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ISHS memorial: Larry Ventis tribute

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W. Larry Ventis was born Oct. 25, 1943, in Knoxville, Tennessee and died from complications of the COVID-19 virus on April 11, 2020. He received his B.S., M.A., and Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Tennessee. Larry followed his alma mater and their "football misadventures" for many years. Larry was a psychology professor at the College of William & Mary from 1969 until his retirement in 2016. He was the department chair from 1999 to 2005. According to W&M Provost Peggy Agouris, he had an illustrious career as a clinical psychologist and researcher. He was a 13-year member of the Board of Directors of the Workshop Library on World Humor. Glenn Shean, who identifies himself as a "close friend, colleague, handball partner, and beer drinking partner of Larry's," recalled that their offices at W&M were adjacent and there was rarely a day that went by that Larry didn't stop him to tell him a joke or something funny he heard. Dave Douglas, Dean of the W&M Law School, noted that Larry was "a gentle soul who loved choral music" and sang in the choir for many years at the Williamsburg Unitarian Church.

Among numerous classes, Larry taught introductory psychology for many years. He mentored countless graduate students in the psychology department's masters program and doctoral students in the Virginia Consortium Program in Clinical Psychology. Provost Agouris wrote, "One particularly outstanding example of Professor Ventis's dedication to mentoring was his 42 years of being a freshman advisor!" Another W&M colleague and longtime ISHS member Peter Derks reported that Larry's senior seminars on the psychology of humor were always over-enrolled and very popular with the students. Referencing the analogy that dissecting a frog kills it and therefore dissenting a joke makes it no longer funny, the course catalog warned that students who signed up for the class "might never laugh again." (Knowing Larry's sense of humor, it's a safe bet that he wrote that disclaimer himself.)

Peter Derks characterized Larry's academic research as a valuable step in bringing humor into psychology. According to one of the founding members of International Society of Humor Studies Don Nilsen, Larry's well-developed

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empirical studies in various publications and presentations of his findings at the ISHS conferences "did a great deal to help establish the field of humor studies as a legitimate academic discipline." In terms of Larry's analysis and experimentation in the field of psychology and humor, he took both a theoretical and a practical approach. His most recent study in the field of psychology and humor focused on incorporating Daniel Kahneman's Intuitive and Reflective Thought to further the understanding of humor processing and appreciation. Larry presented Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow* as an extension of incongruity-resolution theory. Jerry Suls' two-stage model of incongruity-resolution proposes that if the ending of a joke is expected, there is no surprise and thus, there is no laughter. Further, if the receiver does not find the rule to solve the mystery of the incongruity, there is no laughter and only puzzlement.

In an article he published in *Handbook of Humor and Psychotherapy* (1987), Larry hypothesized that when one first hears a joke, unlike a message with a probable meaning and an expected ending requiring little thought, an initial use of intuitive thought results in incongruity. Further thought is required to find the rule that puts the message into the context of a joke leading to resolution. In other words, Intuitive Thought (fast) leads to recognition of incongruity and Reflective Thought (slow) is used to resolve the incongruity. If the joke structure does not initially make sense, one must look for an alternative explanation, for example that it was a joke. To appreciate the humor in the joke, recipients often have to put in more cognitive effort to resolve the unexpected punchline. Larry used the following joke to illustrate the process: "When I was in high school, a lot of my friends wanted to have sex with anything that moved, but I chose not to limit myself." There is an expectation that the statement should end with "I chose not to." The addition of "limit myself" takes reflexive or slow thought to work out the surprise ending.

In addition to theoretical approaches to humor, Larry incorporated practical applications in clinical therapy settings. He recommended using humor as an alternative method in therapeutic settings, where humor is not the goal but as facilitating therapy. Humor can be added to different treatment techniques to increase the likelihood of success. His research focus ranged from the use of humorous imagery to treat phobias to counter-therapeutic ways to make people feel more comfortable with risk-taking behaviors. He found humor could be used as comic relief to disrupt negative thoughts and make situations more manageable. For example, he made up spider jokes to reduce patients' fear of tarantulas. Delia Chiaro remembers Larry giving a conference presentation on how he would treat patients with arachnophobia by presenting them with huge hairy spiders dressed up in pink tutus.

Perhaps there is no better example of Larry's personal imprint in his work than his article "Case History: The Use of Laughter as an Alternative Response in Systematic Desensitization." When approached with a scenario where there wasn't time for traditional systematic desensitization, he improvised a successful resolution using humor. A counselee of his was worried about attending an upcoming event where she anticipated seeing a recent ex-boyfriend and his date. Larry took her through a series of exercises including her imagining the boyfriend in leotards. After the party, she reported back that she enjoyed the event. He showed that creating a laughter response can lead to sudden release from unpleasant tension.

