

Scott Freeman

The first time I ever heard of Scott Freeman was during a macroeconomics lecture by Charlie Swanson, when Charlie described Scott as “one of the top 20 monetary theorists in the world,” a characterization that would have embarrassed Scott, despite the fact that I think the coaches poll had him ranked much higher that season. Well, at least Scott would have appreciated that little joke, as we frequently assessed the merits of the latest college football rankings (especially the rankings for Wisconsin and UT, naturally).

Back to economics ...

Once I became Scott’s dissertation student, he continually challenged me to create. When I arrived for one of our weekly meetings to report on yet another article that I had read and evaluated, he said to me in that sardonic yet encouraging tone of voice that he had mastered, “I think your critical skills are refined enough, why not try something original, now?” I got the hint and got to work.

Once I had completed the core of my dissertation, Scott went to work for me. Never have I seen a more persistent and effective public relations representative. At every conference I attended and every department I visited -- geez, seemingly everywhere that I went, for that matter -- people would tell me “Scott Freeman told me all about you and your work. He thinks the world of you.” Once I had left UT to become an assistant professor elsewhere, an entire generation of graduate students in the economics department at UT loathed my name, given that Scott had required them to learn my model for his graduate macroeconomics class and the comprehensive exam. Who could ask for better promotion than that!

Scott had been diagnosed with his illness several months prior to my scheduled dissertation defense. I showed up feeling sorry for myself, having just overcome some sort of food poisoning that I had picked up on a trip to Europe. After my defense, and after he told me that I had passed, he broke the news to me. I asked why he had not let me know earlier, and he said simply that he didn’t want it to get in the way. That was typical of Scott, as those of you knew him well or heard or read Preston MacAfee’s and Bruce Champ’s wonderful eulogies will know. He didn’t want HIS tragedy to get in MY way. After I got done scolding him, I told him that I appreciated that very much, but that I wanted to help. His response was, “You have enough to worry about; leave my worries to me.”

Once my wife Anna and I decided that a life on the prairie was not for us, and once my wife provided the ticket out of the Prairie with an appointment at Rice, Scott was instrumental in getting me hired as a visitor at UT. It was our chance to work together again. And work we did, but only as a prelude to an evening drink or dinner. My weekly trips out to Scott’s place to work on our paper became a pilgrimage, of sorts. We enjoyed each other’s company and perspective, and we developed a friendship that went beyond our previous student-mentor relationship with the occasional beer at happy hour.

Now we were full-bore drinking partners! And along the way, we actually managed to get some work done, work that I am still planning to complete and publish.

One of the most trepidatious events on my life was the day that I told Scott that I was no longer going to be a full-time academic. You see, when I applied for my first jobs out of graduate school, Scott was convinced that my calling was to be a macroeconomic theorist, and he told me that if I applied to any consultancies or other private sector entities, that I could find someone else to write my letters of recommendation for me. So when I went to him to tell him that I could not keep up the life of being in Austin and away from home three days per week, especially once Anna and I started planning to have a family, and that I had received an offer from a consultancy in Houston that I was considering taking, I thought he would be disappointed. Instead, he said the kindest thing imaginable. He said, "Mike, you can be whatever you want. It's more important to take care of your family than anything else. We'll see about getting you back into academia sometime in the future." Then he said a very sad thing to me: "Don't make the mistake that I made and work your life away. Live your life while you are young, while you have the chance."

But as most of you saw in person, in the end, Scott did not disappoint himself. Once diagnosed, he set about filling the gaps he viewed in his life. He spent more time with family and friends, he traveled to some of the places that he had always wanted to see, and to the extent that he could, he did the things that he had always sacrificed to the altar of tenure and success. He even fell in love. He approached this new avocation with the grit and vigor with which he had previously approached his work. All this while continuing to teach and mentor graduate students. And he made us all very proud to be his friend and colleague.

The last communication I had with Scott was a week prior to his death. It looked like I was going to be spending considerable of time working in Chicago during the summer, so I e-mailed him to let him know that it may finally be feasible to fulfill my promise to visit him in Wisconsin. I also let him know that I had finally found time to make some progress on our paper, and had verified one of his conjectures. I was looking forward to writing it up and sending it to him. He wrote back several lines of encouragement, which I know must have been extremely difficult for him. I found out later from Kristi how excited he was to hear that he would be engaged in research again. As long as my memory of my former mentor prevails, this is what I will choose to remember best. Instead of dwelling on the fact that my career never followed the path that he wanted for me, and instead of focusing on the disappointment that must have caused him, I will choose to recall the glow that I brought to his final days, no matter how unwittingly. That's the way he would want it, and after all these years, it is the least that I can do for him.