

Remembering Donn Byrne

November 25, 2014



Donn Byrne

Kabir (1440–1518), the Indian mystic, asked, “Given both Guru [teacher] and Govind [God] standing in front of you, whom should you bow to first?” Kabir counselled, “All the glory should go to your Guru for showing the right way to Govind.” I then wholeheartedly bow to my esteemed Guru, Donn Byrne, a renowned personality and social psychologist. In 1970, I had just come to the United States for my doctoral degree from Ball State University. From my Fulbright orientation program in Tucson, Arizona, I wrote a letter to Donn, requesting that he train me. Swiftly cutting through all administrative hassles, he ensured my transfer from Ball State to Purdue University. For that intervention, I am grateful and blessed. I got to know Donn as a teacher, a scholar, and, eventually, a life-long well-wisher.

During his more than 4-decade academic career at the University of Texas (1959–1969), Purdue University (1969–1979), and the University at Albany–SUNY (1979–2001), Donn chaired the doctoral committees of 53 students. Back in the early 1970s, I was his 21st student. He advised me to “make only one difference between two experiments of an article.” While writing my doctoral dissertation, he told me, “Write it in less than 30 pages.” When I was leaving Purdue, Donn further advised, “Never put your name in print unless you have read the document twice;” “Do not write an article that can allow others to say that you are a sloppy researcher;” and “If someone questions your work, do give a fitting reply.” To this day, I have tried to follow all three maxims.

Donn wanted his mentees not only to get a job but also to contribute responsibly to the organization where they worked and to the country in which they lived. He wanted me to start my career at a research-intensive institution in India. Therefore, in 1972, a year before I received my degree, he contacted Kamta Prasad, who at that time was head of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and recommended that he hire me as an assistant professor. That I was

offered the job without any interview suggests how supportive Donn was of my appointment!

Of his numerous scholarly contributions to social psychology, personality, and human sexuality, Donn is perhaps most renowned for his classic similarity–attraction research. People had long suggested that “birds of a feather flock together,” but it was Donn who translated this adage into a testable hypothesis: The greater the similarity between the attitudes of two persons, he demonstrated, the greater the attraction between them. He was so attached to this “Law of Attraction” ($Y = 5.44X + 6.62$, where Y is attraction on a scale of 2 to 14, X is the proportion of similar attitudes, and 5.44 and 6.62 are empirical coefficients for the respective slope and intercept of the regression line) that he always queried me as to how well his equation fit each new set of data my students or I collected!

The foci of his monograph, *The Attraction Paradigm* (1971), were on “the way in which [social psychological] research is conducted and ... the way in which both theoretical and applied may be seen to grow out of a base relationship [i.e., the law of attraction]” (p. 414). He noted, “... the attraction paradigm represents a continuing research program which may constitute a useful model for other research, and, if it has anything to offer, should continue to grow and to change” (p. 415). His 1961 *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* article and the 1971 monograph have been cited widely. The mechanisms underlying the attitude similarity–attraction link are still debatable topics of research in social psychology. Interestingly, his similarity–attraction hypothesis has been one of the theoretical approaches to diversity research in management.

Donn wrote around 30 textbooks in psychology. Among them, *An Introduction to Personality: A Research Approach* (1966), which is now in its third edition, effectively replaced the traditional contents of grand theories in personality courses with a more empirical approach to the assessment, antecedents, correlates, dynamics, and change of a dimension of individual differences (e.g., authoritarianism, intelligence, self-concept, etc.). His *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction* (1974), now in its 12th edition, has been very popular and has been translated into several languages.

When Donn was hospitalized in 2013, he desired to meet me. When I visited him on July 18, 2014, Donn laughed, remembering the night in 1970 when I had called his house and his wife told me he had retired. I misunderstood her and was taken aback at the news that he had *expired!* Donn talked about his love for simple but good research, music, painting, reading, writing, and Indian food. When I was to leave, he cheerfully put his right hand on my head, wishing further success and happiness. Sadly, little did I realize that that was going to be my last meeting with him.

The motto of my present institution is *Tejasvi naavadhitamastu*, which, translated from Sanskrit into English, means, *Let our (the teacher and the taught) learning be radiant*. For me, Donn shall always be this Guru nonpareil who has made my learning very enriched and fulfilling, and thus radiant. As a mark of our respect for Donn, my coauthors and I dedicated our forthcoming article on attitude similarity, trust, and attraction to him. I am privileged that I got to know Donn and be mentored by him. I am equally privileged to welcome another Guru, Robert A. Baron, and nine academic siblings who have joined me in remembering Donn Byrne, a great man who positively influenced our personal and professional lives. We will miss him dearly.