Larry also applied humor to family therapy settings, a useful method particularly when young children are involved. He proposed that humor could help clarify issues and alter destructive family dynamics. Larry gave the example of a child exhibiting absurd behavior as a response to an absurd situation in the family. He noted that children often lack verbal and cognitive abilities to communicate emotions and thus linking humor with play therapy may be particularly beneficial. Unlike adults who initiate counseling, children are more likely to be brought to therapy involuntarily and thus may see the therapist as an adversary. By being playful, the therapist can relieve and reassure the child.

Throughout his writing in regard to clinical work, it is evident that Larry cared greatly about his clients. He saw a therapist's job as an "appreciative and reinforcing audience" and they should model appropriate humor and demonstrate constructive uses. Shared humor can also create a bond between therapist and client. He noted that clients' inclusion of humor can be seen as a turning point, an indication that they feel comfortable and trusting with the therapist and can demonstrate the ability to distance themselves from pain or anxiety. He cautioned professionals that children may misinterpret humor as ridicule or lack of taking their problems seriously. Even with adults, he recommended therapists discuss using humor with a supervisor before implementing. He also warned against excessive use especially with self-deprecating humor.

Larry was a prominent figure in the International Society of Humor Studies (ISHS). He was an active member since its inception in 1982, which at that time was called the World Humor and Irony Membership (WHIM). Don Nilsen, recalled that Larry probably attended as many ISHS conferences as anyone in the organization and made important presentations at almost all of the conferences he attended. Delia Chiaro remembered a particular discussion at the roundup of the 2002 conference she hosted in a mediaeval stronghold in Bertinoro, Italy. "When others were presenting future ISHS events elsewhere, a voice from the back of the room shouted out, 'Yeah, but do we get to stay in a castle?' That was Larry."

Larry served as President of ISHS from 2014 to 2015 and was also a consulting editor for the society's journal, HUMOR. According to Moira Marsh, Larry was the psychology expert in "the multi-disciplinary troika of Book Review Editors." She noted that he was a master at translating specialist knowledge for a general audience. Moira recalled that one of the things that made Larry a delight to work with was his playfulness, which could pop out at any moment. She shared, "Once, during an email exchange with Larry and our other book review editor John Parkin in 2016, I referred to 'my Super Database of Everything' in which I was tracking book review candidates and assignments. Larry's reply was typical: 'Wow,' he wrote, 'I covet your Super Database of Everything. I just have some mundane databases of a few things.' That witty but gentle riposte is emblematic of Larry."

In the summer of 2013, Larry hosted the ISHS conference at William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. To Peter Derks, it brings to mind the motto of the conference, masterfully chaired by Larry: "A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing." The quote is attributed to William James, and according to Peter, "suits Larry very nicely." Jessica Milner Davis remembers the weather as the conference began as AWFUL. She described the first day, "There we all were, slopping through the wet trying to locate our dorm rooms (charming, once we made it), and there was Mine Host The Conference Chair, the distinguished but delightfully relaxed professor of psychology, Larry Ventis, to answer all our queries." She described the college and surrounding area as "picture-perfect and the little coffee shop that everyone soon found served excellent espresso – a nice surprise for international visitors who are not really that keen on Starbucks."

In addition to his exhaustive host duties, Larry participated in Tracey Platt's dissertation defense on closing night of the conference. As she began her presentation, Tracey remembers Larry challenging her, "Gelotophobes don't exist." He proposed that he and other clinical psychologists had never come across anyone presenting with gelotophobia, which is the fear of being laughed at. Tracey described the exchange, which highlighted Larry's gracious and thoughtful nature, this way, "Larry sat there smiling, in that warm, disarming manner he had, waiting for my reply. This moment inspired me. 'So, what do you do when you first greet a new client? Do you smile and show you are friendly and kind?' His considered reply was as I expected, 'Yes of course, why?' 'Well, that's the answer! Gelotophobes will see you smile and believe you are mocking them and leave, never to return. How often does that happen?' 'Yes, often' he said still smiling, still charming. The Ph.D. in hand, the rest is history but the memory of the lively discussion that followed us into Williamsburg and the Duke of Gloucester pub where we rewarded ourselves with a great burger, celebrating a fantastic end to the conference and a successful defense. The lift back to campus in the bright red convertible sports car was just the icing on the cake!"

