

Remembrance of Greg Dees - February 11, 2014

By Edward Skloot

I think a lot about Greg and I bet you do too. Greg was my closest friend and his death has opened up a space I can't fill – and don't really want to. This is, I think, a natural response; you feel lucky to have known him and yet short-changed that you couldn't have just one more lick.

I didn't know him well when I came to Duke almost six years ago but I am clear that it was Greg's phone call during the recruitment process that persuaded me to accept Duke's offer. I'd done a fair amount of work on entrepreneurship by nonprofit organizations in the 1980s and '90s and we reached out to each other. When I got to Duke we worked together constantly and we became fast friends.

One thing I ask myself is how Greg turned out the way he did – a modest, self-effacing, generous, playful, intellectually tenacious person who just so happened to create, shape, refine and expand the boundaries of what we now call social entrepreneurship. He helped frame the Social Enterprise Initiative at Harvard in the early 1990s and

then began to put pen to paper. Piece by piece over two decades he came to feel that open and adaptive societies can solve their deepest problems only when they buckle social enterprise with social mission (2013).

Greg forged a way of thinking and acting and taught an ever-widening stream of social entrepreneurs. He legitimized their efforts in academia. He wrote cases and articles, spoke carefully about his ideas, engaged others and, in the process, found himself on a new playing field. But if he were put on trial for this behavior, like Socrates was for corrupting the youth, he'd probably plead "innocent." He simply wouldn't take credit for what he believed were the genuine, authentic good works of others.

The Danish author Isak Denisen wrote that "all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." We feel our sorrow over the loss of a terrific guy, and he too has a story to tell.

Greg was born in Cincinnati, a stone's throw from Appalachia. His family had more than its fair share of problems, including alcoholism and poverty. One Christmas the local church had designated the Dees family as poor and deserving of help, but never had told them. Members

suddenly appeared bringing lots of presents. This deeply angered his father but Greg had no inkling that he was a very poor kid in need of charity. Still, many of us know that as a grownup Greg never would do things for others that he was sure they could learn to do for themselves. Invariably they did and were the better for it.

Whether or not events like this were determining in who Greg became we'll never know for sure. But we do know he'd return again and again to the theme of social and economic need and how society could best come to grips with its challenges. I think this is the heart of his story.

Greg graduated Magna Cum Laude from the University of Cincinnati with a degree in philosophy. He began a meditation practice there. He went to the Yale School of Management. But, for his PhD from Johns Hopkins, he circled back to moral philosophy. I think Greg felt a personal need to do "inner work." In time, his deep dive into philosophy and mindfulness gradually took him to investigate spirituality and, later, to Buddhism.

If you asked, he would tell you he wasn't a religious person. Yet, in the last few years he several times expressed the wish that he'd dug

deeper into the spiritual side of his own personal journey. He was on this path when he died.

Maybe it's too much of a stretch to think that building a case for social enterprise was a way to connect the practical and the spiritual. But I have no doubt he knew that building a field to solve social ills, like poverty or poor health, was a moral imperative. It was what we think about when we say, "He found his calling." In an unaggressive but persistent way, Greg may well have come to a very practical -- and possibly ennobling -- approach to healing society's wounds.

I think Greg was purposeful wanderer. *[The term is adapted from an essay on strategic planning by Prof. John M. Bryson of the University of Minnesota.]* Greg sort of learned his way to where he was going and where he wanted to be. This "wandering with a purpose" took him to university teaching -- a profession he absolutely loved. He used it to nurture others as well as to convey lots of data. He made the rounds of elite universities; Yale, Harvard, Stanford and Duke -- but also to a small, rural college back in Appalachia, Berea College.

In January 1997, Greg took a leave of absence from Harvard (!) to work with a strong economic development group called MACED and to engage faculty and students at the college.

MACED and Berea sit in the heart of Appalachia in a place of great poverty. The college was founded by Abolitionists before the Civil War to educate both whites and blacks. It was then, and still is, tuition free. It's one of the best colleges in America.

Greg had been challenged many times to get out of his ivory tower. If he believed so strongly in social entrepreneurship, he should go and practice it. So he did. The experience was very meaningful.

Despite the best intentions and much hard work, creating social enterprises in Eastern Kentucky was virtually impossible. Generations of people born into poverty and corporate paternalism can't flip and become social entrepreneurs. There is much dependency, little business knowledge and almost no access to capital.

Greg stayed for 18 months, and when he left he was disappointed and wiser. He saw that social entrepreneurship doesn't work everywhere, and shouldn't. He re-acquainted himself with crushing poverty and its effects. He also realized how much he loved teaching. The Posthope blog many of us contributed to vouches for that love.