-Ramadhar Singh
Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, India

Robert A. Baron

Oklahoma State University

If I were asked to name the one person who has had the greatest impact on my life, I'd reply at once: Donn Byrne. Over the years he has shaped the course of both my personal and professional lives, and as I noted in the dedication of a recent book, "*He has been my truest life-long friend.*" Those words are no exaggeration, as I'll now explain.

I first met Donn in 1969, when he came to give a talk at the University of South Carolina (I was a new assistant professor there at the time). We became friends almost instantly, and that friendship continued for more than 45 years. It was largely because of Donn that I came to Purdue in 1971, and the opportunity to be his colleague, as well as his friend, was truly both a delight and an honor. Soon after my arrival, we cemented our friendship still further by working together on a new Social Psychology text. That book, first published in 1974, is now in its thirteenth edition. Over the years, as we worked closely on this project, I continued to learn from his amazing breadth of knowledge, his intrinsic kindness, and his remarkable insights into human behavior. A few years later, Donn played a central role in my promotion to full professor, so his positive impact on my career continued unabated.

In 1979, Donn left Purdue for the University of Albany, SUNY, and I missed him greatly. However, fate intervened, and in 1987, I moved to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute — only 15 miles away. We met often while we were both in the area, and getting together with him was always a great pleasure. In 2009 I joined the faculty at Oklahoma State University, but we kept in touch continuously. Although I was very happy in my new position, the fact that I could no longer see Donn in person was always a source of sadness for me.

I mentioned above that Donn had a major impact on my personal life, and in fact he was responsible, indirectly, for my meeting my wife, Rebecca. So he contributed greatly to my personal happiness in this way, too. What more can I say? Donn was indeed my truest life-long friend, and I will miss him and carry wonderful memories of him for the rest of my life.

Paul A. Bell

Colorado State University

I had the pleasure of meeting Donn E. Byrne at Purdue for the first time in the late summer of 1972. He was a very friendly guy with a marvelous sense of humor, and we found that we had a lot in common. I had just finished my MA in psychology at Trinity University in San Antonio, and Donn informed me that he was a native of Austin and at the time was proud to say that he was a fourth-generation Texan. I worried that he would not like my one-upmanship when I informed him that I was a sixth-generation Texan, my great-great-great-grandfather having come to Texas with Stephen F. Austin's father, Moses. Donn took it in stride and informed me that he was a cousin of Frank C. Erwin, Jr., the outspoken chair of the Board of Regents at the University of Texas (Donn's middle name was Erwin) during the years of

great social unrest over the Vietnam War and hippie lifestyles. What probably generated the most positive short-term affect between us was that Donn loved to host games of charades, and my wife Patty and I were quite good at it — especially when we played on Donn’s team.

One day Donn asked me to write an invited chapter with him on repression–sensitization. I learned later that Donn got his ideas for his R–S investigations from his exposure as a student in the clinical program at Stanford. He worked under Lee Winder (later provost at Michigan State), who in a 2002 communication celebrating Donn’s retirement noted that the Stanford clinical program at the time was probably at the top scientifically — that competition was serious but not disruptive and morale was high. Former APA President Richard M. Suinn was a student of Winder’s at the same time as Donn, and he once told me that Stanford research in those days included studies on the potential therapeutic benefits of LSD and chlorpromazine, and students were encouraged to participate. Donn never verified that latter claim with me.

I had the great, great privilege of having both Donn and Robert A. Baron as coadvisors for my dissertation. I was a research assistant on each one’s grant, and I got to witness in so many ways their magnificent partnership and the synthesis of ideas from being exposed to each one’s work simultaneously. I was there when the first copies of the first edition of their social textbook arrived in the mail. They were thrilled beyond belief, and it would be the first of many partnerships to come.

Gerald L. Clore

University of Virginia

In 1961, as a first-year clinical student at Texas, I took Donn Byrne’s graduate personality course, which changed everything for me. I was inspired by his systematic approach to research, showing how simple experiments could clarify complex psychological phenomena. One of the best gifts a mentor can give students is a method that is both reliable and flexible. Byrne’s “bogus stranger technique” for studying attitude similarity and interpersonal attraction was such a method. The designs were highly constrained, and the basic results could be described by a simple linear model. But even such a basic quantitative model was powerful, allowing clear interpretations of new findings as well as a clear recognition of when our assumptions were wrong. This glimpse of the power of quantifying one’s thinking had a lasting influence.

