Roger’s Big Brain, a remembrance by Gloriana St. Clair

Because Roger was a scientist and because as a child he liked to take all his toys apart to see how they worked, I donated his big brain to Parkinson’s research. I could tell wonderful Roger stories for hours, but today, I want to focus on his love of learning, his view of fellow humans, and his empathy with other animals. I know that many of you will be telling other equally wonderful stories at your lunch table today, and I wish that all of us could hear all of those stories, too.

Roger’s brain enjoyed being fed by lectures on a broad spectrum of subjects. Once, providentially, he attended a talk by Raj Reddy at the University of Texas. Roger was most impressed with what he heard; he also knew the work of Herb Simon, Allen Newell and many other Carnegie Mellon computer science luminaries. Subsequently, when I dithered about whether to apply for the University Librarian position at Carnegie Mellon, he insisted that I should. His brain revealed in the results of that decision. In his travels with the Million Book Project, he met many people whom he admired. And he heard the broadest possible spectrum of lectures in India, China, Qatar and other countries. He believed in the progress of science and especially in the potential for computers.

In Roger’s brain, all people are created equal and are equally endowed with goodness. All people are required to earn their way through the world through work, a dignified endeavor. All people should be committed to justice and the kind treatment of others. Roger’s friends invariably share these values. Throughout my years with him, Roger was quick to see when others needed help and to respond immediately. For instance, he counseled many others who had lost family members to the crime of drunk driving and who had had their children die. Fittingly, in his last illness, Indian Hindu and Muslim graduate students, African American and Hispanic caretakers, and gay and straight friends showered him with their love, a word he did not believe in or use.

Roger’s big brain owned an extremely fit body that Roger imagined as a large animal interacting with other animals, larger and smaller. On a trip to India, he watched Madhavi give a temple elephant a tangerine which the elephant promptly returned for peeling. He thought that Redeemer Episcopal Church would be significantly improved by acquiring an elephant. For years, he had a cat named Fat Cat. He often left Fat Cat alone for days to travel. She retaliated by biting her visitors and refusing to perform her job description of sitting in Roger’s lap and purring. He then moved her food bowl into the refrigerator until she returned to work. In another encounter with a smaller animal, Roger surface dived to examine his favorite marine friend, an octopus. She reacted by spraying ink at his mask. Confused by the ink, a poor Sergeant Major (the damselfish, not the military official) ran into Roger’s snorkel. Just a few weeks before he died, Roger told me and Ayaz a story about a mother armadillo and her three babies who were snuffling his toes as he was sitting outside until that larger animal, Roger’s body, moved and they ran away. Roger believed in a harmonious, conscious world.

This spring, my friend Henry Posner, Jr. died. The rabbi fittingly labeled him as a Prince of Israel and used Shakespeare’s exquisite lines about Hamlet “Farewell Sweet Prince. And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” Roger, too, was a prince. His love of learning, interactions with friends, and empathy with his fellow creatures make him a welcome addition to the flights of angels, in whom he did not believe.