So, it was off to Stanford and, then, in 2001, to Duke, to establish the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship (CASE) at Fuqua. CASE was his grounding wire and base of operations for more

than a decade. Many of you know the significant accomplishments of CASE under Greg's leadership. You may not know that CASE, and Greg specifically, was the primary reason applicants gave when asked on their admission forms: "Why do you want to attend Fuqua?"

You would think this notoriety would have given him a swelled head. Wrong. In virtually every project Greg initiated or ran he refused to be known as its sole director or author. He was almost always co-director, co-author, co-founder or co-whatever. The urge to share leadership and standing not only fit his personality. It also showed his confidence in others by nudging them into places where their talents could develop and flourish. As one of his friends said, "He wanted to give people their aspirations."

Each time he heard himself described as "The Father of Social Entrepreneurship" he took it but also cringed. He was constantly surprised that fate, or something unknowable, had chosen him to form and build a new academic discipline. He remained a sharer and an empowerer all his life. The stories on the Posthope blog ring with admiration for Greg's kindness, empathy and willingness to give of himself. Indeed, he had found his calling.

For all this, Greg was a quiet person who could live alone -- with increasingly severe health problems. He never complained or asked for sympathy. He rarely talked about himself. And, in fact, he was very funny in kind of a sneaky way.

I drove him to many medical appointments over the years when he knew enough not to drive himself. I'd usually get a call from him three or four days before the appointed time and he'd invariably start with "Got a few hours to spare?" We cleared the time and I'd sometimes ask what test or procedure he was going to have. He'd mumble something inaudible and I'd say, "Sounds serious." And he'd answer he didn't really know. Except once. He called and all he did was spell "c-o-l-o-n-o-s-c-o-p-y." "Half day?" I asked. "Not sure," he said, "There's miles to go up there before I sleep." And a half day it was.

Greg and I spent a couple of years at Duke emailing each other in grandiloquent, bloated language dripping in humility. It was a kind of repartee which took effusiveness to a high art. Usually the subject was mundane, the language not so much. Greg signed his emails either as IBOW ("I bow") or SOLO ("so low"). Here's a typical paragraph about choosing a place to meet our friend Greg Jones:

“Would that I can ooze into your supreme presences my life, yea, my afterlife, would be eternally complete. I have no bags but much baggage that I shall bear stooped in your illuminating grace. Do reveal in your wisdom the location of our convening. My meager hovel, should you care to step inside the boundaries of fetid impurity, exists to accommodate you. Excellency and Master, appoint the locale and this flyspeck of dislocated humanity will crawl toward your heavenly presences.” Not bad!

Alas, this passage also signals our ultimate surrender. We invited Greg Jones to join our duo – which he readily accepted. He left us in the proverbial dust. His language floats on air in elegant curlicues and acrobatic loop-de-loops. Why we asked a former Dean of the Divinity School to join the party I’ll never know. But J. Gregory Dees and I, seeing we’d met our match, retreated into email-speak from then on.

By the way, Greg and I discussed writing his in-process book in the language and form we had honed in our emails. Tempting though it was, Greg politely declined.

As you know, it all wasn’t yucks and laughter, though Greg’s twinkly humor often came through. A special sadness is that he had, in recent years, made wonderful new friends whose brightness brought out

Greg's sweetness and generous spirit. Just as his health issues pulled him down, their presence pushed him up and a new energy and lightness overtook him. The old Dees began to shine. But, in the last months before his final round, he pushed himself to too many conferences and speeches in too many places and it took a toll from which he wouldn't recover.

So, we leave his story in mid-air. Greg was purposefully wandering again. He saw and wrote how answers to social problems had to come from lots of places, in what he called an "open solution" society. That society would be known for the democratization of social innovation. It would be flexible and adaptive. It was here he could situate social enterprise as a meaningful part of the solution. Once again he opened his sight lines to imagine a global society that could be a spiraling source for good.

Greg was broadening our thinking while digging deep to find the inner and outer sources of moral behavior. Social entrepreneurship was a big part of the answer. This is the legacy he left which we now can assume. Every one of us was empowered by Greg to carry on. He

pointed the way and gave us the skills. It's our turn now -- and we mustn't waste a moment.

Let me end with a short poem by the farmer, poet, environmental activist – and Kentuckian – Wendell Berry. It reminds me of Greg, the purposeful wanderer. It's called "The Real Work."

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to
our real work,*

*And that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to
our real journey.*

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

Blessings on you, Greg.