

Remembering Allen Fenichel

1936-2018

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Montreal, July 2018



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I met Allen in September of 1980. He was 44, I was 24. I had just arrived in Montreal to begin my economics degree at McGill and was ready to ‘take on’ the economists.

It was the first session of the first course of the program ‘Introduction to Economics’, which was to be taught by Professor Fenichel to an audience of 300 students. Although I didn’t know much economics, I considered myself ‘critical’. I walked into the auditorium fully expecting McGill’s Economics faculty to be gatekeepers of capitalism and conservative apostles of ‘neoclassical economics’ – and I had made it my mission to debunk their dogma.

But I was quickly disappointed.

The class was still humming with a first-day buzz when a tall, thin, bearded man walked briskly towards the podium. Sitting ten rows above him, I marked him as my first economics ‘enemy’.

And then he started speaking. He lectured effortlessly, without even glancing at his lecture notes. And to my great surprise he didn’t preach. He challenged. And he was critical – critical of capitalism, but also of socialism and, indeed, of any dogma. Within five minutes, I was completely disarmed. I had come prepared to challenge a dogmatic teacher, but Allen was anything but dogmatic. He was sophisticated, articulate and open-minded, and what he said actually made sense. I realized how much more I still had to learn before I could engage with him. It would take me several months to gather the courage to ask Professor Fenichel questions in front of such a large audience in my hesitant English.

And in hindsight, I’m so glad I did. One winter day, I was waiting for the bus on Sherbrooke Street to go to McGill, when I saw Allen jogging. To my surprise, he stopped to ask: ‘I know you; you are the guy who speaks in class, aren’t you?’ It was terribly cold – perhaps -20c – but his approach warmed my heart.

We quickly became friends. Age made no difference, and neither did authority. Allen made me feel welcome in his office and treated me as his equal. We met frequently, ate lunch together and developed a deep intellectual affinity that lasted for

many years. A few years back we met in Montreal after a very long period in which we hadn't seen each other. But the discussion flowed as if we'd picked it up from the day before.

Allen was a mentor whose honesty and courage I admired. He said and did what he thought was right. He also never shied from a fight – particularly when he felt there was an injustice. I owe my own academic career in part to Allen, who stood fast by me during a two-year-long grievance against the department for the acceptance of my MA dissertation. The dissertation studied the Israeli War Economy, a sensitive topic at the time, and I had found myself in a departmental crossfire when the department's chair retaliated against my supervisor by deliberately sending the thesis to a Zionist reader for review, in contravention of the departmental policy on examiners. The thesis was promptly failed, and when I grieved against the chair, Allen offered to be my advisor. With his unfailing help and support, I eventually won the grievance and my thesis was accepted. This of course was part of a larger pattern; I later learned that Allen would frequently volunteer to help the weak and vulnerable. He did so many times at McGill, and he continued to do so in British Columbia with various advocacy groups.

But the memory I'm perhaps fondest of is of Allen's outing with my daughter, Elvire. I think it was in 1986 or 1987. Elvire was three or four years old, and Allen surprised me by asking if Genevieve and I would agree to let Bronna and him take her out to the movies. 'I simply like children', he explained. Elvire had so much fun on that special occasion – and even claims to remember it today!

Allen, you will be missed dearly.