In Memoriam:
Eddy Zemach
(1935-2021)

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Eddy and I had been heartily engaged in a vigorous and much enjoyed exchange which had thrived some decades when, Zap!, it was abruptly silenced years back by some severe neurological evil. Nothing to be done. The End. And so I had been straightaway made that much at a loss without even the courtesies available to those wishing to extend good wishes to the terminally ill.

You may wonder what our first meeting was like. It might seem more like an encounter of sorts. Way back in the mid-1980s, I read what must have been a very flawed, if not dreary, paper at the regional American Society for Aesthetics session at Asilomar. During the discussion period, this very well-groomed silver-haired guy, quite unknown to me, has his turn. Without any of the usual civil preliminaries, he starts firing away: “There are at least five things wrong with your thesis. They are these...”, and so Eddy proceeds to demolish my shaky structure brick by brick. Of course, he was dead on. What can one say when faced with one’s manifest foul-ups? And yet at the time I thought: “Now, here’s someone I can really get on with!” And so it was. Can this have been a case of ‘Takes one to know one’? ‘Birds of a feather’, notwithstanding my entirely lacking the predatory craft of this Israeli bird of prey? Our association flourished.

Let it not be said that I didn’t have my own comeback, however merely authoritarian. Some seasons on, at another session of this association, I wound up chairing what could well have been at least as wanting a presentation as my own. During the talk, Eddy, as if trapped in the stands, uncontrollably spluttering with fury at the nonsense unfurled, insisted on sparing all of us any more insult and demanded having his say on the spot. His mission was clearly to expunge any of the objectionable virus to which we were otherwise haplessly exposed and thereby to prevent any
further infection. I discovered then the uncoded might of the session chair. “Shut up, Eddy!” I barked. “You’ll have your turn when it comes.” Lo, he behaved! And so too the prim academic formalities were then temporarily retired to handle this loud, very smart, altogether philosophically heavily-agitated man who’d really no serious patience for much besides getting swiftly to the point. No need, it seems, for the standing polite orthodoxies of the academic conference and its neo-religious ceremonial customs. And once again a further kind of mutual understanding emerged, one not lacking a certain merry twinkle of goodwill.

I suppose I should say something about the setting of these meetings because that, no doubt, worked its influence. They were held at Asilomar State Beach and Conference Grounds State Park near Pacific Grove in California. For the likes of a philosophy gathering, the coastal geography is altogether distracting. And yet here the aesthetics crowd obeyed its proper call and chose a setting which is, without wanting to sound too banal, simply beautiful. That alone might have accounted for the draw these sessions had for many of us year after year, but, in other ways Asilomar outdid itself. The conference facilities allowed for just a few dozen participants, so one was quite utterly spared the oppressive sales convention mood hanging over the large national and regional gatherings of so many academic conferences. What does this suggest? Well, as you can suppose, all the sessions had to be plenary. Nothing was specially scheduled to proclaim the grandeur of some weighty philosophy maestro; nor could specialist coveys vanish into their own private specialist spaces. On the other side, no one could respectably play hooky, the privilege of the anonymous juniors, either to seek out the lure of big city entertainment outside or to play whatever backroom politics academics like to suppose even they may enjoy. We all had to listen to each other. And mingle with each other. There was no opportunity for or interest in majesty and hierarchy. No peacocks strutted these grounds. We were rather something like a racket of magpies or the noisy gulls quite at home on the coast. One wound up making friends at Asilomar, not really in the category of colleagues or connections. It’s just that we happened all to be there because of our common curiosity. I know this may sound for some quite romanticized. I guess that’s what thirty-plus years distance can do.

It was in this unmatched setting that I got to know Eddy. And got very much to enjoy our intense chatter. Appreciate that I came from the wrong side of the tracks not only in light of my humble academic pedigree but also because of the damaging appeal candor has for me. There is no lack of egoism, self-importance and pomposity at some academic gatherings and I’d learned to expect a certain kind of dismissal some academics exercise lacking as they do great wealth or power. Not so with Eddy! Here was someone who, with me at any rate, had no pretensions nor any urge to lapse into bouts of superiority when the rank suited. We just talked philosophy and had a great time at it. I’d say this was not unlike making music together for fun, but that won’t quite work.

Our association extended, during the longer off-seasons, to a flourishing correspondence. Zoom wouldn’t have worked because we both greatly enjoyed writing what used to be called ‘letters’. Email took over, but ours was not a communication distinguished by the telegram-like character of Twitter or iPhone texting. Our exchanges typically went on for what would have been pages. And they were very frequent as if a way of making do for want of direct talk by exploiting the immediacy of the new medium. What special importance does this have? I’ve known over the years many academics who’d not waste their time in such correspondence unless it was thought an avenue for publication; i.e., career advancement. So they send you their one-liners. Not so with Eddy. We just wrote at length as we’d have argued at length over some distinction or some position or whatever else philosophers bicker about. I came much to depend on this kind of relationship not least as a way of having my mind challenged in ways otherwise unavailable.

So I was very cut up when Eddy lost his mind those many years ago. No surprise. What a punishment that his organic machine persisted as it did wanting throughout certainly one of its most valuable powers. So, finally, rest in peace.

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