

## Chapter 20

# The Treat of Ed's Generosity

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I had the privilege of being a student of Ed Fink in the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park during my doctoral studies (2009–2014). As this volume makes abundantly clear, there are many things about Ed's career and character that are worthy of note. He is smart, disciplined, funny, creative, prolific, etc., but one of the more meaningful of Ed's attributes to me is his generosity. He was (and is) enormously giving of his time, relationships, energy, advice, and things. As I write this, I realize that list creates a fitting acronym to describe his openhandedness. Indeed, it was (and is) a TREAT to be the recipient of Ed's generosity. Here are a few reasons why.

### Time

Ed never rushed you out of his office. He was always willing to help students with a problem, answering questions with patience and good humor. More importantly, if you were game, he took the time to get to know you, asking questions unrelated to classes, and sharing about his own interests and personal life. He took joy in knowing his students as people rather than as mere teaching or research assistants who could prove useful for purposes of grading or data collection.

After graduating, I would frequently seek out Ed's ideas relating to data analysis or a reviewer's antagonizing comments on an article I submitted. Even though he did not directly benefit from any of these conversations, he patiently gave of his time to help me. At conferences, even though it seems that there is always a long line of people waiting for the chance to talk with Ed, he reserves some time for a coffee to catch up and see how I am doing.

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## Relationships

Ed is quick to share his relationships and incorporate new acquaintances into his ever-expanding social network. As a student, when I approached him with a question that he thought one of his colleagues at another institution could help answer, he would not hesitate to call that person then and there, and, over speakerphone, introduce me and have a conversation together. Ed introduced me this way to a number of people whom I, as a starry-eyed graduate student, considered “academic celebrities.” Ed seemed to be connected to all the movers and shakers in communication science, but he also wanted you to be connected to them as well.

While working on my dissertation, I ventured on the job market. Ed was kind enough to serve as a reference. I had the good fortune of landing a handful of interviews at well-regarded departments. I thought there must have been some sort of mistake for them to waste their time on me, an unseasoned scholar without a PhD in hand. In hindsight, I realize that those opportunities likely occurred in no small part due to Ed being willing to vouch for me to people in those departments with whom he had cultivated trusting relationships.

On numerous occasions, while I was a student in one of Ed’s courses, his phone would ring, and he would answer it during class (perhaps as a bit of a diversion for his students). He would tell the person to say “hello” to the class, and we would say “hello” to the caller. I recall being struck by the regularity with which colleagues, former students, and friends would call Ed. After I became a professor, I had the experience of Ed answering my call while he was teaching and saying “hello” to his students, this time with myself being Ed’s colleague, former student, and friend.

## Energy

Ed never seems to rest. This manifested in his devotion to teaching and mentoring graduate students and providing lengthy feedback to improve their work. The energy and attention required to dissect my work with that amount of detail, let alone the work of multiple students, was astounding. I would become exasperated when I received Ed’s feedback on a paper, which always seemed to have as much of his own writing as that of my initial submission. Ed would give copious notes and make corrections so comprehensive that every slight formatting error in an APA reference was not safe from his red pen. He kept the red-ink industry in business. At one point toward the end of my coursework, I asked Ed if he had ever considered using a different ink color in order to be a little less harsh on his students. He challenged me to provide empirical support for my claim that feedback in red ink was perceived more negatively compared to other colors. He was not going to change his practice without a good evidence-based reason. Surprisingly, I couldn’t find a study to that effect. So, we set out to find our own evidence.

We designed an experiment in which we fabricated a somewhat awful undergraduate essay and then provided copious handwritten Fink-like feedback

in red ink. We did our best to make the document look like a real graded assignment, scribbling out the name of the student (allegedly to keep their identity anonymous) as well as the grade they received. After scanning the essay, we digitally altered the red ink to either black or green, creating three different color conditions of otherwise identical feedback. Using a between-subjects design, we told our student sample that we were conducting a departmental assessment of fair grading practices and wanted to see whether students' perceptions of their peers' graded work were in line with their professors' perceptions, so we asked them to estimate the grade the professor gave the student's essay and asked them also to assign their own grade to it. As expected, red feedback elicited lower grades compared to green or black feedback. Unexpectedly, students assigned lower grades compared to those they estimated the professor did (So who exactly are the harsh ones?!). True to his word, Ed altered his pen color after that. And while Ed continued to devote energy to covering my work with written feedback, it was typically soaked with purple instead of red ink.

