

Chapter 24

Ed Made Me Read Think

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A much more significant problem is that historical documents are often summaries after the events and not detailed records of events as they occur. ... Reliability of evidence tends to decrease as the time lapse between the action and the reporting increases, though the human memory is a complex variable. (Lewis, 1975, p. 321, *Fist-fights in the kitchen: Manners and methods in social research*)

My memory does not feel that complex, and I don't question its reliability too much. I distinctly recall August 1997, walking into the Marathon Deli in College Park, Maryland (it's still there), to meet and have lunch with my newly appointed advisor, Edward L. Fink. I was an older grad student, who knew nothing about doctoral study in Communication—I was just kind of good at going to school—so I was incredibly anxious and seriously doubted my ability to succeed. From that first day, Ed was a kind, patient, and avuncular mentor. He never appeared to doubt me at all. Indeed, there were points during my doctoral study where Ed's confidence was the only confidence I had.

Over the ensuing six years, there were many meals in College Park at Marathon Deli and at Plato's Diner (it, sadly, has been replaced by a Trader Joe's). We did some of our best thinking over coffee and Athenian omelets; I never declined an invitation to meet him there. We must have gone hundreds of times, but Ed always read the menu. This was endearing but also an example of the focused thoroughness that was baked into his way of being. After all, you could never know if the menu had changed unless you read it carefully every time!

Festschrift of Edward L. Fink, Ph.D., 141–145



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doi:10.1108/978-1-80592-355-820261024

The outline of our lives, like the candle's flame, is continuously coaxed into new directions by a variety of random events that, along with our responses to them, determine our fate. (Mlodinow, 2008, p. 4, *The drunkard's walk: How randomness rules our lives*)

And so, my fate was determined: my approach to Communication, my methodological choices, and my expectations of scholarship. You can draw a straight line from that first lunch to this essay. I struggled during my first year, and the grad students called SPCH 702 (Ed's first semester data analysis class) the "cry in the bathroom class" because on any given Tuesday evening during break, that's where you could find me, and what I would be doing. I was sure I was failing. Ed would roll his eyes and say, "you're not failing." I hadn't learned to trust his process yet, although I would have had a much less bumpy year if I would have. I didn't know at the time that I could always count on him. Really, always.

Years later, I happened to be staying at the Marriott in College Park doing some residency teaching for University of Maryland Global Campus. I was teaching a lot, and tired, and hadn't even called Ed to tell him I was in town. I threw my back out. Lying in pain on the bathroom floor of my hotel room, barely able to move, I called a few of my work colleagues to see if someone could take me to urgent care. I called my boss. I called a couple of grad school friends still in the area. No one was available to come help. Except Ed. I was embarrassed to call him out of the blue to say (a) I was in town, and (b) could he take me to urgent care? But he didn't hesitate at all; he simply said, "Of course," and came right over.

I would be remiss if I didn't also share the story of how our Human Communication Research article came to be. After I had graduated, my family moved to Twentynine Palms, California, in the Mojave Desert. The average daytime highs in the summer are about 102, with temperatures regularly exceeding 110. My home did not have an air conditioner but relied on evaporative cooling; it cooled the air flowing through the house by passing it over cold water. You might have guessed; it is nothing like air conditioning. And yet Ed flew out from DC in the height of summer 2003 to help me turn a part of my dissertation into a journal article. He was hot. Very hot! And yet he sat with me for endless hours, writing and rewriting, condensing 364 pages into a coherent 20. Did I mention he was hot? Conditions were barely tolerable, but he remained his cheery, optimistic self and we were going to get that article submitted even if we passed out from the heat. Which we didn't. But, in my memory, almost!

The weekend at the college

Didn't turn out like you planned

The things that pass for knowledge

I can't understand

(Fagan & Becker, 1972, Reelin' in the years [Song])

Ed made me read, and not just the “regular” readings of a doctoral-level communication quant, although at that first lunch, my homework was to purchase and read the entire *Handbook of Social Psychology* fourth edition before next we met. Rather, he sought to ensure I engaged with a broad range (my younger self might have described this as an unreasonable range) of ideas that often seemed unrelated but which the perspective of time has revealed were absolutely interconnected. As George Costanza said, “it’s all pipes.”

Once, I made an offhand reference to the song lyrics above, which led to a robust discussion of 70’s rock, including how Donald Fagan chose the name Steely Dan.

Ed: Do you know how Steely Dan got their name?

Me:

Ed:

Me: Yes

Ed: But have you read *Naked Lunch*?

And thus, what I thought was a random conversation led to an assignment to read Burroughs. Although I generally knew the origin story, Ed argued I could not truly appreciate it without tackling the source material. This was/is, of course, the case for *everything*. I would call it Ed’s lifetime #protip, his version of “Wax on, wax off”: Always. Read. The. Source. Material. And 27 years later, I always do.

... what is commonly called communication can be seen as a very economical way for one organism to affect the behavior of another organism. “A male cricket does not physically roll a female along the ground and into his burrow” [Dawkins and Krebs] write. “He sits and signs, and the female comes to him under her own power.” Communication, seen from this perspective, is simply a way for an animal to “exploit the senses and muscles of the animal it is trying to control.” (Wright, 1988, p. 202, *Three scientists and their Gods*)

The use of small flows of matter and energy to control large flows of matter and energy is an integral component of human social life, which can be typified by a simple everyday statement such as “go to the store and bring home food.” In this example, the minute energy flow embodied in the set of sound waves which constitute the message are used to control the physical transportation of a human body across space and time to distribute large amounts of matter (food, in this instance).

(Woelfel & Fink, 1980, pp. 195–196, *The measurement of communication processes: Galileo theory and method*)

Ed taught me statistics at the highest level, and I cannot overstate the profound impact that has had on my career teaching primarily research methods and statistics. But it was more than that. The math was only a tool. An important tool, to be sure, and a difficult one to master (hence the crying in the bathroom) but ultimately it was a means to access the science of communication. There's a piece here that's hard to articulate, about the gift Ed gave to me, and others, of understanding the math enough to get to the complex science, where Communication lives with Biology and Physics. As humans do. I know many Comm scholars whom I respect and admire, who don't fully grasp the math and so in a Festingerian self-protection move they dismiss it—and the deep science—as unnecessary. I am forever grateful that Ed offered us a sophisticated, interdisciplinary, scientific approach to understanding Communication processes.

In the situation where man is deprived of all possibility of intellectualization, that is, of interpreting geometrically a given process, either he will seek to create, despite everything, through suitable interpretations, an intuitive justification of the process, or he will sink into resigned incomprehension which habit will change to indifference.... The dilemma posed all scientific explanation is this: magic or geometry? (Thom, 1975, p. 5, *Structural stability and morphogenesis: An outline of a general theory of models*)

I'm not going to lie; I didn't read the entirety of this book. It's extraordinarily dense English translated from regularly dense French, with sections like "The epigenetic polyhedron" and "The dynamical analysis of the chreods of a static model." However, it is the book with which I'd like to end these literary-linked anecdotes because this passage, in particular, epitomizes the fundamental idea that drives Ed: *magic or geometry?* In all things, he chooses careful observation, serious consideration, and logical thought. He chooses geometry. And the field of Communication is better for it.

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