A Remembrance of Alan Kotok • June 7, 2007

Until a year ago, it was such a comforting [reassuring] feeling to know that Alan Kotok was available—even if just for a moment's conversation. An exchange of thoughts with Alan could brighten any day.

His early departure left so *many* hard-to-fill holes in the hearts of his extended family. Fortunately, we have durable memories in abundance. On this occasion for remembering, I consider it an honor to recount some of my favorite experiences of Alan.

Stories of Alan, whether private or widely known, and no matter how old, ring familiar because Alan was such a remarkably *consistent* person. He treated everyone the same: with respect, kindness and total honesty. And he changed little, actually—over a lifetime of making the lives of those around him more interesting and more fun.

I can say without hesitation that Alan was *the* most consistently stimulating, entertaining, informative, and satisfying individual it has ever been my pleasure to interact with.

He was brilliant and super-knowledgeable, yet utterly without self-importance. His quiet words were always well chosen, but never calculated: in just a *few* of them, he could present the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth—seemingly effortlessly. He was so 'well-adjusted' and unselfconscious—and he understood human nature so well—that he could be relentlessly funny just by making factual statements.

Upon graduating from MIT [at the age of only twenty], Alan joined Digital Equipment Corporation [as employee #490]. Two years later, I followed suit, and found myself in a really delightful job—delightful mainly, because it put me into continual contact with Alan over the next thirty years. My work was to travel the world, giving technical chalk-talks about the products and plans of DEC's large-computer engineering group. Alan was principal design engineer for this group, and I got to be its 'ambassador of goodwill.' Alan suggested a more modest title: "Professional Parrot." The job remained such fun in fact, that over the years, I thwarted DEC's every effort to validate the "Peter Principle" by promoting me.

With Alan as my chief source, I got to go around making predictions about what DEC would do next. There was never much worry much about company secrets escaping untimely, because at Alan's suggestion, we adopted the "needle in the haystack" approach to security: he suggested we simply *encourage* any rumor which ever developed: we even had license to start them!

Alan had a very relaxed attitude toward computer industry prognostications: once over dinner, the CEO of a company which was on the verge of spending millions with Digital, asked Alan where he thought the industry was going. With characteristic candor, Alan replied, "I don't follow the computer industry." When he saw the look of horror on the faces of other DEC attendees, he added, "By that I mean I don't concern myself with the buzz. I believe good ideas live longer than bad ones, and get better as they circulate, so by ignoring the noise, I can get things done and still not miss any of the good stuff."

I recall attending “engineering committee” meetings, wherein some debate would typically develop. Alan would seem only minimally interested, listening as each new input threw more darkness on the controversy. When all seemed thoroughly confused, he’d finally bestir himself, and utter a few words of clear, Kotokian logic. There’d be a short silence, followed by a general agreement that somehow, the problem no longer seemed to require discussion.

The most stimulating and exciting period in my life, was the seven years during which I shared bachelor quarters with Alan in our apartment in Waltham. He had chosen that location because it was half way between the DEC headquarters in Maynard and the Tech Model Railroad Club here. Our interactions at home were so gratifying: whenever I needed an update on matters technical, Alan was there to provide an enlightening ‘drink from the fire-hose.’ He taught me so much, all the while making it *seem* like a dialogue of equals.

Alan was incredibly easy to live with. I can’t remember us ever having a conflict. In fact, I *actually* can’t remember Alan ever being mad at anyone, or anyone being mad at Alan.

Alan used big words sparingly, usually only for comic effect. I remember him explaining to me how Ethernet hardware behaved when it detected collisions among the packets being broadcast: only after explaining its strategy with lucid simplicity did he chuckle in mock embarrassment and say, “It’s called ‘binary exponential back-off’.” After spending enough time around Alan, one was never at a loss for a few appropriated words.

Once he returned home and announced that he was experiencing a "liquidity crisis"—the first time I'd heard the phrase; that was his prelude to a requesting a small loan. Ultimately of course, he returned the money with interest: at least when he gave it back, he said he had had an *interest* in returning it for some time.

Speaking of money management, DEC required its travelers to fill out vexatious expense-voucher forms. It was just too much trouble to keep precise track of every penny spent on a business trip, and too much of a strain on one's conscience to invent the data after the fact. So Alan devised the REVGP, the 'Random Expense Voucher Generating Program.' When fired up, it asked how much money you left with, how much you returned with, and what you had receipts for. Then it generated a suitably random assortment of expenses to cover that amount of money in that amount of time—consistent with company and IRS guidelines. When it proved hard to reach the desired total with food costs alone, the program might invoke the taxi-fare generator, the toll generator or the laundry generator. Years later, Alan chanced to overhear his *then* boss grumbling about the tedium of doing expenses. He said, "Here, try this." The boss expressed shock, and asked if it created believable numbers; Alan said, "You've been believing them from me for over a year now."

