What’s the worst part about death? This is a tough question. As I think about the year since Alan Friedman’s untimely passing, I propose an answer.

Thanks to tributes and reflections made after his death, his obituary in the New York Times, and from the articles contained in this special issue, I now know things about Alan that I never knew before.

Of course, I know these things only in part, to be sure. Had I had even an inkling of these dimensions of Alan’s remarkable life and career, I would have surely pursued them in one of our many conversations. But that can’t happen now.

Death is the rudest of interruptions. So what’s the worst part? It’s the end of what Whitehead called “the great conversation.”

An acute case comes to my mind as I write this today.

I always saw Alan as a humanist and scientist, equally at home in the knowledge (scientia) fields and what I call the wisdom fields. Alan was deeply and broadly read, an aesthete, you might say, if that word had not been so badly contorted. And Alan’s interests embraced all kinds of art, from literature to film.

While he and I had occasionally talked about Alan’s experiences of working with (and under) a collection of New York’s mayors, the two of us never discussed Alan’s courageous and critical role in the struggle involving art and freedom. It was only after his death that I learned of Alan’s role in the 1999 dustup between Mayor Guiliani and the Brooklyn Museum.

Mayor Guiliani had threatened to cut funding to the museum over its display of art that he, as mayor, deemed offensive. I remember the incident and how ironic it seemed to me to be. After all, the mayor was a devotee, indeed a champion, of opera. I love opera myself. But if you don’t want to be exposed to drama laced with sacrilege, treachery, incest, brutality, and all manner of mayhem, you should probably avoid opera. The Mayor, I recall thinking at the time, seemed strangely selective in his choice of things to find offensive.

What was the cause for the Mayor’s concern? Abby Goodnough, in the Times, wrote the following as a lead for her article:

“Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani stepped up his attack on the Brooklyn Museum of Art Thursday, threatening to terminate its lease with the city and possibly even seize control of the museum unless it cancels a British exhibition that features a portrait of the Virgin Mary stained with elephant dung.”

In that same piece, Goodnough wrote that “although the directors of many of the city’s prominent museums expressed dismay… most refused to speak publicly about the controversy yesterday.” The eminent directors of Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art justified their silence by saying that speaking might jeopardize “negotiations” between the mayor and the Brooklyn Museum.

A week and a half later, the Times had this headline, “A Scientist Rallies Allies for Besieged Art Museum.” Dinita Smith’s report begins by telling us that “it took a physicist to galvanize many of New York City’s most important cultural institutions to take a stand in the battle over the ‘Sensation’ show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.”

And that “scientist” was our friend Alan, brave, steady, canny, and effective, as always.

I am left wanting to know more. I wish I had had the chance to ask Alan to tell me this story and to talk with me about what, years away from it, the story could be said to signify.
How much I wish now—especially in the shadows of the shootings and deaths in Copenhagen, Charlie Hebdo, and the "Muhammad Art Exhibit" event at the Curtis Culwell Center in Texas—that I could hear Alan's views on freedom, risk, provocation, and education.

Now that I know about Alan's role in the Sensation show, I understand much better why he was so immediately attracted to the work we got to do together—to put the contested topics of civic consequence at the center of partnerships between the formal and informal education sectors.

But now that I know what I do, I am left wanting to know even more. I miss the chance to learn from Alan, to be with him, to hear his gentle voice, to ask the questions I never got to ask.

This is what grieving is. There is a consolation, of sorts: as I wrote after learning of his death, we can work to put Alan's wisdom into practice. That is what I know we, and so many of Alan's colleagues and friends, are continuing to do.

In that very familiar passage from John 14:2, Jesus tells us: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you."

So it is with each of us: we are all houses of many mansions, rooms and indeed whole wings of rooms that others can only explore if they ask us for access. We wish we had been given more time for a longer house tour with Alan. We make up for that loss by contributing the parts we each know to make a larger collage of Alan's life.

I want to thank Margaret Honey, our guest editor, Ellen Mappen, and all the contributors for helping to bring this special edition to fruition. And I join you all in thanking Alan for giving us such great material to work with and the inspiration to keep up his good works.

— Wm. David Burns
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