

DAN GILBERT'S EUOLOGY FOR DAN WEGNER

Delivered July 5, 2013

Dan asked me to wear a Hawaiian shirt to his memorial service and so I am. Other of his requests, for example, that I deliver a eulogy while wearing nose and glasses, or that I make sure his ashes are distributed in suppository form, will not be honored. I should also note that if Dan were here he would wonder who I was talking about because I never called him Dan. We were both named Dan, and so when we called each other Dan we always felt slightly concerned that we were talking to ourselves. So for as long as I can remember he was Wegner and I was Gilbert. Calling each other by last names made us feel like college athletes who could probably get dates with cheerleaders, so we both liked it just fine.

I've stood up and spoken about Wegner many times in our nearly 30 years of close friendship, but always with the full knowledge that he would later have a chance to stand up and speak about me. This was an important part of the delicate system of checks and balances that ensured that our remarks involved no more than friendly teasing. But Wegner won't get to stand up and speak about me again, which means that today is the time for pointless cruelty.

Pointless cruelty is, of course, a phrase that I picked up from Wegner somewhere in the course of our journey together, as are so many of the things that come out of my mouth and into my mind. Having exchanged with him millions of words on thousands of days across dozens of countries over a truly remarkable number of martinis, I can't always tell anymore where his words start and mine end. When I tell someone that the groom couldn't find his fingers in a power failure or that the bride's dress was kept aloft by a complex system of levers and pulleys, I don't know if it's him talking or me.

Odds are that if the phrase is really clever, or just pointlessly cruel, then Wegner invented it. Because of all the things Wegner was, inventor was first and foremost. No matter how old and wrinkled he got over the decades we spent in each other's company, I could always look at him and squint, blur my vision just a bit, and see an 8 year old boy who'd just lost his dad, sitting up in the attic of his home in East Lansing with an issue of Popular Mechanics and a chemistry set, trying to develop a formula that would make him invisible or transform the family cat into a dog because he REALLY HATED CATS.

Wegner was always an inventor, and somewhere around the end of college, where he majored in physics, he had an epiphany: the only thing better than inventing objects that sparkle and whirl and catch fire and fly was inventing ideas that do those same things. So he became a social psychologist and spent the rest of his life making problems for the rest of us.

That's right. Most psychologists solve problems but Wegner invented them. We spend our time trying to pick the lock on nature's door. But Wegner was like Harold with his purple crayon, drawing doors on the wall, and then opening them to reveal vast stores of intellectual treasure that had always been sitting where the rest of us had always been failing to look – right there in the ordinary places that others had just walked on by.

Many of Wegner's inventions are on permanent display in the museum that we call the scientific literature, and they will be there for generations of psychologists to visit and admire, to touch, to hold, and to use. But Wegner's greatest inventions exist only in the memories of those of us who were there when he created them, because his most beautiful, his most breathtaking work was done in daily conversation, where he would riff and roll and improvise on any topic with such effortless originality that it made your jaw drop and your head spin and several other equally unoriginal and anatomically improbable metaphors. Talking to Wegner was a roller coaster ride. It started out smooth and slow, and then just when you started to wonder where that little car was going -- bam! -- the bottom fell out and you were in free fall, and the big Canadian guy next to you was smiling and whistling show tunes.

He could do this because he was smart. But everyone I know is smart. What Wegner was that the rest of us weren't was funny – funny on the surface, funny in the middle, funny right down to his chewy nougat center. And I don't mean ha ha funny. I don't mean ho ho funny. I mean deep funny, apoplectic funny, the kind of funny that makes you laugh so hard that your sandwich come out your nose as you fall to your knees, gasping so hard for air that bystanders call the EMTs who shoot you full of lithium, strap you down, and take you to Shady Acres for what they keep promising will be just be a brief rest.

And this wasn't once in a while. Wegner would do this to you roughly every 90-120 seconds that you were in his presence. And by the way, he never did it by telling jokes because for him, jokes were fossils, jokes were leftovers, jokes were remnants of yesterday's cleverness – or worse yet, of someone else's cleverness! True humor was a spontaneous invention – HIS invention! – and it had to happen right here and right now and it had to be about what was occurring between you and him in this very moment. In the space of a few milliseconds his brain could take whatever you'd just said and generate THE remark that was so perfectly appropriate and so perfectly inappropriate that it was both surprising AND inevitable; you couldn't have thought of it yourself in a million years, and yet the moment you heard you knew that it was the ONLY thing that could possibly have been said, the only thing that made just the right amount of sense – not too little, but not too much. Dan Wegner was the Miles Davis of conversation. Like jazz, the whole point of his humor was that it was being generated as it was being performed – and if you didn't get that, well then, you were probably the kind of person

who liked Neil Diamond and traveling salesman jokes and who would eventually become the object of his wonderfully pointless cruelty.

I say that Wegner was funny -- a thin, flaccid word -- only because I don't think we have a word for what he really was. Funny makes him sound frivolous when, in my view, what he did was quite profound. We all have minds and hearts. Our minds strive for brilliance, our hearts strive for joy. What Wegner understood -- what he taught me at least -- is that humor is the place where the brilliant mind meets the joyful heart. To be made both happier and smarter by a single utterance—that's grand wisdom and grand comedy, and that's what he did for me, for many of us, over and over and over again.

I didn't know where to start today, and you can probably tell that I don't know where to stop. If I had known Wegner just a little less well I could summarize him for you. But I knew him so well that to say *the important thing* about him is like trying to say the important thing about air. It's everywhere at once, it's part of everything we do, we're inside it and it's inside us, and we can't imagine what a world or a life or a breath would be like without it. I know far too many important things about Wegner, so let me end by telling you one that I never told him.

Much of the time, I am a writer. When a writer writes, he is always talking to someone. He puts words on paper by delivering an imaginary soliloquy to some listener in his head. The listener isn't necessarily the real person who will actually read the words, it's the person to whom those words are being silently spoken. For three decades, Wegner has been my listener. The fact is that he rarely read anything I actually wrote. He pretended he'd read it, but I caught him on the details far too many times to believe that. It's okay. It didn't matter. Because I didn't write FOR him. I wrote TO him. My *amigo grande* is no longer in my living room, but he will always be where he has always been, in my mind, listening to every phrase I write, telling me "that one's beautiful" or "that one's curious" or more likely "hey, that one's mine."