DAN’S MEMORIAL

Thank you all for coming. Special thanks to Phil and Amy Nichols, our friends Amanda Petry (formerly Hall), Carrie Reiger Brownlie, and Lisa Campbell for their invaluable help in organizing this service.

I met Dan in August of 1997 on a dorm-bonding camping trip called “Stouffer Outdoors” before our freshman year at Penn even began. It was designed as a “get to know each other” bonding event to bring dorm members together. It worked on many levels and more than any of us could imagine.

Dan was a German major and so he’d planned to spend a year abroad in Berlin his sophomore year. So even though we were “dating” that year--, he followed through on his plan and I stayed at Penn. We got to know each other the old-fashioned way with a modern twist—epistolary-style except via email…(the old “UNIX” system).

Every day I’d check my email at the library and look for that dfritz@upenn.edu message.

This past week I have been sorting through a lot of our files and folders --racking my brain for the very best to share with you about Dan, and since I have always had a “Dan folder”, it wasn’t too difficult to find some gems, and obviously I could go on and on for years, but I thought the best way to speak about him would be to read something he wrote. He was always working on novels, comics, board game ideas, and his famous “Babble-online” publication, but all of these things had one central idea and it was something we spoke of often: “fellowship” I’ll first read from the “Letter from the Editor” page of the first ever issue of Babble-on:

“Welcome to the inaugural edition of Babble-On! The purpose of this newsletter is to give us all a creative outlet in a free, non-judgmental environment. Just kidding—we’re all silently judging each other all the time. It is my hope that we will all explore and build upon our creative talents and/or simply take the opportunity to share our thoughts with one another. In the end, it’s all about fellowship. And I hope you all—both as readers and as contributors—will get something like that out of this little endeavor.“

For those of you who were spared “email solicitation” of articles for this newsletter via Dan, it became a 5-year labor of love of his…he spent hours compiling statistics and editing articles from friends, family, and mere acquaintances. Let’s just say I learned to love maps and bar graphs over time…and even I was never exempt from the “Babble-on Deadline”. It speaks to his desire to foster “fellowship” that he did this He simply wanted people to come together and fulfill their unleashed potentials…from the nerdiest computer science major to the most creative, artsy-fartsy type. I was always fascinated.

So as I looked through the Dan folders and the highly organized computer files, I found what I was looking for in an excerpt from the novel Dan had worked on for years and I had read and edited so many times. It is quite simply entitled, “Tales”, and it is unabashedly a series of chronicled stories inspired mostly by our dear friends. The “I “voice is clearly Dan.

One day I walked down to my mailbox and opened it up, as usual. I got a letter from Sol. There aren’t many things that are as joyous as getting an unexpected letter that isn’t a coupon about the new Laundromat in town, a flyer for an all-ceramic gnome set, or a cursed phone bill, but this letter was an even greater pleasure to see than the average unexpected letter. I knew it was a letter from Sol on first sight, because he always had horrible handwriting, even worse than mine. After grabbing the letter out of the box, I split it open straight away. Sol never put the usual chitchat in his letters. He didn’t waste his words, though he wasn’t terse, and there was usually something there to either truly provoke thought or make you laugh. He began without the bat of an eyelash:

*Al,*

*I’ve been thinking about the conversation we had back in July*. *You’re right, there aren’t enough people who have their own identity, who have enough courage to have an opinion, and that’s why they need us to take the reigns and lead them. I don’t think you can just throw them away, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t deserve it. You’ve probably deserved it at one point in time too. Everyone has a place and some worth, and you just have to be a little more patient to be able to see that. That doesn’t mean that everyone has the potential to take over the world, because there are people who will never progress above cashier at the grocery store. That’s not bad. That’s how it is. We just need to understand our own potential and be willing to reach it. But what we really need to do is conquer an island and bring our wives there. Or find our wives there. Just as long as they’re able to keep up with us when we want to climb up the coconut trees and swim across the bays.*

*Sol*

I brought the letter up to my room and sat in thought for a while about this. All of my memories ran through the courtroom in my brain, hearing the testimony of the people I had come to know, and it made me both sad and jubilant. Sad that there was no real possibility that everyone I ever knew would reach their glorious potential, and jubilant that I was beginning to understand my own great well of possibilities. If I were made to be a sheep, then by God I would be a sheep. But if I were a wolf in sheep’s clothing, then I should stop being a sheep and have the courage to realize this, knowing that it would take a lifetime of single days to complete my ascension. I would have to push the envelope every step, because ambition was part of finding my own potential. The moment I stopped dreaming, stopped drawing up floor plans of my future estate, stopped thinking about the next gift I would buy my friend, stopped rethinking everything I’d already noted as rock solid truism, I would have been beaten down just short of the summit, I would have stagnated and rotted away. Reaching the summit required constant effort, which inferred to me that you could never reach the summit. But this didn’t mean that my goal was futile. It was the constant striving toward the summit that caused growth and learning. The journey might even be more important than the destination. Then I realized that none of this mattered if I ended up being a jerk surrounded by jerks. Maybe sometimes I deserved being thrown away, too. Sol had a point, but I just wanted to find some people whom I could talk to without feeling like I was mentally fasting and whose presence alone could make me love my own life even more. Before all, what mattered was fellowship.

I wrote a reply to the letter:

*Sol,*

*We will climb the coconut trees and swim across the bays together.*

There are so many relationships represented in this room: friends, family, co-workers…

I held the sacred and privileged position of being the one by Dan’s side in times of unfathomable adversity. One of the first things he said to me after he was diagnosed was, “Well, I didn’t think I had any life-lessons to learn, but maybe I was wrong”. I saw him go through so much, and my conclusion is “Dan, the lesson is ours.” And to borrow from something one of you wrote to me—I hope we don’t disappoint you.