Robert Spillers, in memoriam

Andras Kornai

It is surprisingly easy to write about Bob, because I still can't imagine that he is dead. We lost touch a few years ago, but he must still be alive, he had this wonderful replacement heart valve, from a pig as he was always happy to explain, of course he is still there in Woodside, in the same house with the creaky floors and dusty interior.

My last physical memento is a receipt from one of his favorite places, Buck's "Never underestimate the customer's ability to consume". The place fit him, because he always lived his life with gusto, and when we worked together we'd go there time and again. Other places we liked to go to, Emperor Norton's on Santa Teresa "homemade Italian comfort food and San Francisco style pizza" no longer exist, and the online traces correctly identify its closing as 'like losing a second home'.

Losing Bob is like losing a second family, for he was not just a colleague, he was also family. We were IBM neighbors, I worked at the Almaden Research Center, and he at the Santa Teresa Lab, a few miles away. He roped me into his project (an early AI project dealing with ontology) through another Hungarian at his lab, Gabe Wyler. He also roped in some world experts (will forgo the name-dropping, but if you know anything about AI and/or ontology you will have heard of these people) and made them sit in the same room.

He was never my boss officially. His project was a sideline for me, the main line was OCR, the Almaden lab had a great team working on this. But he was the best manager that there was, always leading by example, and using nothing but the power of reason to get people do what he wanted. What he wanted was for people to think together, and he fit the mold of the enlightened IBM manager to a tee, with a "THINK" sign on his desk – he didn't actually have one, but he embodied the very idea.

We traveled a bit together on IBM coin, to LA, where he lived for a while in the 1970s as point man for fighting the antitrust litigation that almost crippled IBM for a decade. This litigation ended up as "the [DoJ] antitrust division's Vietnam". His contributions (on the logistics side, he wasn't a lawyer) were quite significant for Assistant Attorney General William Baxter to declare the case, after 13 years of point-blank litigation, to be without merit, and dropping the charges. Bob literally rented moving trucks, and coordinated delivery of tractor trailers' worth of documents, tens of millions of pages, properly arranged in filing boxes by the thousands, to the courthouse. He had great stories about the white-shoe lawyers and their hookers. "I am an Akers man" he would explain to me, and I was a kid again, from another continent, someone who watched Bill Hewlett, Dave Packard, or John Akers the way later generations of kids would watch Bill Gates or Steve Jobs.

My IBM years were also when my wife Livia and I had our best times, our son Mishka was born, and we moved from "Lifestyle living" at the Americana in Mountain View to our own home in Palo Alto. Bob was something of a godfatherly presence. Not an actual godfather, we were Jewish enough to frown upon the custom, and besides he already had a godson in Zack. When the good times came to an end, and we sought a divorce, Livia and I instantly agreed on Bob as a judge. Not a formally empowered mediator, but a person we both knew we could trust, as he will be impartial, he would get us in the same room, and he would make us think.

He was family. Not exactly a stern father (his main strength was to lead by sheer reason, I've never seen him make a 'power move' in my life), but far more than a clever uncle, someone whose humanity was just as essential as his reasoning. Divorces are never easy, and no doubt both Livia and I taxed him to the utmost by special pleadings, just this one last thing, blah blah. He was a tower of strength, and he led us through, as he was capable of doing exactly what he asked him to do, to take Mishka's interest and nothing else into account.

I am grateful to him to this very day, and you know what? He still lives in Woodside on Bardet Rd, off Cañada, and next time you are at Buck's, or Amici's, drink to his memory, he'd appreciate that.