Remembering Daniel M. Wegner

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APS William James Fellow Daniel M. Wegner is fondly associated with the "white bear phenomenon" for his experiment in which people couldn't keep from thinking about a white bear after being told not to.

Dan Wegner was many things — a psychologist, a colleague, and a dear friend. But of all the things he was, *inventor* was first and foremost. No matter how wrinkled and flabby the two of us became over the three decades that we spent in each other's company, I could always look at him, squint, and see an 8 year old boy sitting in the attic of his house in East Lansing with an issue of *Popular Mechanics* and a chemistry set, trying to develop a formula that would turn the family cat into a family dog because, as Dan would explain to anyone who would listen, there really is no reason for cats.

Because Dan was an inventor, he went to college to study physics. But toward the end of his college career he realized that the one thing better than building machines that sparkle, whir, catch fire, and fly is building theories that do the same. And so he made a sharp left turn and entered the field of social psychology, where he spent the rest of his life making problems for everyone. Most of us think of problems as things one finds and then works hard to solve. Dan thought that problems were things one invents, and that solving them was the easy part. Many of the problems he invented are on permanent display in the museum we call the scientific literature. Some are shaped like white bears, others like unwieldy coffee cups, or confessional puppets, or secret games of footsie. You'll recognize them immediately when you visit. They are the ones you'll want to touch.

Watch Daniel M. Wegner's 2011 William James Fellow Award Address on the "Joy of Theorizing."

But Dan's most beautiful inventions were the momentary creations that reside only in the memories of those of us who happened to be standing nearby when he made them. Those inventions were the ideas and insights he generated in the course of daily conversation, where he would riff and roll and improvise on just about any topic with such effortless originality that it would make your jaw drop, your head spin, and several other anatomically improbable metaphors. A conversation with Dan was a roller coaster ride: It started out slow and a bit uphill, and then just when you began to wonder why you'd bothered to fasten your seatbelt, the floor would drop out from under you and you'd find yourself in free fall, spinning in a direction so strange and new that it sucked the needle right off your compass.

Dan could do this because he was smart. But so are you. What Dan was that the rest of the human race mainly isn't was hilarious. He didn't achieve hilarity by telling stories or telling jokes; he did it by making *remarks*. Those remarks were like great licks in jazz — ordinary phrases rearranged in ways so unexpected that they produced a thrill both cerebral and visceral. For Dan, remarking was high art, and your apoplexy was the measure of his success. He once told me that a good remark always contained what he called "The Second Most Remote Associate," which was the word that was exactly two words away from the word the listener was expecting. On a surprising number of occasions that word turned out to be *shrubbery*, which he considered the second funniest word in the English language right after *kerfuffle*. Dan thought about things like this. He thought about them quite a lot. And that's why he could tip people over using nothing but his mind.

The day before Dan died, I sat with him for most of the afternoon and blabbered. It was difficult for him to speak by then, but he liked to listen. We both knew we wouldn't see each other again. So I asked him to promise that when he got to the other side, he'd save the barstool next to him for me. I reminded him that I would be thirsty when I arrived, so it would be nice if he had my martini ready and waiting. I repeated the order he'd heard me give a thousand times — the order that bartenders all over the world inevitably got wrong. "Hendricks, up, bone dry with a twist, lime not lemon, stirred not shaken." Dan opened his eyes, looked up at me, smiled, and in a small voice said, "You'll never get it that way."

But I will. I know I will. My amigo will see to that.

-Daniel Gilbert
Harvard University

William Crano

Claremont Graduate University

The graduate student assigned to TA my first class at Michigan State had a reputation: smart, creative, quirky — not in that order. Apparently to impress me, he arrived at the lecture hall only 2 minutes before

the first class, Psych 101, a gigantic 650-student course designed to bloody the new assistant professors and instill in them a sense of their proper place in the academic hierarchy. In the lobby of this vast hall was a large stuffed polar bear, attitude rampant. The student, of course, was Dan Wegner, a young man who even then marched to the beat of his own drummer — or pianist.

We talked about the bear only a few months before his passing, and we both wondered if that unlikely hunk of taxidermy had played a role in his later thinking. We remained unsure. On that day so long ago, I resolved to reprimand Dan and remind him of his duties as a TA after the lecture, but his first words to me put an end to that plan. As we walked from the back to the front of that cavernous hall, bulging at the seams with students, every seat occupied — truly terrifying for a neophyte delivering his first lecture — he whispered, “Listen, I’ve trained in CPR. So if your heart stops, I’ll probably be able to restart it.” Those sentences, the first words we had ever exchanged, and the twinkle in the eye of their speaker, forever endeared me to this brilliant, audacious, and irreverent man.

Dan was my first PhD advisee, and I treasure those early days, just as I do the decades-long friendship with one of social psychology’s creative geniuses, a man of enormous intelligence, great wit, and true humanity. In our last meeting, we played a game he had devised, assigning one-word descriptors to friends, acquaintances, and the rare enemy. After we had run through most of the field, Dan was prodded to describe himself. After only a moment’s hesitation, Dan’s self-descriptor was “gentle,” and notwithstanding all of the many wonderful attributes he might have fixed upon, this word fit this gentle man better than all the others.

