

Memorial Minute

Michael J. Tremelling

Michael Tremelling died last June at the age of forty-two. For a decade and a half his life had hung by a thread and that thread was getting thinner and thinner. He knew that, but he used what time he had to do his work, to raise his children and to show more concern for others than for himself. When he lost his last battle, his friends, colleagues and students lost the most remarkable man they are ever likely to know.

Michael Tremelling was born on October 14, 1945, in Rigby, Idaho. In his undergraduate years, at the Idaho State University, he was the junior member of joint faculty-student research that resulted in his first two publications. This early experience shaped his later professional life as a chemist and as a teacher of chemistry: he was never happier than when he worked with his Vassar students in the laboratory. Mike did his graduate work at Yale, where he earned Master's and Doctor's degrees in physical organic chemistry and then went on to Cal Tech for a year of post-doctoral research.

It was during that year that both his kidneys failed and were replaced by a kidney given him by one of his sisters, Jeanne. When Mike applied for an appointment at Vassar early in 1974, he sent along his *curriculum vitae* on which the entry "Health:" read "Good; kidney transplant May 1973". That laconic assessment reflected his determination more than his optimism. He knew, as we did, that the health of a transplant patient is never simply "good". The drugs administered to prevent the body from rejecting the alien organ inevitably weaken the entire immune system. Even a trivial infection like the common cold constitutes a threat to life. In addition, these drugs cause progressive deterioration of the bone structure. Both of Mike's hips had to be replaced with steel and plastic not once but twice, and during his last stay in the hospital, he faced a third hip replacement, a drug-resistant infection, and a second kidney transplant. That proved to be more than even his tenacity could overcome.

Mike had a fierce and dogged will to live, not for the pleasures life afforded him, for those were few, but for his work which he loved, and for his two young sons, Christopher and Jonathan, whom he loved more and whose custody he had fought a long and wearying battle.

Most of his energy went into his work, and he was good at it.

He was a demanding teacher, and a generous one. He was always ready to help students who were honorably struggling with chemistry, and even more so to guide those who wanted to explore it beyond the context of the introductory course. But he had no patience with students who did not try to do their best. For someone who as a matter of course worked to the limit of his capacity under trying circumstances, - who painfully dragged himself to class on crutches and taught with an overhead projector from his chair when he could no longer stand on his feet, - it was incomprehensible and infuriating that there were hale young people who could not be bothered to put their best effort into their own future.

At the center of Mike's professional life was his research. Characteristically, he was only interested in difficult problems. He carried out work in three distinct areas of physical organic chemistry: solid-state reactions at high temperatures, steric requirements of physiologically active molecules, especially morphine analogues, and the mechanisms and kinetics of free-radical reactions. His substantial and highly original contributions to these fields have been published in more than a dozen papers, several of them in journals that accept only work of unusual and fundamental importance, like *Tetrahedron Letters* and the rapid communications section of the *Journal of the American Chemical Society*. His work was supported by grants from the Petroleum Research Fund, the Research Corporation, and the National Science Foundation. He worked and

published jointly with two colleagues in the department and, above all, with his students. To a deeply engaged scientist, teaching and research are indivisible: the most effective teaching and the most exciting learning are done when a student and a teacher strive together to trace the lines of order and of beauty in Nature's tapestry. The students who had the good fortune to work with Mike in the laboratory knew and loved him best, both as a scientist and as a man, and their lives have been profoundly changed by knowing him.

It is easier to talk of Michael Tremelling's work than to convey what kind of man he was. Few could live in such adversity and in virtually constant pain without falling into despondency, self-pity and an acceptance of defeat. That was not Mike's way. He staved off despair by setting aside what he could not change and putting his energy into what he could. If he was discouraged by what he called the rollercoaster ride of small improvements followed by large setbacks, he did not let it show. His health was not a subject of conversation he saw fit to open. As he lay immobilized on his bed for most of last winter and throughout spring, he would talk to his visitors about everything else but that, - about books he read, about college affairs, about national politics. His comments were often funny and always incisive and cuttingly to the point. He did not have the mind, - or the time, - to beat about the bush. Only when asked would he speak of his

condition and then in such a matter-of-fact way that it seemed he was looking not at the ruins of his life but at a biochemical phenomenon he followed with detached interest.. Then he would change the subject. The remarkable thing is our clear sense that he avoided speaking of his pain and of his prospects not to protect himself but to spare our feelings.

There is no lack of large and noble words to describe Michael Tremelling. There is his genuine brilliance as a scientist. There is his unflinching courage that can only be called heroic. There is the enormous dignity with which he faced multiplying disaster. But at the core of all of these there is that rare and unfashionable quality called goodness. Wordsworth reminds us that the "best portion of a good man's life" are "his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love". Yes, but not unremembered. All who knew Mike during his short life will remember him for however long we may live.

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