Alan was most generous with his time, and over the years, he willingly played the role of mentor to anyone who asked for help. Needless to say, he was in constant demand. Occasionally, he had to get feisty to protect himself from abuse. Once when a memo arrived from an unknown authority, demanding his presence at a seven o'clock meeting a few mornings hence, he wrote back saying, "To get me there at all will require permission from Ken Olsen; to get me there at seven o'clock will require permission from God."

He was always ready with a candid analysis of reality: as my flying miles piled up, he put my mind at rest by assuring me that there was no chance of running out of good luck; instead he said, every time I climbed on an airplane, I had a *new* fifty-fifty chance of surviving. He said that statistics, reduced to a population of one, were meaningless. But... he reminded me often that if I stopped traveling, I'd have to start working.

We frequently traveled together to give joint presentations. I have fond memories of one such occasion: we were at a castle by the name of 'Schloss Auel' in the Black Forest of Germany, training DEC's European salesforce on the latest member of the PDP-10 family; I happened to use the word "microseconds," then hesitated and said, "or is it milliseconds?" Alan piped up from the back of the room and said, "Well, it's milliseconds, but what's three orders of magnitude among friends?"

One of Alan's extracurricular roles at Digital was to preside over its ever-growing telephone system. He designed a 'tie-line' network which eventually linked all the DEC facilities worldwide—and he always knew all its secret access codes. Sometimes for the fun of it, or to test some recent improvement, he'd pick up the 'off-premises extension' we had at home, and dial through to Geneva say, and from there to London, thence to Sydney, on to Helsinki etc, etc... until finally he arrived back at some nearby office, where he'd request an outside line, and dial the other phone in our living-room. It would ring, and yes indeed, a 'hello' spoken into one phone would pop out of the adjacent one—*eventually*. If it didn't, then there was a fun new problem to solve.

Alan was a savvy judge of other people. He once wisely described another famous DEC engineer as "an idea source in need of an idea filter." I have vivid recollections of

watching TV with him during the Watergate scandal. President Nixon was holding forth and Alan said, “He’s lying.” I said, “Do you think so?” Alan said, “Absolutely, the guy’s a crook.” [You can guess what’s coming.] Soon thereafter, the president uttered his famous words, “I am not a crook”; we burst out laughing and wondered whether the apartment was bugged.

There is a mythical manuscript from which many people can quote, even though it doesn’t exist. It’s called the “Thoughts of Chairman Kotok.” Devotees of the myth were delighted, when Alan was actually *given* the title of ‘Associate Chairman’ here at W3C. I’ll leave it to John McNamara, who’ll be up in a few minutes, to give you a few of its more noteworthy nuggets.

Alan was notoriously fond of excellent but unpretentious eating places—even to the point of choosing to get married in a little French Restaurant called Chez Claude in Acton. Whenever anyone would ask, “What kind of restaurant would you like to eat in tonight?” his standard reply was, “Ethnic.” By that he meant a place where the chef was likely to know what he was doing. The first time I can remember seeing an obscenely large portion of food arrive on my plate, Alan was there to explain: he said, “The profit is proportional to the amount of food which leaves the kitchen, not the amount which gets eaten.”

Speaking of Alan’s marriage... Among the belongings I brought to our apartment was a large, church-style electric organ—vintage 1958 and full of vacuum tubes. [It still works: I refer to it as the Kotok memorial organ.] Alan was most eager to learn to play it. This became a subject of merriment, because until the moment he first tried, I had never seen him attempt anything he wasn’t *already* superbly good at; alas, as an organist he was

comically inept. So he engaged a music teacher, Judie Beck, who would later become his wife and the center of his entire universe. To paraphrase a quotation from the humorist, George Ade: "Judy came once a week to bridge the awful gap between Alan and J.S. Bach."

Alan's musical tastes were decidedly pre-eighteenth-century, as I found out one evening when Alan arrived home unexpectedly early. As I was listening to WCRB, Alan hurried in and snapped the sound system off. I asked, "Why did you do that?" He said, "Because he announcer just said the magic words: 'With the composer conducting'."

The last time I saw Alan and Judie together, we were dining at Ida's restaurant in Boston. They were reminiscing about a recent anniversary dinner they'd enjoyed there, and trying to remember just when it had been. Alan turned to Judie and asked, "What *is* our anniversary?" Judie looked at him cross-eyed, and Alan shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'm such a romantic." But as we know, he truly *was* a romantic: theirs was a wondrously satisfying marriage of twenty-eight years. He survived her by only seven months.

I'm not sure it's appropriate to verge upon matters quasi-religious in this setting, but I want to close with a quote from Mark Twain. He said, "I have never seen what to me seemed an atom of proof that there is a future life. And yet — I am strongly inclined to expect one." Those are my sentiments exactly—especially if I add that I'm too skeptical to believe in the *impossibility* of anything. So Alan and Judie... if you're paying attention to these proceedings, please know that there is no amount of praise or fond remembrance we could bring forth here, which would adequately *thank* you—for the enrichment you managed to bring to all of our lives. Thank you, thank you.