Joe Rotman Eulogy

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I was very moved and honored when I learned that Joe Rotman had requested that I speak on this very sad occasion.

Losing Joe, my colleague and dear friend of many, many years, has left a deep, aching hole in my heart. I will miss him in so many different ways: as a colleague, as an intellectual partner, as a fellow lover of mathematics, as a progressive Democrat, as a music lover, as a movie buff, and, most of all, as a dear friend.

Over the last 50 years, Joe's and life and mine have intersected in many different ways. Here are some of them:

- Joe and I first met in 1959, when he arrived at the U of I with a freshly minted Ph.D. in math from the University of Chicago, and I was about to get my Ph.D. in math from the University of Illinois. We quickly discovered that we had quite a lot in common, including the fact that as undergraduates we had both gone through the same rigorous program of liberal education in the College of the University of Chicago. That was actually a bigger deal than you might think. At the time we attended the College, it was a very heady and exciting place. It had a fabulous faculty, an innovative, rigorous liberal arts program, and a diverse student body (including large numbers of World War II vets on the GI Bill). Alums of the U of C College tend to bond quickly and easily—not around the football team (which the U. of C. didn't have), but around shared *ideas*, and shared intellectual values. That's what happened with Joe and me.
- Another thing that we had in common was this: We had come from the University of Chicago, where the political spectrum ranged from moderate left to left of left, and suddenly found ourselves in 1960 Champaign-Urbana, where the political spectrum ranged from moderate right to right of right!
- Both Joe and I had spent some time in the U. of C. Math Department (though not at the same time). Joe finished his Ph.D. there; I transferred half way through to the U. of I. We could, and did, reminisce about instructors and courses and fellow students. One of our shared heroes at the U. of C. was Professor Irving Kaplansky (who, I believe was later Joe's thesis advisor). Kaplanski was a fine research mathematician, but he was also a brilliant expositor of mathematical ideas. Kaplansky's lectures were so clear, and so well-organized that you couldn't help but understand them. They were also so beautiful

and elegant that it was almost impossible not to enjoy them. Joe followed in Kaplansky's footsteps. He too became a wonderful teacher.

- Joe loved thinking about and discussing effective ways of teaching mathematics. Some of the things he said were profound, some witty, some both. Here's an example of a "Joeism" that comes to mind:

  I tell my students:
  > There are some things in mathematics that *seem* to be trivial, and, in fact, they really *are* trivial;
  > There are some things in mathematics that *seem* to be trivial, but, in fact, they really are highly *non*-trivial;
  > And there are some things in mathematics that *seem* to be *non*-trivial, but in fact, they really *are* trivial.
  > And it's my job to teach you to tell the difference!

- Despite his busy research program, Joe maintained and nurtured a life-long interest in mathematics *education* at many levels—from first year high school algebra on up to very advanced and esoteric topics. I like to think that one of my more important contributions to the field of math education was to hook up Joe with my friend Al Cuoco, a brilliant high school math teacher I knew in Massachusetts. The two hit it off as I had hoped, and produced a wonderful text aimed at high school math teachers. Joe and Al's collaboration turned into a close friendship. Yesterday, I received the following poignant note from Al:

  > "There's no way to describe my sadness. I still have on my calendar for every Friday: "Call Joe"

Joe and my interactions were certainly not limited to professional mathematical and mathematics education issues:

- For several years, Joe and I (and our wives) were members of a film club, as well as a Jewish/Israeli book club. It's in those contexts that I learned to appreciate Joe's wide-ranging interests, insightful observations, comments, and questions on matters far removed from mathematics. (Shades of the U. of C. College again, no doubt!)
- I also saw Joe at the weekly luncheon meetings of a bunch of curmudgeonly, elderly Jewish men, who quaintly call themselves the "Old Farts." It was a purely social gathering, but I was pleased on the occasions when I could sit next to, or at least, near Joe, and have a good conversation with him.

We were frequently invited to Joe and Marga's house for a variety of social occasions: dinner parties, film and TV showings, or just to sit around and chat, and maybe vent our spleen on the latest Republican or Likud mischief. They were such gracious hosts that we always left with a warm feeling, even on the coldest winter nights. Of course, the high point of each year was the Passover Seder that Joe presided over, and for which Marga provided the superb food. Their son, Danny, always read the Four Questions. I've been to many Seders in my life (including ones I myself led): some were downright unpleasant, some were OK, some were really nice, but the Rotmans' were by far the best!

I should add that Joe and I didn't agree on *everything*. I could never really understand Joe's passion for the Illini basketball team!

In closing, let me say this: Despite all the wonderful things that Joe has done in his life, I think that perhaps his greatest legacy will be his children, Danny and Ella. I got to spend some time with Ella during Joe's last days. Over the course of that difficult week, I became increasingly impressed by Ella's concern, care, support, and love for her father and her mother, as well as her practical ability to be useful. She is a real mensch, and we can all be proud of her.