**In Memory of My Husband, Richard N. Cooper (1934-2020)**

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Dick’s passing on December 23 shocked many friends and colleagues. Some of them even feel embarrassed that they didn’t know he had been ill. But this was intended by Dick.

Around 2008-2009, soon after we moved into the Francis Avenue neighborhood near Harvard Square, Dick told me, upon returning from a trip to Washington, that an economist in his early 60s at the Brookings Institution had recently “dropped dead on a tennis court.” Everyone thought it was such a pity - how much more contribution he could have made if he hadn’t played tennis that day, but Dick contended with his own conjecture, “That’s exactly how he wanted to die.”

I immediately inferred that Dick was imposing his own vision about death onto this colleague. Thinking of the neighborhood tennis court which we all liked to use just around the corner from our house, as well as his open-heart surgery for a valve replacement in 2007, I said, “I don’t want you to die on a tennis court.” He acknowledged my view and didn’t argue. I knew back then that he would not change his view or his behavior because of my objection. He would not slow down his pace of activities in order to prevent possible death. He wanted to continue life at full speed until the very last minute. This is exactly what happened, albeit dying of cancer is less dramatic than dying of a heart attack.

Dick’s whole-hearted embrace of life, combined with his abundant energy, great intelligence, rock-solid confidence, and perennial optimism, led to a stellar curriculum vita. His career evolved seamlessly from a dissertation fellowship at Brookings (1960-61) to a senior staff position at the Council of Economic Advisors in the Kennedy Administration (1961-63), to a faculty member at Yale University (1963-77) and Harvard University (1981-2020). These positions were interspersed with several governmental posts in the Johnson (1965-66), Carter (1977-1981), and Clinton administrations (1995-97), as well as Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (1990-92).

Ironically, he never deliberately sought high-level positions or public attention. As one of his friends once commented, “He wasn’t good at marketing himself or his ideas.” He never had an ego or even ambition. All he wanted was to solve real-world problems. His technical competence and steady temperament facilitated his path to the forefront of a series of cutting-edge policy challenges, from the U.S. balance of payments crisis in the 1960s (which culminated in the Nixon shock of 1971), to coordinating fiscal expansions at the Bonn Summit of G-7 leaders in 1978 in the aftermath of the 1974-75 recession, to establishing trade relations with China in 1979, and confronting the challenges of climate change in the 21st century.

In approaching all these problems, he had an engineer’s mindset. Before he encountered the field of economics at his alma mater, Oberlin College (1952-56), he had thought to become a nuclear physicist. His engineering instinct was most evident in his dealing with more mundane problems in life. Whenever a toilet, a furnace, or other home appliance broke down, he always took a crack at it first. Only when more substantial work was absolutely necessary, did he hire a professional service. And he knew exactly what kind of work he was paying for.

He took pride in filling the formidably complex tax forms by himself every year. He insisted that all Congressmen and Senators, as well as other economists, should all do their taxes by themselves, so that they would understand the level of complexity inherent in the tax system that compels ordinary Americans to hire tax accountants even when their own income is relatively low.

At one point, I thought, “If you do everything by yourself, what about comparative advantage and division of labor, or maximizing the overall social welfare through specialization?” But I didn’t question him because I knew this was just his way of doing things. It had nothing to do with labor specialization or the affordability of professional services, but everything to do with mental acuity, physical capability, and more importantly, a willingness to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty. He was not a typical arm-chair professor, but rather a practical man with a very wide range of interests

Dick liked going to the cheapest local grocery store about once a week both to buy milk and cereal and to be in touch with the prices of daily staples that ordinary people rely on. He did not like Whole Foods, thinking the price premium there did not justify the quality difference between non-organic and organic foods. One thing he paid particular attention to at the grocery store was the price of a dozen of eggs, because eggs are one of the few commodities closest to a homogeneous product. Wherever he traveled to foreign countries, he liked going to the local grocery store and comparing egg prices, so that he could build his own reference points for checking the validity of the Big Mac Index, published regularly by *The* *Economist*.

