

John Marshall Williamson (Jack to all), Ph.D. 1987, passed away at his home in the mountains of San Bernardino County on Oct. 16, 2017 at the age of 65, from bile duct cancer. Jack held multiple positions throughout his life, from working for the California State Assembly on legislative data management projects with myself to working on economic case analyses with former Caltech professor Louis Wilde. Jack was also a strong participant at the Rinzaï-ji Zen Center, and his Buddhist faith gave him tremendous solace during his final days. Married three times, Jack was married to Lydee Scudder, daughter of Caltech professor emeritus Ted Scudder, when he passed. Sadly, Lydee passed away on February 12, 2018, one day after Jack's remembrance at Rinzaï-ji (her obituary may be found at <http://idyllwildtowncrier.com/2018/02/21/obituary-eliza-lydee-scudder-1952-2018/>)

As we are no longer bound by the word restrictions of print media, a few personal memories are perhaps appropriate. Jack and I were graduate students at the same time in Caltech's Humanities and Social Sciences Division, and I recall that my first conversation with Jack was a discussion about a scheme involving putting poison in the Pasadena municipal water supply and then charging people for the antidote (in the days before 9/11 such fantasies seemed less offensive). After a few seconds into the conversation I realized that I had met a kindred spirit. He and I shared a common world view; to wit, a love of reductionist philosophies of human behavior and the ridiculousness of a *reductio ab absurdum* arguments as applied to human relations. The reductionist philosophy he most reveled in was, of course, economics, and he received his Ph.D. from Caltech in 1987 in that field.

Accompanying his love of fundamentals was a disrespect for pretense and artifice. A typical academic sendoff in economics is a recitation by speaker after speaker of various papers which purport to apply the deceased's works to everyday situations facing human beings. Jack would have rejected that out of hand. Those of you familiar with economics are aware of the concept of public goods, or as it is sometimes called, the tragedy of the commons. The commons in medieval England were just that--common areas where farmers would graze their sheep. The problem was, every farmer had an incentive to put the maximum number of sheep on the commons, of which a consequence was that the meadows were worn down and could not support even a fraction of the sheep they once could, so every farmer was worse off than had he agreed with other farmers for each to limit the number of sheep they put on the commons. This is commonly used in economics of an example of how the inability of individuals acting in their own self-interest to reach a common agreement can result, in the parlance of economics, sub-optimal outcomes.

This is a fairly profound concept and it is often used as a justification for the existence of government, which creates means for people to coordinate their actions. Of course, there was nothing profound about Jack, and in typical Jack fashion, he took this concept and applied it to a more quotidian academic setting. He and I were passing by a classroom where a particularly boring lecturer was speaking to a group of bored students and Jack commented, "It's incredible. Everyone in that room is worse off. If only they could make a binding agreement to all stand up and leave simultaneously."

I've spent some time expounding on this particular story because to those who knew Jack, it will ring very true. Writers know that cheap laughs come from lines that are out of character, whereas humorous lines that do reflect the underlying person are those which are most prized. Jack was amusing, but his humor came from his particular world view and reflected that. He was charming rogue academic.

Jack originally applied the same type of reasoning to the Buddhist faith. He explained to me once that it consisted of learning to answer conundrums--for example, what is the sound of one hand clapping. He stated it took years to come to an understanding of the answer and hence achieve enlightenment, but eventually some of those who had learned the answers to the conundrums started putting them in books and selling the answers. A typical Jack remark. But, eventually, he managed to overcome his reductionist beliefs and embrace the complex ambiguities of the transcendent, and he ended up finding a great deal of solace in his faith.

Jack told me once that he had decided that all traumas are separation traumas. Death, he declared, is separation from future income. Jack's friends and acquaintances enjoyed psychic income from Jack's pithy bon mots and trenchant observations, and we are now separated from that psychic income. We'll miss that diminishment of income--and we'll also miss Jack.

Kenneth F. McCue, Ph.D.
Caltech, 1984