Jonathan Schooler

University of California, Santa Barbara

Although departed, Dan Wegner’s thoughts will surely persist, and so too will our thoughts of Wegner. The irony of relentlessly thinking about Wegner cannot be lost on the many whose lives he graced. Wegner was a bear of a man, who, like the white bears he so often invoked, was usually disarmingly endearing but occasionally fierce (he really did not like to be disagreed with). He was a man deserving of hyperbole: quite probably the most creative and inspiring psychologist I have ever known, and surely the funniest.

Not a day goes by without a thought of Wegner, with his amazing wit and contagious laugh, bursting to mind. But in stark contrast to the intrusions that he studied, I welcome the numerous thoughts of Wegner that so often arise. He will forever be a lasting inspiration for me, not only setting the research bar impossibly high with his uncanny ability to explore deep ideas with playful methods, but also in providing a model of how to live life and face death.

Following his most unwelcome diagnosis (of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), I had the privilege of joining Wegner, Tim Wilson, and Dan Gilbert for “amigo-time” weekends approximately every 3 months for nearly 3 years. Each visit we encountered a weaker Wegner, but he was always just as able to make us laugh like nobody else ever could or ever will. No one can fill the void left by Dan Wegner, but at least I can count on his welcome memory persistently barreling into my mind.

Robin R. Vallacher

Florida Atlantic University

My admiration for Dan Wegner began with our first encounter at Michigan State in the fall of 1970. Passing by the TA office he shared with several other graduate students, I noticed a sheet of paper thumb-tacked to the door. Titled "The Psychologist's Creed," it included such gems as:

To help people, I must understand them. Thus, when they are idle, I will speak of their depression. When they are glad, I will speak of their mania. When they are forgetful, I will speak of their repression. And when they are obnoxious, I will apply high voltage to their temples.

He had me at "Creed." I entered the office and we quickly established a bond that persisted for the next 4 decades.

One could appreciate Dan's legendary sense of humor as a wonderful and enviable gift and let it go at that. After all, he was a serious and conscientious scientist. His playfulness, however, was not merely a distraction or timeout from his rigorous theorizing into the human condition — far from it. For Dan, spontaneous humor and penetrating insight were opposite sides of the same coin, both representing the working of an agile mind capable of penetrating beneath the surface of everyday experience to expose human potential and foibles.

It is a cliché that truly great intellects "think outside the box." This doesn't do justice to Dan's intellect — he thought *about* the box. Many smart people can frame theories on what people think and do. Dan's concern was the implicit mental filters that shape and constrain the content of explicit thought and action. This focus on the interplay of tacit mechanisms and overt behavior provides a common denominator for the six theoretical traditions he pioneered that have had such noteworthy impact on the field.

I have known people who may be as intellectually gifted as Dan — not many, to be sure, but science is populated with strong intellects. And I have known people who are clever and funny — true, Dan was always the funniest person in the room, but other such people are out there. And I have known many sincere, socially sensitive, and compassionate people — again, they are rare but they exist. The thing is, I cannot think of anyone else I've met who hit all these marks so splendidly and consistently — year after year, decade after decade — as did Dan. And I'm pretty sure I never will.

Timothy Wilson

University of Virginia

One Monday, when Dan Wegner was my colleague at the University of Virginia, he and I went to our customary lunch at the Panda Garden (Dan chose restaurants by individual dishes he liked; in this case it

was the sesame chicken). When I asked about his weekend he replied, “Oh, it was great, I wrote an NIMH grant proposal.”

I was flabbergasted, because I couldn’t imagine writing a grant proposal in such a short time. “You mean you finished a proposal you’ve been working on?” I ventured. “No,” he said, “I started it on Friday and finished it on Sunday.”

Obviously Dan had not begun thinking about the proposal that Friday; he had been working on the ideas for some time and had already conducted several seminal experiments on the topic (his theory of ironic processes of mental control). But unlike me, who has to start writing to know what I think, and then go through several drafts, Dan was able to work out the grant in his head and develop it to the point where all he needed to do was spend the weekend writing it down.

And what a proposal it was — beautifully written, expertly crafted, and off the scale on the “wow” factors of importance and interest. The application was funded on the first round of review. (Editorial aside: This was back in the days when NIMH funded ground-breaking work in behavioral social psychology — sadly, days that are long past.)

Dan’s genius was finding problems that were intriguing and fun and then inventing entirely new theories to explain them. And what a blast he had while doing it. I’ve never met anyone who enjoyed his work more than Dan did; indeed, for him, there was no distinction between work and play. Playful science is what he loved, and no one was better at it.

The best way to remember Dan, I think, is for all of us to try to be more playful with our work. Take an interesting idea and dance with it, complete with arabesques, entrechats, and grand jetés. If we stumble, get up and say, as Dan would, “Oh fine,” and then enjoy the next glissade all the more. And if Dan were here I would say, “Your turn to wear the tutu.”