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Forum

In Memory of Fred Jablin: What Might Have Been and Still Might Be

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I begin my term as forum editor by honoring the memory of Fred Jablin, an early leader in the field of organizational communication. I am quite certain that Fred would like to be remembered less for the tragic circumstances of his death than for the considerable contribution of his early work and the promising new directions in which his work was headed. The *MCQ* editors had been discussing an appropriate recognition of Fred's contribution to the field that extended beyond the tribute made to him in Volume 19, Issue 1. Together, we decided on this forum as a fitting recognition.

I had come to campus to work on Monday, November 1, 2004, and had left my office briefly to join several colleagues for lunch. When I returned, I was stunned to find a voice mail message from Linda Putnam and an e-mail message marked *urgent* from Vernon Miller, both sharing the tragic news of Fred's death. Odd thoughts can pass through a person's mind at moments like this, and through mine appeared an image of Charles Redding (Fred's doctoral advisor and widely considered to be the "father" of the field of organizational communication) welcoming Fred in to the "other world," communicating something like, "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here yet."

I have a similar feeling as I compose this introduction for my initial forum paying tribute to Fred's academic work. We're not supposed to be doing this just yet. We were supposed to have had another 20 years or so to talk over ideas with Fred and to learn from new developments in his own thinking. But tragically, on the morning of October 30, Fred's life was brought to a sudden, inexplicable, and violent end. So here we gather, much sooner than we'd like, to honor the contribution of Fred's past work and to create space for the new directions in which his work was moving.

Fred was, perhaps, best known for his early work in the area of superior-subordinate communication (Jablin, 1979) and then his later work in organizational socialization and communication (Jablin, 2001). For at least a decade, his agenda-setting pieces on communicative issues in organizational assimilation inspired researchers working across postpositivist, interpretive, critical, and postmodernist paradigms, leading to one of the most well-developed and easily identifiable bodies of research in the field of organizational communication today (Putnam & Krone, 2006). Based on my own experience as one of Fred's early doctoral advisees and as a coauthor, whether we were conceptualizing and writing about multiple levels of analysis in organizational assimilation research, organizational communication across the life span, or taking an ecological systems approach to the study of communication and workplace relationships, Fred was a highly conscientious scholar and an exceedingly clear writer who made his ideas accessible to all. In part because of these qualities, his work has left a clear and distinct footprint in the field of organizational communication.

In the past decade, with his move from the University of Texas to the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond in Virginia, Fred devoted his attention more specifically to the contribution an organizational communication lens can bring to the interdisciplinary study of leadership. "Courage and Courageous Communication among Leaders and Followers in Groups, Organizations, and Communities" is a talk Fred delivered to the faculty and graduate students of the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies at Rutgers University about 6 months before his death. Shortly following his death, Vernon Miller traveled to Virginia to assist the Jepson School staff in sorting through all the books and papers in Fred's office and, in the process, located a copy of the text of Fred's talk. As far as any of us who had worked closely with Fred know, it was the last formal talk he gave, and we take it to be representative of the direction in which his work was headed. In it, he details the processes by which he came to appreciate a multidisciplinary approach to the study of leadership, how he became interested in the concepts of courage and courageous communication, and why he believes the relationships among them warrant further study. In this forum, we honor his ongoing development as a scholar and attempt to amplify his call for research.

As he concludes his introductory remarks and begins to introduce the primary focus of his talk, Fred pauses to confess that he is about to break one of his cardinal rules—that is, never to speak in public about something you are still in the early stages of conceptualizing and have not yet studied empirically. As a former doctoral advisee of Fred's, I was quite familiar with this particular rule and smiled to think that he had finally decided to bend it. Yes, Fred Jablin, the scholar, was far too conscientious to simply think out loud in public about the relationships among phenomena as complex as courage, leadership, and communication. We can only imagine that it even might have taken a little courage for him to do so! And for that, given the most tragic of circumstances, we can be grateful. Although we will not have the opportunity to question and discuss with him what have now become his final thoughts on leadership, perhaps we can read these ideas instead, as a timeless call, not only just to research but also to take seriously the need for courage and courageous communication across the multiple spheres of our lives.

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