As yet another demonstration of Larry's extraordinary wit, he sent the following email to Wladek Chlopicki, an attendee from Poland, who had been issued a parking ticket on campus during the conference. Larry wrote: "Dear Wladek, I thought you would want to know that you are no longer in danger of

being seized on the streets of Krakow by the College of William and Mary Parking Police and extradited to the US to stand trial. Your parking ticket violation has been forgiven, and you can once again travel freely in the US without wearing a disguise and without fear of being apprehended." The next year, Larry attending the ISHS conference in Utrecht, The Netherlands. Giselinde Kuipers fondly recalls Larry describing his AirB&B, a 15th century house, in his Southern drawl and with his American naiveté, as "very clean and all" for such an old structure. She remembers him referring to the society as "an extra family."

In reached out to friends and colleagues in preparation for writing this tribute, similar words describing Larry were repeated over and over: gentle, empathic, and nonjudgmental. The following are some quotes, thoughts, and memories shared by the humor community. Peter Derks noted that Larry had a terrific knack for combining unlikely circumstances. One routine Peter remembers Larry delivering was in regard to a real estate agent for a bowling alley: "The alleys are going fast, but still plenty of good gutter lots available." Peter added, "We miss him! He was one of a kind and cannot be replaced." Karyn Buxman, who met Larry for the first time at ISHS 1992 in Paris wrote, "He had me at hello. What a gracious and witty gentleman." Jessica Milner Davis will never forget his kindness and selfless gift of time. Alice Sheppard was disheartened by the news of his passing. "I well remember meeting Larry Ventis for the first time and always thought highly of his work. A great loss," Martin Lampert described Larry as such a good friend, "He will be remembered for his easy-going manner and gracious and generous spirit."

Don Nilsen noted that without Larry's presence, ISHS will never be exactly the same. Similarly Moira Marsh wrote, "I cannot imagine an ISHS conference without Larry Ventis. He was a gentle, kindly unassuming presence, and he served the humor studies cause as he served in every other sphere of his life, unselfishly, efficiently, and without fuss." According to Cornelia Cody, "I loved that there were so many different sides to Larry. In addition to being an academic and humor scholar, he was a musician, an athlete ... and, I'm sure, other various persons. I loved that he never took himself too seriously. Most academics can be horrible snobs. He was never one. In fact, he was incredibly generous."

I was fortunate enough to have known Larry for 23 years and am honored that I was chosen to oversee this tribute to such a lovely man and dedicated humor scholar. We met at the 1997 ISHS conference in Edmund, Oklahoma, more specifically over a beer at the Ramada Inn bar just off campus. Our second meeting was at the 1999 conferences at Holy Names in Oakland. He schlepped his guitar all the way from Virginia for the comedy contest and, not surprisingly, won the competition with a brilliant song parody he wrote about the conferences set to an old folk tune.

Following the 2000 conference in Osaka, Japan, Larry and I toured around the country for a week. We had many adventures such as serendipitously finding an outdoor restaurant along a wooded river where we were served by an authentic Geisha. Our trip to the top of Mt. Fuji was another highlight. We stashed our luggage at the Tokyo train station and took two trains and two buses to the base of the mountain. We began our climb around 10 pm, timing it so we could see the sun rise as we neared the top. While altitude sickness slowed Larry down, the cold temperature made me want to keep moving. Together, we soldiered on. By the time we got to the top, I was grumpy from a lack of sleep. The sight of souvenir stands and a road that brought trucks up the mountain pushed my limits. I was immediately ready to head back down to a hot shower when Larry gently nudged me, "Don't you want to at least look at the crater?" He immediately got me out of my bad mood by directing me to the beauty that surrounded us. I like to say Larry was the slow to my fast. It wasn't until the next day that Larry shared with me a wellknown Japanese saying from his guidebook: "A wise person will climb Mt. Fuji once in their lifetime, but only a fool would climb it twice." I cherish our friendship and the times we spent together whether it was in brightly lit conference auditoriums or dimly lit campus pubs. I will forever consider him one of my favorite people of all time.

Larry will be forever known for the joy and laughter he brought to others. The 200+ attendees for his on-line memorial service was accented by heartfelt tributes from members of his church choir, tennis partners, former colleagues and students at William & Mary, and his ISHS family. I will close with the following Facebook post written by his daughter Summer: "He was the most joyful, active and caring person. He was a wonderful parent, and I have heard from so many others what he has meant to people in all areas of his life, but above all, he was always eager to laugh and make others laugh."

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