## Advice

After writing up the results of the red-ink experiment, we submitted them to a communication journal to be considered for publication. The editor promptly desk-rejected the manuscript for not being a "communication study". I was disappointed, but resigned, and called Ed to talk about alternative outlets for where to send the piece. Thus, I was surprised when Ed told me that we were going to send a letter to the editor about why they were wrong and explain all the ways that our study was about communication. I was shocked that such a thing was possible. Ed put together a letter arguing our case, and sure enough, the editor sent our paper out for review. Ultimately, the study was published (see [Richards & Fink, 2017](#)). Here and elsewhere, Ed advised his students essentially to never give up and always push forward when they believe in their work.

I once called Ed during a separate instance, and he happened to be cleaning out his University of Maryland office in preparation for his move to Temple University. He was emptying his filing cabinets and had found a number of old rejection letters from editors and his somewhat obstinate response letters to editors conveying his disagreement with their decisions. Again, I had never thought it possible to respond in such a way after having a manuscript rejected, but Ed was so confident in the quality of his work that he felt justified in doing so. He reminisced that his success as an academic largely relied on him being persistent: In the face of rejection, one must keep sending out one's work.

He joked that reviewing those letters had led him to generate a model of scholarly persistence in which two constructs non-recursively affect each other. According to Ed's model, scholars' persistence was a function of 1) having coauthors and 2) being arrogant. Coauthors functioned as an accountability mechanism so one would not give up on a project in hopes of not letting the others down after getting rejected. Arrogance functioned to support the scholar's

belief that their work deserved to be published. But in the face of rejection, arrogance was also necessary to convince your coauthors not to abandon a project. And having coauthors allowed one to commiserate about the incompetence of reviewers, which further solidified one's arrogance. We laughed about that idea, but he may be right. Regardless, his advice about remaining persistent despite experiencing obstacles has helped me in my own academic career.

## Things

Finally, Ed is generous with his things. For those who TAed for his classes, he freely shared his teaching examples, assignments, and pedagogical insights on which to model our own instruction. During certain holidays, he would invite students into his home, sharing food and traditions. He is generous in sharing jokes from the large arsenal that he has accumulated over the years. Besides the jokes themselves, part of Ed's joke-telling that I find amusing is that he seems to remember jokes according to proprietary, but vague, descriptions by which he has them cataloged in his cognitive space. Ed would frequently introduce a joke by saying, "Have I told you the one about the married couple?" "Did you hear the one about the priest and the rabbi?" or "Remember the one about the mouse?" I would often respond by saying something to the effect of, "Well, I don't know whether I've heard it because you don't normally identify your label for each joke after you tell it!" He would roll his eyes and, of course, go on to tell the joke, and sometimes I would have heard it, but frequently it would be new to me.

Ed is also a dedicated article sharer. Anytime he encounters an article that speaks to another person's interests, he will pass it along. Ten years later, I still get articles from Ed relating to my dissertation, for which I was lucky to have him as a committee member, even though I really have not done work related to that project since graduating. Nevertheless, I am thankful for his thoughtfulness and that I come to his mind every now and then. And if I ever get a chance to return to those unpublished dissertation datasets, I will have a thorough literature base at the ready, thanks to Ed.

It is purported that Albert Einstein had a potted begonia in his office while at Princeton. According to hearsay, after his death, his secretary took clippings and shared them with other faculty to start new plants of their own. I have a friend whose father-in-law apparently has one of these descendants of "Einstein's Begonia," and I am hoping to get a clipping of that plant someday to grow in my own office window. But it would always be second-rate next to another of my potted plants, which, in the same spirit, I have taken to calling "Fink's Hoya." Before I graduated, Ed shared a clipping of the hoyo plant that was growing in his office, and it has grown quite large sitting in the window of my office in the decade since. Over the years, I have shared numerous clippings of it with other colleagues and students who have admired it. They get the beginnings of a new plant, and I get the opportunity to tell them about my generous professor and friend, Ed Fink.

## Reference

- Richards, A. S., & Fink, E. L. (2017). Attributional chromatics: How does the color of written communication affect interpersonal perceptions? *International Journal of Communication, 11*, 1683–1704.