Donn was a minimalist not only in his research, writing, and teaching styles, but also in his humor and personal life. He somehow managed to produce numerous books and a long vita without working nights or weekends. Students were drawn to him, and he generously accepted all comers. But he also was a minimalist in his compliments of his students. In fact, to this day I remember both of the ones I received. But of most importance, he inspired me and others of his students by showing how scientific progress begins with the collection of data.

In thinking back, one particularly chilling memory stands out. One day in 1966, Donn and I took shelter in a classroom while outside, Charles Whitman, the Texas tower sniper, shot 43 people, including one of Donn’s other students. We watched together in horror for over an hour as puffs of smoke came from the sniper’s gun again and again. There was no precedent then; Whitman introduced the nation to the idea

of mass shootings in public.

Of course, mostly I remember the excitement of doing research in his lab. Donn Byrne was a wonderful mentor for me and so many others who had the good fortune to be drawn into his stellar orbit. He changed us all, and we will miss him.

Jeffrey D. Fisher

University of Connecticut

I met Donn Byrne in August 1971 as a kid who had just graduated from the University of Wisconsin amid violent Vietnam War protests and the specter of Kent State. My senior year I realized I needed to do something to continue to avoid being drafted to fight in a war I detested, so I took the GRE exam and the law boards: the former because I had excelled in psychology as an undergraduate, the latter because my father wanted someone in our family to be a lawyer. I applied to the Purdue psychology PhD program because I had heard at Wisconsin of a “golden age” in social psychology there, in a program headed by Donn Byrne. I was admitted, and received a \$140 per month research assistantship from Donn to work with him. During my first summer, Donn paid me to write pornographic passages for a study on reactions to erotica he was planning to run that fall. Interestingly, his secretary refused to type them at work, but was willing to do so at home, and I learned that I was excellent at writing erotica. If I had been unsuccessful at graduate school, I might have another calling.

What I encountered during my 4 years of graduate training at Purdue was nothing short of amazing. With Byrne as a remarkable “hands-on” role model, and emboldened by his belief that his students could perform research like new PhDs after a few years of exquisite training, students performed audacious programs of research on Byrne’s attraction paradigm, or — with considerable support from Donn — on their own immodest research agendas. Palpable in students were a sense of enthusiasm and excitement, the belief that we could and would make important contributions to the field, and a remarkable work ethic. Students frequently received their PhD with 8–10 publications in major journals and always had a deeply imbued sense of the critical value of theory-based paradigmatic research as well as tremendous knowledge and savvy about how to perform it. At Donn’s weekly research seminar (known fondly as the “attraction meeting”), social psychology graduate students unveiled their latest studies excitedly and to mentoring feedback from Donn and their peers. Graduate students began their tenure as mere kids but ended up as some of the best in their fields after 4 years of total immersion.

Donn was a role model and a father to me, much like my own father, and he was a true “*mensch*.” From Donn, I developed and retained a remarkable passion for psychological research and theory, and a very strong work ethic. Donn taught all of his students that they could do the impossible, daily. My association with Donn resulted in a wonderful 40-year research career and extremely gratifying experiences training graduate students in a style I learned from him. When I visited Donn about a month before his death and thanked him for the wonderful life-long, life-changing gifts he had given me, he answered “I think you are giving me far too much credit,” in typical Byrne style. That was one of the few times when my brilliant mentor got it wrong.

William A. Fisher

University of Western Ontario

Arriving at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana — from Tel Aviv, in the aftermath of the October 1973 war — was an interesting experience. Sirens sounded to warn of tornados, not air raids; graduate students in psychology were actually paid to improve their minds; and interesting kinds of alcohol were available at student–faculty gatherings. There were also, as it were, giants in those days: Purdue’s social psychology program was populated by a multiplicity of brilliant, creative, and productive scientists, including Donn Byrne, Robert Baron, and Kay Deaux, later to be joined by James Jaccard.

At our first meeting, Donn slid a deck of computer cards across the desk (remember computer cards?), and through a haze of cigar smoke (his, not mine) suggested that there were some unanswered questions in data he had collected for the US President’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography that I might like to explore. (Note that I returned home that day and told my wife Randi that I was “Shocked, shocked!” to find that sex research was going on at Purdue. I had come there to study interpersonal attraction and aggression.)

