my dear friend.

## **Lisa G. Aspinwall**

*Professor of psychology  
University of Utah*

Alice was a wonderful scientist and mentor. Generous with her time, ideas, and careful constructive editing, she entrusted me with three special issues of *Motivation and Emotion*, and I served as associate editor of the journal for five years under her tutelage. More importantly, I had the opportunity to discuss research ideas with her and to work with her on a consulting project. We always found a way to make meetings for these various projects fun and to explore such “safe, enjoyable options” as salad bars, tapas restaurants, and other places where positive affect, variety, and choice rule the day. It is fitting that our last meal together was at a Chinese restaurant in Las Vegas called *Joyful House*. In her work and in her life, Alice appreciated the benefits of fun and enjoyment as worthwhile means in their own right, but also pioneered their systematic experimental study as important influences on a range of cognitions and behaviors. Her work is marked by a career-long commitment to challenging simplistic assumptions about positive affect in favor of careful empirical research, and to testing ideas in diverse meaningful contexts, such as consumer behavior and medical decision-making. I am sorry she is not here to see — and contribute to — neuroscientific advances in self-regulation and decision-making, particularly in the understanding of switching set and prioritizing among tasks. I know she would ask researchers

challenging questions about the role that positive affect plays in these processes as people respond to important elements of task and context. On a personal note, I know that I will continue to draw inspiration from her work and her commitment to it.

## **Frank R. Kardes**

*Professor of marketing  
University of Cincinnati*

Alice was a good friend and a valued colleague, and she will be missed. We frequently got together at conferences, mostly Society for Consumer Psychology annual conferences, to work on research and to go to dinners and, occasionally, to play cards (we used to play a silly game called Scum with a large group of friends). Alice particularly liked dessert because she said that sweets induce positive affect and that this stimulates flexible and efficient cognitive processing. She was fun to work with, and I was always impressed by her keen insights and her creative research ideas. She had an important and lasting influence on me and on the fields of social psychology and consumer psychology.

## **Susan Powell Mantel**

*Associate professor of marketing  
Ball State University*

My first memory of Alice was in 1993 when as a third year PhD student, I attended my first Association for Consumer Research conference and met Alice through my advisor, Frank Kardes. Alice asked me about my work with interest and offered much appreciated advice. I was in awe. I had read several of Alice's papers and had an interest in the study of affect — but to be standing at a conference and discussing my research with *the* affect researcher was (at the time) amazing to me. My paper presentation was scheduled for 8:00 AM on the last day of the conference (I did not expect much of an audience), so, when Alice attended the session and then stayed to discuss my work after the session was over, I was very grateful. Little did I know, at the time, that this interaction would be the start of a long, treasured relationship. I know that there are many others who have a similar story of Alice taking an interest in them as they were just starting out — my story is just one of many— but I am grateful for having had Alice in my life. Over the years, my relationship with Alice grew in many ways. Mostly, we saw each other at conferences, but we also had many phone and email conversations about research, family, religion, politics of the world, and politics of college faculty. I was such a small part of Alice's network of connections, but she was a big influence in my research and a great sounding board for many issues in my life. I miss Alice — especially at conferences.

## **Julia D'Souza**

*Associate professor of accounting  
Cornell University*

Our offices at the Johnson School were along the same corridor, almost opposite each other. Alice

would often stop by to chat or just say hello. She said my office felt peaceful, and she enjoyed coming in. I suspect, though, that she considered accounting very boring. And I know that she looked at all things tax-related as her natural enemies. I remember being dumbfounded when she announced triumphantly mid-October one year, “My taxes are done!” In future years, I’d ask, with genuine curiosity, “For which year?” Discussing religion we found to be mutually enjoyable. Judaism meant a lot to Alice, and she was very knowledgeable about her religion, and committed to its observances. I was raised a Catholic and we enjoyed discussing similarities and differences between Christianity and Judaism. I remember casually remarking once that if I had another shot at life and a choice of which religion to be born into, I might have chosen to experience Judaism next, and then Buddhism, or maybe Buddhism next and then Judaism. I suspect she thought me to be most non-discriminating! Her own identity was tied very strongly with her faith, and I admired her commitment to her principles.

