

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 1, 2015,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Daniel Merton  
Wegner was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **DANIEL MERTON WEGNER**

BORN: June 28, 1948

DIED: July 5, 2013

Dan Wegner was many things—a scientist, a scholar, a teacher, a mentor, a colleague, and a friend. But first and foremost, he was an inventor. Although he ultimately become a widely celebrated *éminence grise* who won every major award his field could offer, he never stopped being the 10-year-old boy who sat in the attic of his house in East Lansing with an issue of *Popular Mechanics* and a chemistry set, trying to develop a formula that would turn the family cat into a family dog because, as he would maintain for the rest of his life, there is simply no good reason for cats.

Dan was an inventor, and so he went to college to study physics and engineering. But toward the end of his undergraduate career he realized that the one thing he liked better than building machines that whirred, sparkled, and flew was building theories that did the same things. And so he made an intellectual left turn and entered the field of social psychology, where he spent the rest of his life making problems for everyone.

Most scientists encounter problems and then work hard to solve them. Dan thought problems were the things to be invented and that solving them was the easy part. Many of the problems he invented are now on permanent display in the museum we call the scientific literature—problems including transactive memory, action identification, ironic processes, thought suppression, and apparent mental causation. Each of these rubrics represents an area of research that Dan single-handedly designed and developed and in which others continue to work. His theories were elegant, his experiments were ingenious, his writing was revelatory, and psychologists now properly regard him as one of the century's most creative and insightful explorers of the human mind.

Alas, some of Dan's most wonderful inventions reside only in the memories of those who happened to be standing nearby when he created them. Those were the ideas and insights he generated in the course of daily conversation, in which he would riff and roll and improvise on just about any topic with effortless originality. A conversation with Dan was like a roller-coaster ride. It started out slow and a bit uphill because Dan was rather shy, but

then, just when you began to wonder why you'd bothered to fasten your seatbelt, he would say something, and you'd suddenly find yourself in free fall, spinning in a direction so strange and new that it bent the needle on your compass.

The things Dan said were not just smart. They were also utterly hilarious. He never told stories or jokes, but rather, invented remarks. His remarks were like great licks in jazz—ordinary phrases spontaneously rearranged in ways so unexpected that they produced a visceral thrill. For Dan, spontaneous remarking was high art. He once observed that the best remarks often contain the “second-most remote associate,” which is the word that is precisely two words away from the word the listener was expecting. He also noted that on a surprising number of occasions, that word is *shrubbery*. Dan thought about things like this and he thought about them a lot, which is why he could tip people over using nothing but his mind.

In life, Dan attained professional heights that few can achieve. And in death, he set a personal example that few can follow. In 2010, Dan was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and over the next two and a half years he gradually lost his ability to stand, then to sit, then to move, then to speak, and then finally, to breathe. But until his last weeks, Dan remained fully engaged in his life's work. He continued to mentor his students, helping them become the best versions of themselves rather than pale copies of him. He continued to work on a new book and publish new scientific papers. He was delighted by the steady stream of visitors to his home, referring to his waning days as “the world's longest wrap party,” and he accepted each new physical challenge and inevitable defeat with unusual grace and good humor. At a final conference held in his honor, he expressed gratitude for “the deeply satisfying life I've found using science to explore the nature of human connectedness” and then bid farewell to colleagues, students, friends, and admirers whom he knew he would not see again: “I'd rather be here right now with you people, the people in this room, than with some of the finest people in the world.” For Dan, dying was no excuse for failing to be funny.

Daniel Merton Wegner was the John Lindsley Professor of Psychology in Memory of William James. He was the recipient of the highest honors given by the Association for Psychological Science, the American Psychological Association, and the Society of Experimental Social Psychology. In a fitting tribute, the Society for Personality and Social Psychology now awards the Daniel M. Wegner Theoretical Innovation Prize annually in his honor.

Respectfully submitted,

Joshua Greene  
Daniel Schacter

Daniel Gilbert, Chair

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Portions of this Minute were previously published by Daniel Gilbert, “Remembering Daniel M. Wegner,” *Observer* 27, no. 1 (January 2014).  
<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2014/january-14/remembering-daniel-m-wegner.html>.