A puzzling finding emerged from analysis of the data set: Married participants who had profoundly negative affective responses to erotic stimuli, including anxiety, disgust, and nausea, also had the most children. Given that it is necessary to at least tolerate sexual contact to conceive children, this made no sense — to me. It did make sense to Donn, who conceptualized the finding in a fashion that has served as the basis for my career. In Donn’s view, having babies is easy. Not having babies, in contrast, is difficult. More specifically, in order to not have babies, an individual has to engage in a complex series of approach responses that include anticipating sexual intercourse, acquiring contraceptive information, talking to a partner about contraception, publicly acquiring contraception, and using contraception consistently and correctly. To the extent that an individual has dispositional and generalized negative affective responses to sexual stimuli, the individual will be unlikely to undertake the complex series of approach responses involved in contraception and will end up having the most children. From this chance finding grew a conceptual model, the identification and measurement of the personality dimension of erotophobia–erotophilia, a decade of confirmatory paradigmatic research, the Sexual Behavior Sequence theory of the determinants of sexual behavior, and the Information–Motivation–Behavioral Skills model of health behavior change — which has become the basis for several decades of prediction and intervention research concerning HIV/AIDS preventive behavior, conducted by Donn’s students, Jeffrey Fisher, and me.

Above all else, Donn was an intellectual and interpersonal comrade, happy to share ideas with students, happy to teach them about the finer things in life (mostly, martinis and single malt whiskey), and happy to sort out together in late-night and early-morning post-colloquium gatherings issues of peace and war, love and lust, and, as it were, the Meaning of Life. Music played in the background (“Good morning America, how are you? Say don’t you know me, I’m your native son?”), dawn arrived, and Donn and Lois, and my wife and I, greeted a new day over breakfast in the kitchen.

Marissa A. Harrison

Penn State Harrisburg

Donn Byrne was one of the most influential people in my life. I was lucky enough to take his five courses — two undergraduate and three graduate — at the University at Albany. I cannot even begin to convey how much I learned from him, both academic and life lessons. He was not my formal graduate adviser, but I could always count on him for academic, career, research, and even life advice.

I have so much gratitude for the things Donn did for me. He wrote a recommendation letter for every job I ever had; he talked me down when I was going research-bonkers; he predicted that I would get a job when the smoke of graduate school cleared (and he was right); and he shared with me his undying passion for psychological science and love of life.

Donn was a model academic: He was legendary yet humble, frank yet kind, outstanding yet approachable, and dedicated to his career while still keeping his family and friends a priority. He was brilliant, generous, kind, and a gentleman. To quote Adam Lipson, “Donn was a good man.”

I got to know Donn very well over the years. He had a fabulous sense of humor. For example, when he seriously warned us *never* to wear yellow shoes to a job interview, Amy LeFevre, Susan Hughes, and I bought him neon yellow tennis shoes as a joke ... and he actually wore them! Whenever we would meet him in restaurants, he would come as a Dapper Donn — always dressed to the nines with a vest, tie, and jacket — and now accessorizing with these nuclear neon-yellow shoes. Even after we graduated, at least once a year we would make the pilgrimage to Albany to have a Yellow Shoes dinner (and perhaps some Beefeater martinis). Sadly, I will miss these times.

Donn was always a staunch supporter of evolutionary psychology, my chosen field, and in this I find an appropriate analogy: Donn’s “academic genes” live on. He is always with me when I teach, research, and mentor, and I am certain this is true for all of his students. What I learned from him I share with my students, and they will share it with theirs. His mark is indelible. Thank you, Donn, for everything.

Robin, Lindsey, and Becka, I am so sorry for your loss. Thank you for sharing your Dad with us.

Amy J. LeFevre

University at Albany–SUNY

When I began my graduate school experience at the University at Albany–SUNY, Donn was not my advisor. In fact, I only took my first class with him because my colleague, Marissa Harrison, suggested that I would learn a lot and enjoy his teaching style, adding that he was her favorite professor. He soon became mine as well. While he was one of the most cited authors in psychology and had an amazing and prolific research record, he was always humble. He was also very concerned about students and helpful to anyone who was smart enough to seek him out. Although he was still not officially my advisor, he seemed to always be the best source of advice on all sorts of subjects, from what to wear to a job interview (*not* yellow shoes), to publishing a textbook, to financial planning. His quiet-spoken guidance ranged from attraction theory to the recipe for the perfect martini (dry, Beefeater gin, a twist of lemon) and everything in between. He told me not to worry too much about political issues, because the history of the world showed that we could get through anything and emerge stronger. Most importantly, he believed in me when I was having a hard time believing in myself. He eventually became my advisor

officially, for which I will forever be indebted to him. I know for a fact that I would not have graduated without his support and inspiration. His positive regard for all living things, his sense of humor, and his caring, humble nature stand as a model for us all, one I attempt to live up to every day.