He was very down to earth in many respects. He didn’t like anything meretricious. He enjoyed simple food and preferred austere clothing, although he appreciated restrained elegance as embodied in classical music, classical ballet, and ballroom dance. He did not like verbose writing or platitudinous speeches. He wanted to cut through all the fuss and get to the core of the matter. He could be very terse. When he was about to become Chairman of the National Intelligence Council (NIC) in Washington in 1995, some human resource official interviewed him: “What’s your strategic goal for this important position?” He simply replied, “To do a good job.”

Dick’s rapid promotion to full Professor at the age of 31 in Yale’s economics department and his subsequent advance to various important positions were consistent with his precocious nature from early on. He always knew what he wanted and never deviated from his inner-most true self. According to the Cooper family biography, written by his brother, Dick “was born an adult.”

He always made conscious decisions. At Age 5, he “decided Beethoven’s music is good music.” At Age 13, he “decided” not to pay any attention to sports because he witnessed how much of his brother’s energy and time sports consumed. At Age 19, when a college friend asked him what he wanted to do with his life, he replied he wanted to “advise governments.” (That is exactly what he did in retrospect.) At Age 40, after completing his term as Yale’s provost in 1974, he declined all the solicitations from smaller colleges to become their president. He knew a main job of the president of any college was fund raising, and he did not like that. At Age 46, near the end of the Carter administration, in which he served as Under-Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, he was approached by a Wall Street investment bank to become its chief economist at a salary multiple times a professor’s. He declined resolutely and came to Harvard in 1981, because he valued the autonomy of professorship much more than any increase in financial compensation.

It has been said that education is about translating information into knowledge, translating knowledge into understanding, and ultimately translating understanding into self-knowledge. Dick had self-knowledge all along and was never in self-doubt.

He did everything he wanted to do with only one exception. I asked him a few years ago, when we were chatting in bed, “Would you do anything differently if you were to live again?” He thought for a moment and said, “No.” Then on a second thought, he said, “There is one job which I’m interested in, but nobody knows my interest in it.” It turned out to be the position of the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in Washington. This made sense to me given his mastery of the budget of Yale University when he was provost during 1972-74. He said he had learned from that job (I think he really meant “figured out”) “19 different ways to say no” to requests by various departments and centers to increase their budgets. I did not pursue what those 19 ways were, but could imagine that they must have been derived from his understanding of the intricacies buried in the university’s massive amount of financial minutia.

Dick was anything but snobbish. He not only believed that “all men are created equal,” but carried this creed one step further by treating everyone equally, regardless of age, gender, race, or social status. He answered students’ questions in the same way as he answered the U.S. President: seriously and thoroughly. He said, “No question is stupid.” He regarded his equal treatment of everyone as being “fair-minded” and “even-handed.”

He was an extremely secure and highly relaxed person. He strongly disliked herd mentality and behavior. He defied social conventions and was very comfortable with being iconoclastic in many ways. He married me in October 2000 when he was 66 and I was 28 years old. It turned out that our age gap was more than offset by the energy difference between us. He was always indefatigable, until the very last one or two years of his life. Only in retrospect do I realize that his cancer cells had begun to develop back then. But at that time, I interpreted his slowing down as a sign of a normal aging process, re-assuring him, “Who doesn’t slow down? Many people slow down in their 60s.”

Dick was always able to make his body do what he thought was the right thing, such as sleeping solidly even in the economy class of an intercontinental flight. He was always refreshed by the time he got off the airplane and ready to join activities, almost never susceptible to jet lag. At Age 74, he upsized our residence from a condominium near Porter Square to a large single-family house near Harvard Square to accommodate the growth of our young children, William and Jennifer, then aged 6 and 4, whereas many of his friends were either downsizing or considering to downsize. (It turned out that Willie’s later interests in outdoor hockey and in piano and drums called for a lot of space.)

Dick began cancer treatment in late August. After the failure of the first two kinds of medication, the chance of success with taking another became significantly smaller than the previous rounds. But Dick would not give up treatment or resign to hospice care. He had always beat the odds against him after all. He continued with the third and the fourth treatments …

He handled this entire medical process with his characteristic stoicism, equanimity, and tenacity, while keeping his composure. Fortunately, he never experienced pain or distress, unlike most cancer patients. He died peacefully after a very fulfilling and satisfying life. I made sure that he looked dignified and professorial in his usual clothes before the funeral home people took him away. He was content.