

George J. Suci

April 24, 1925 — February 11, 1998

George Suci was born and grew up in Gary, Indiana. He was the only child of Aron and Adela Suci, who immigrated from Romania early in this century. George's Romanian heritage shaped his character and his traditions — friends in Ithaca will remember the spring lamb roast he held for many years.

During World War II, George was stationed in the Aleutian Islands where he was responsible for the maintenance of communications equipment. In his spare time, though, he studied the art of boxing, which in later years appealed to some of his graduate students who, like George, had not grown up in an academic world.

After the war, George was educated as an electrical engineer and psychologist at Purdue University and the University of Illinois. He went on to hold positions at the American Institute for Research in Newport, Rhode Island, the Institute of Communications Research and the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois, and the National Institutes of Health. He joined the Department of Human Development at Cornell in 1959.

George's research and scholarly writing was concerned primarily with language and the way it carries meaning. He did pioneering studies on the measurement of meaning (the semantic differential method) with Osgood and Tannenbaum at the University of Illinois. Later, at Cornell, he and his students developed psychological and psychophysiological methods to study early language development and the relations between thought and language in infants and children.

George served as adviser and mentor for many graduate students who went on to successful teaching, research, and administrative careers in universities and government agencies. He taught core courses in cognitive development at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. He served as Department Chairperson from 1986-91 and as Director of Graduate Studies from 1978-81 and again from 1993-94. He was appointed Professor Emeritus in December 1996, but continued to teach through the spring of 1997 and served as Acting Department Co-Chairperson during the summer of 1997.

George died at home on Wednesday, February 11, 1998, after a brief illness.

George meant a great deal to many people at Cornell. The comments that follow reflect the thoughts of a few of his friends and colleagues, written since the time of his death.

“When we first met, I was just beginning my professional career and George was on the home stretch of his, entering the stage of life Erik Erikson called ‘Generativity.’ George was very generous and was a valued professional advisor. I regularly sought him out for counsel because I could count on him to listen to my concerns and give me solid, sensible advice. I was often surprised when he would completely transform my perspective on a troubling issue. I didn’t expect to find such deep wisdom and professional sensitivity from this humble man.

“George was a colleague. We team-taught a course in cognitive development for several years and I came to admire his ability to be completely non-defensive when he lectured. He gracefully turned my interruptions into learning opportunities for the students, modeling for them the practice of scientific dialogue. George’s seminal research on the semantic differential gave him a impressive depth of appreciation for issues of scientific measurement. His lectures and readings on the philosophy and practice of operationally defining scientific constructs was unparalleled. I’m glad I was taking notes during those lectures, because I can now provide my students with George’s excellent lessons. It was always a pleasure to discuss science with George. He had an uncanny ability to look at research and immediately cut through the fluff to see what was valuable and what was not.

“George was a friend, a good friend. Despite the difference in our ages, we became fast friends. It was easy to be friends with George, mostly, I think, because I knew I could trust him and he knew that I did. He never treated me as just an ‘assistant professor.’ In fact, one of the nicest things about George was his nearly total disregard for a person’s social or professional status. Even in an academic setting where status differences are institutionalized, George treated everyone, students, junior faculty, and staff as individuals. I think that’s why so many people liked and trusted him.

“It was also easy to be friends with George because he was so much fun. He always made me smile. It could be something simple, like coming in to work wearing his Art Carney hat, or when he got tickled by something and would throw his head back in a wonderful snaggle-toothed laugh.

“My grief is alleviated a little because I have so many happy memories of George. In all their cacophonous variety, from the sacrilegious to the sublime, all these memories are George to me.”

“Sometime during the winter of 1997, I took advantage of the fact that George had just retired to finally tell him what I thought of him. I told George that there were two qualities of his that were most important to me as his former student, his colleague, and his friend.

“First, I admired his street smarts. He had a sense of what made individual people tick, what was most meaningful to them, what motivated them. He also had a strong and accurate sense of how things in the world really worked, whether it was the relation between thought and language in infants, or department politics.

