

COMMENT

FROM THE EDITOR

Alphonse Chapanis, a founder of ergonomics, a branch of engineering that considers product and workplace design from the physical point of view of the actual user, died on Oct. 4 in Baltimore. He was 85. – The New York Times, October 15, 2002

In my last column, I described the fortuitous circumstances that brought one humble practitioner to his calling in this profession. Little did I imagine that I would be obliged to share the second chapter in my journey so closely on the heels of the first.

After shepherding me through degrees in human factors and ergonomics in California, my advisers indicated that my next stop should be in Baltimore to work with Al Chapanis, the man who brought *them* into the field, a living legend whom I ultimately came to affectionately describe as the godfather of human factors.

It would take a great many columns to describe what I learned from this man about commitment, compassion, and the professional implications of Johns Hopkins University's ode, *Veritas Vos Liberabit* – The truth will set you free. For me,

**Veritas Vos Liberabit –
The truth will set you free.**

“Veritas” is the understanding and wisdom that follows the dedicated and conscientious application of the tools of our trade; “Vos” are all of us as we struggle to make a better life for ourselves and our families, relying on the double-edged sword of technology to ease our burdens and make our struggles effective. “Liberabit” is the freedom from frustration and anxiety we achieve when that technology is designed with compassion and wisdom.

Seventeen years ago, former students of “The Professor” gathered at the HFES Annual Meeting in Baltimore to honor this man and roast him with fond stories. We cherished his commitment to his graduate students (he once chastised fellow faculty for throwing obstacles in the paths of their students: “We put our graduate school applicants through the wringer to select the ones most likely to succeed – once they’re here, it’s our job to make sure they do.”). We held him in awe for his commitment to truth (we would joke that our manuscript drafts would come back from him weighing 20% more from all the graphite he applied to the margins). And we laughed with him about his fun side (work days in our department were filled with challenge and striving, except for the delightfully surreal hour at lunchtime when we’d join The Professor to watch his favorite soap opera, “Ryan’s Hope”).

This year I looked forward to our return to Baltimore for the 46th Annual Meeting, anticipating visits to the old haunts, catching up with other former students and colleagues, and, most of all, once again shaking the hand of the man who gave me my professional inspiration and the confidence to pursue my dream. Sadly, the last was not to be. The man who was like a father to me in graduate school went into the hospital on the first day of our conference, and on the last day, he left us to pursue a different kind of freedom.

Al Chapanis taught us all to be passionate about making this world a better place to live in, and he gave us the tools, the confidence, the enthusiasm, and the determination to make it happen. We all mourn Al’s passing; I will never forget to celebrate his life.

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