

Søren Bisgaard

(1951-2009)

Universities create a place for talented people to do whatever they do best. Unlike many other complex enterprises, universities have a high tolerance for individuality, for idiosyncrasy, and for unanticipated creativity. To outsiders, this often appears anarchic, uncontrolled, purposeless, but we know the opposite is true. Universities succeed on the strength of the sometimes-unpredictable talent of individuals, and the university's friends and supporters recognize that creativity does not always follow a known path or produce predictable results. And so, we recruit into our midst an array of individuals whose commitment to teaching and research binds their widely diverse talents to the institution's purpose. The task of a great university is to attract and sustain the world's most creative and productive people. The addition of Søren Bisgaard and the recognition of his talents through the distinction of the Isenberg professorship provide a demonstration of how universities fulfill this mission.

On occasion, we try to capture the complex achievements, the unique personality, and the essential quality of someone as remarkable as Søren. Yet, even with the multiple perspectives so many have provided on his life and times here today, we may still feel that perhaps we've missed something significant, some critical dimension of performance or nuance of personality that would accurately capture our personal sense of his value. We can more easily capture Søren Bisgaard's role as a scholar and intellectual leader, as a powerful force in developing his field, and as a major contributor to the wider world of work beyond through his exceptional list of publications, awards, honors, and engagements. The intellectual achievement in this record leaves no doubt about his enduring professional significance. But while we celebrate these tokens of academic, professional accomplishment, we still seek a unifying theme, and perhaps a shorthand code that fixes Søren's presence permanently in our minds and hearts. As should be clear from our conversation today, we each find a somewhat different shorthand to symbolize the depth and permanence of his impact on our lives.

For those of us whose treasured time with Søren touched less on his elegant and sophisticated academic work and more on his personal friendship and institutional commitments, the qualities that seemed to define most clearly his unique approach to life and work clustered around the notions of principle and precision.

Principle served to identify Søren's recognition that we should always attempt to do things with an unwavering focus on doing them right. Adapt to circumstance and opportunity? To be sure. But compromise the principles on which the activity rests? Not likely.

Precision appears as a core driver of his work, expressed through the measurement and statistical calibration of cause and effect, action and reaction, quality and performance. Throughout his remarkable publication list and reflected in the many honors conferred by his colleagues worldwide, the pursuit of precision fascinated Søren. While mathematically complex and theoretically sophisticated, Søren was precise for a purpose. Precision for its own sake had virtue, but precision in the service of work and society, in the support of improved outcomes for business and industry, in the search for enhanced health and welfare, these purposes justified the application of elegant mathematical and statistical techniques to the ordinary work of our lives.

And here, of course, principle joined precision, for if a thing were worth doing, it needed to be done right; and to know that we do things right, we must measure them. The trick, as Søren taught us, is not so much the techniques of measurement, however important his contributions to this field, but the identification of what we should measure and for what purpose. How big, how fast, how efficient, how profitable, how productive, how fine--all these quantities offer an opportunity for measurement, for statistical quantification, for the application of ever more rigorous techniques, but without understanding why we need to know how big and fast, how efficient or productive, the exercise failed his test of utility.

Some, confused by his genial and charming persona, his kind and generous support of colleagues, students, and friends, imagined that his charm extended to a flexibility of principle. Not so. Søren loved us all, recognized our foibles and imperfections, tolerated our weakness, and encouraged our dreams, but he saw us clearly as the flawed individuals we are, appreciating us nonetheless for the life histories we represented. When it came time to do the work that mattered, however, Søren separated the personal from the professional. We might be charming, but we needed to do our work right, not for his benefit but for the benefit of the enterprise. While there was always room for personal empathy and compassion, these qualities could not fully compensate for a failure to pursue a high level of performance. In our imperfect world, such commitment to principle often caused confusion amongst those of us who failed to see the difference between Søren as friend and Søren as responsible for the work that must be done right.

If we counseled patience and forbearance in the management of people or organizations, he often looked puzzled, as if to say, “Don’t we want to do it right? Don't we want to use the best method to accomplish our objective? Why would we want to do less than what's required to bring our work to the highest level of performance?” We, of lesser stuff, would try to explain the complex calculus of interpersonal and political cost-benefit in our constantly messy societies, but the calculation of motivation, self-interest, historical preference, and institutionalized inefficiencies could sometimes defeat his elegant mathematics. Søren would look at us as if to say, “What are you thinking? We must do it right, and we should begin now.”

These are not the attitudes of the skillful academic politician or the perspectives of the astute manipulator of institutional interests, but they set for us a beacon of integrity and principle that

reminds us of what it takes to do it right. Perhaps we couldn't always achieve the clear principled and effective approach that drove Søren's engagement with the world, but in him we could always recognize what we should do, how we should do it, and the benefits to us all if we did our work within his principles.

As many of you know, Søren had a special relationship with the sea and its boats. We amateurs might try to talk about boats and the ocean with Søren, but it became instantly clear that few of us could really capture the essence of his connection or fully appreciate the depth of his expertise. Although he recognized our failings in this regard as simply the result of an inadequate upbringing, and never held it against us, his sometimes-cryptic comments about this or that element of sailing helped us understand his rare combination of principle and precision.

The principle required that no motor should defile a true sailing vessel, and the precision required the sailor to dock the boat properly without mechanical assistance. That, he told us, was something worth doing right.

Today, we fix Søren Bisgaard permanently in our memories, captured through the reminiscences of so many people whose lives and times he inspired and changed. Today we give thanks for the privilege of being part of such a remarkable life.

John V. Lombardi

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