Sarah K. Murnen

Kenyon College

I first met Donn when I was an undergraduate student working with Betsy Allgeier at the Bowling Green State University. I had just given my first professional presentation at the Midwestern Psychological Association and Betsy introduced me to Donn and several others who were part of the Byrne “family.” I remember being awed by the fact that this productive and influential scholar was so friendly and soft-spoken. On the advice of Betsy, I applied to work with Donn at the University at Albany and earned my PhD degree there in 1988. I am thankful to Donn for providing me with the appropriate level of support. I was able to work with him on some projects he designed, but he also encouraged me to develop my own ideas. We collaborated with Kathryn Kelly (Donn’s former wife), who introduced me to feminist perspectives. Donn’s sexuality research and Kathryn’s appreciation of feminist ideas still inform my work today. For my comprehensive examination, I faced the seemingly daunting task of familiarizing myself with the method and results of every study cited in *The Attraction Paradigm*. After the fact, I greatly appreciated that the book taught me very precisely how science is supposed to work. Donn was a great scientist who helped his students see how the results of any one study can make a valuable contribution when conducted within an established paradigm. I admired Donn for his dedication to advancing the science of social psychology, his loyalty to his students, and his dry sense of humor. I will miss his yearly, ironic Christmas letter; his occasional emails; and the feeling that he would be there if I needed advice or support.

Joel H. Neuman

State University of New York–New Paltz

After more than 20 years working and managing in the consumer electronics industry, I was considering a career change, and I was very uncertain and anxious about my future. I first met Donn Byrne in 1986, when I was considering entering the doctoral program in social psychology at SUNY–Albany. Donn was then Chair of the Department of Psychology. His encouragement and support during that meeting eased my transition, for which I will always be grateful.

Donn was a compassionate teacher and mentor as well as an inherently kind and supportive friend. His broad knowledge of so many subjects was impressive, as were his wisdom and his willingness to share that with others. As his long and distinguished academic accomplishments suggest, he certainly had a lot to brag about; but this was simply not in his nature.

Despite being every inch the gifted researcher scholar, Donn was always humble and self-deprecating. He was always able to see the humor in any situation — even when it came at his expense. I remember an incident that occurred during a research meeting. One of my peers walked into the lab holding a computer printout with results from a recent study. Donn asked if two specific variables were correlated.

After reviewing the printout, that peer of mine reported that there was a large positive correlation. While Donn was explaining the reason for that relationship to us, my peer looked very embarrassed. When Donn finished, that student apologized for having misread the negative as a positive correlation. Without missing a beat, Donn turned to all of us and said, “No problem, I can explain that too!”

All too frequently, we pay tribute to people after they pass away. Fortunately, many of us had the opportunity to share our feelings about Donn in his presence too. In April 2002, for example, Paul A. Bell and Jeffery D. Fisher organized a festschrift in honor of Donn Byrne at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. This gathering of Donn’s colleagues, friends, academic children/grandchildren, and three children (Lindsay, Rebecca, late son Kevin) provided us with an opportunity to jointly relive and celebrate Donn’s life and accomplishments. I was simply amazed at how Donn had made a difference in this world and touched lives of so many of us in an extraordinary way! I am deeply saddened by his passing, but he leaves behind a remarkable and enduring legacy.

Charles A. Pierce

University of Memphis

In fall 1990, I enrolled in the psychology PhD program at the University at Albany–SUNY to work with Donn Byrne on interpersonal attraction. Everyone in the field of social psychology knew about Donn’s reputation as a leading attraction scholar. After all, his printed CV required a half-inch heavy-duty staple!

What many people may not know about Donn is his personal side. Despite being a prolific scholar, Donn always managed to find time to read novels and investment books, watch movies, attend live theater events, and work on challenging landscape projects such as building decks and stone sidewalks. He was also knowledgeable about politics, which was evident in the humor of his annual Christmas letters. His hobbies and fantastic sense of humor made for enjoyable side conversations during our research meetings in his office.

My favorite memory of Donn is from a lunch we had together in the conference hotel at the 1995 meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association in Boston. We were sitting at the restaurant bar enjoying our food when an attractive young woman sat down next to me and conversed with me during our meal. While walking out of the bar he said to me, “You don’t understand my Law of Attraction.” I replied, “How so?” He answered, “You mistakenly assumed that the attractive young woman from the bar was attracted to *you*.” I will never forget that lunch and Donn’s creative sense of humor. No less important, I realized why Donn had his Law of Attraction equation, $Y = 5.44X + 6.62$, engraved in a tie clip.