The foibles of English grammar also provided fertile ground for fun conversations. English is not my mother tongue, and I had been taught the language originally through a classical approach that focused on parsing sentences to break it into component parts, distinguishing between a gerund and a present participle, and other not-so-practical, analytical (fun, I thought) exercises. Alice, for whom English was the mother tongue, brought to her usage of the language the same rigor that she brought to her research — she was a purist as far as grammar, punctuation, and orthography are concerned. We laughed at “different than” and “between you and I” as much as we argued over whether she was “taller than I” or “taller than me.” I’ll miss those conversations. Alice was also very knowledgeable in philosophy, American history, and politics. Aside from psychology, of course. I learned a lot from her especially about American Government, and will always be grateful for that. Shalom, Alice!

## **Anthony D. Ong**

*Associate professor of psychology  
Cornell University*

I came to know Alice after arriving at Cornell as an assistant professor. Although we were in different departments, she was my closest colleague. We shared common interests in understanding the nature of positive affect and its measurement. She took an interest in my research on adult development and aging. We exchanged books and papers. On more than one occasion, she kindly agreed to read early drafts of manuscripts, often returning to me copious-hand written notes that she had prepared with promises to meet and discuss what she had learned. Soon, we were designing experiments, collecting data, and meeting regularly: it was all very exciting, the atmosphere steeped with curiosity and regard for the difficulty of thinking about psychological science. Alice and I also shared a love of eating out on a limited budget. We were both faculty fellows and met every Thursday for dinner at one of the all-you-can-eat dining halls at Cornell. Talking to Alice, I would soon forget that I was talking to one of the intellectual pioneers of the modern positive psychology movement. And yet it was during one of those many evenings spent discussing research over cafeteria food that I realized that Alice was more than a mentor and colleague. She had become a dear friend.

She was incredibly generous in a way that few people of her stature are. She took my interests seriously, believed some of them were worth pursuing, and did all she could to encourage me to take time, endless time, to incorporate different perspectives that would allow for more pointed tests of psychological

theory. This was what Alice did best, celebrating the insights achieved through incremental science. Not long after Alice passed away, I moved into a new office and found myself going through boxes of old papers. At the bottom of one box, I noticed, was a *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* paper published more than 35 years ago. It was one of Alice's! Although it was a paper that I had seen before, seeing it again made me think of her and immediately brought a smile to my face. The paper — no doubt familiar to those who knew her work — was titled “Duration of the effect of good mood on helping: Footprints on the sands of time.” Through her good humor and thoughtful insights, Alice Isen left a lasting footprint on the lives of all she touched.

## Amir Erez

*Professor of management  
Warrington College of Business Administration  
University of Florida*

Alice was born in Philadelphia and was raised in that city and its suburbs. She had a close, loving relationship with her parents, Eve Isen (a homemaker) and Saul Isen (a printer). She was also devoted to her brother, George Isen, who passed away in 1978. Alice was an enthusiastic fan of Philadelphia's sports teams, especially the Phillies and the Eagles. She was a devoted alumnus of the University of Pennsylvania where she and her brother received their undergraduate degrees. She enjoyed the city's cultural institutions, including the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Pennsylvania Ballet.

Above all, Alice was a researcher. She wanted to use her knowledge and her extraordinary research skills to expand our understanding of human psychology. She strove to inculcate her values — her respect for truth and simplicity — in her students. She had very close relationships with her students and was fiercely loyal to them. Her sharp mind and her ability to get to the core of issues along with her tremendous amount of knowledge and her keen intuition as an experimental researcher helped develop the minds of numerous students. I was one of the lucky students who were greatly influenced by Alice's mentoring and friendship. I met Alice in 1991 as a first-year graduate student at Cornell and she quickly became one of my most influential and admired teachers and a very close friend. Over the years I benefited tremendously from her creative and unique ways of looking at issues. We talked several times a week, sometimes for hours, and during these conversations I was fortunate enough to get a glimpse into her exceptional way of thinking. Alice strongly believed in the message of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides who argued that the more knowledge one acquires the more one is able to fulfill the commandment (Deuteronomy 6:5) to love God. Thus, to Alice science was not only a passion but also a religious pursuit.

Alice was one of the most courageous people I know. She was not afraid to state her opinions and had no fear of authority. Throughout her career Alice often stood out for women's rights and those of minorities, and in general, for those who were treated unjustly. The fact that many times she personally suffered the consequences of her protests never stopped her from doing the right thing. I wrote this reflection with the help of Mary Anne Nester. Mary Ann was one of Alice's closest friends and together with two other close friends, Rita Melen and Julia D'Souza, we took care of Alice in the last few months of her life. We all benefited greatly from our friendship with Alice and we miss our

conversations with her, her advice, her wit, her friendship and loyalty, and her passion for life, but most of all — we just miss her.