“What he didn’t have was any grand illusions of control. This was one part of his street smarts – he worked the system for solutions to problems, instead of thinking he could dictate or impose them.

“And another part of his street smarts that I liked very much was that he had no particular respect for authority per se. He didn’t show disrespect. But respect was something people earned by their actions and their principles, not something that came along with power.

“Besides his street smarts, the other thing about George that was important to me was his big heart. His genuine interest in your well being. His ability to focus on people’s strengths and not their weaknesses. The open and supportive atmosphere that he created among the people he worked with — faculty, staff, and students alike.

“These two qualities – street smarts and a big heart – were even more valuable because, in George, they were combined. And it was that combination that I sensed 24 years ago when I joined other grad students in the east basement to work with George.

“That was a wonderful time. Having ideas, lots of them. Remodeling the lab on weekends and during breaks. Building our own apparatus and inventing Rube Goldberg solutions to the endless electrical and mechanical problems, trying to record heart rate from 12 month-olds while keeping the pens on the Grass polygraph unclogged, using an old blues tune as the lab’s theme song; the list seems endless. From those days until now, George was a model for me — and I know, for others.

“He was down to earth, unpretentious proof that someone from a background that didn’t have much money or education could go to college, get a Ph.D., and actually make it in this bizarre world of academics without losing his identity, his mind, or most of all, his heart.”

“George was a mensch. The general translation of ‘mensch’ is ‘honorable man’. More specifically, it refers to someone who is kind, merciful, righteous, and has integrity. Traditionally, a mensch is explicitly not a hero. Practically, living life as a mensch is often itself a heroic act.

“Traditionally, a mensch is not necessarily wise, but George was. He could cut through the cobwebs and see what the important issues were. His advice often seemed quirky, as though it were coming out of left field. However, it was his very quirkiness that often provided an entirely different, and invariably useful, way of seeing and understanding things.

“George was amazingly non-judgmental. It was possible for a colleague to confide in George about one’s anxieties without having to worry that at some point in the future, the information would be mentioned in a context that would make it hurtful or embarrassing.

“George was the person of choice to talk with about ideas that were only imperfectly formulated. He never treated them as evidence of intellectual inferiority; instead, he treated them as being first steps, and provided feedback to make them better. He had a clear, incisive mind and he was generous in sharing it. In the institution of academia, where worth is often equated at best with mere intelligence and at worst with glibness, George based his academic evaluations on the actual scientific quality of a person’s professional work; he based his personal evaluations on the integrity of a person’s actions. He was equally comfortable, and non-condescending, talking with janitors as with administrators.

“It was not surprising that George was chosen to occupy leadership positions, as director of graduate studies, and as department chair. People trusted George. Academia, like many political institutions, is frequently a hotbed of interest groups jockeying for power, often at other people’s expense. George, too, had interests and preferences and, in certain administrative positions, could have acted on them. However, one of George’s frequent expressions was, ‘Nah, I’m not gonna do that. I’d like to, but you do stuff like that, you lose your integrity.’

“George was entirely without artifice. He didn’t posture; he didn’t lie by omission; he didn’t promote himself. Those who didn’t miss the hoopla found a man of integrity, a listener, a source of wise advice, a loyal friend. George was a mensch.”

“The characteristics which always come to mind when I remember George as a long-standing colleague and friend are his high sense of personal and professional integrity, a sharpness of critical intellect combined with a generosity of spirit and personal modesty, and a capacity to appreciate the simple joys of life and to share them with others. He greatly enjoyed being helpful to others dealing with problems, be they graduate students or faculty colleagues, whether concerned with technical issues or interpersonal questions.

“In his administrative roles, his hallmark was a commitment to fairness and allowing for differing views to be heard and discussed on the way to group decision making. In essence, George seemed to be able to live his professional life, with its commitment to excellence and achievement, within the larger guiding framework of his personal life as a caring human being.”

Rick Canfield, Barbara Koslowski, Henry Ricciuti, Steve Robertson