

Remembrances of Dennis Ritchie

Tansy Blumer

Sent: Monday, August 13, 2012 2:22 PM

To: Bill Ritchie

Subject: Re: Dennis questions...

Hi Bill:

The radio days began possibly before you were even born. Lynn and I were in 6th grade when you were born, and I think we had become quite close and played at your house a lot during that year. Your family was especially interesting to me because there was always something intriguing going on at your house. Things like watching your father build a TV set! I had never seen a father do stuff like that, and I had never seen anyone who could actually read *Popular Science Magazine* and make stuff described in said magazine. I particularly enjoyed seeing your father and Dennis collaborating on such projects. I remember being at your house once when suddenly a voice emerged from the radio in the kitchen and was talking about Lynn and Tansy along with other radio patter. It was magic! Dennis had a really amusing patter when he was at the microphone, and he combined storytelling, joke telling, and specific orders to his listeners in his broadcasts – I remember him bossing John around a bit, reminding him to do various chores that he really hadn't been assigned – all part of the joke. These broadcasts emanated from the basement and I can remember running downstairs to see where "the voice" was coming from and seeing Dennis' head bent over a mike, script and reference materials in hand. Just like a DJ, but far more literate and very funny. I was smitten! No one I knew had such a fascinating brother. In those days, he came across as quite gregarious and very creative to his younger sister's starry-eyed friend. He was older and certainly wound up in his own world of discovery, but he always had time to fool around with various fun projects that we could enjoy with him. Everyone remembers the Halloween stuff, I'm sure. I think he first started doing the Halloween tricks in those early years. He used the little front door vestibule to set up a coffin draped in sheets and surrounded by lit candles (with Dennis inside as the corpse), so that when kids came to the door, that is what they were greeted with. I was a witness to the first year of this when he made plaster fingers and toes, decorated them to look like wounded and severed digits and put them in a bowl to be passed out to the children instead of candy. Your mother was always a bit worried about these antics and used to gently wonder out loud if this activity wasn't "a bit much" for the little kids who were getting scared. Dennis was polite and respectful, but I don't remember him stopping a project just because it was a bit over the top! It was so much fun to be a part of his constant stirring of the pot. He always had something going on, was always willing to let us be a part of it, and we were always fascinated by his knowledge of how to do such exotic stuff. Seems a bit tame now, I guess, but you have to remember, it was the bland old 1950's then.

I remember when I was older going to PLP to visit your family. Once or twice Dennis was the driver on the trip from Summit and John (at least once) was a passenger. Not sure why, but that's how I remember it. The road at a certain point had all sorts of arrows to indicate curves in the road, and Dennis would tease John that these were snake warnings. John was terrified at any mention of snakes, living or dead, and it wasn't hard to get a rise out of him by just mentioning them. The teasing wasn't cruel; in fact, it was kind of a ritualized entertainment in which we all had parts – John's role was to look terrified and ask repeatedly if they were really snake signs. At the end of the weekend, your father would drive back to Summit, and I would fall asleep in the front seat (we never got much sleep at PLP on those weekends).

I remember several times at PLP when Dennis and I were kind of ‘together’ for a square dance or a beer party. This was notable not so much because I considered it a date, but because when you were with Dennis, there was always something interesting to be learned. He would point out the locations of stars and constellations in the sky, for instance, or he would show me where the bats had a roost and point out where they were flying. I remember being on the lake in a rowboat with him and asking timidly if the swooping sounds and breezes in my face were because of the bats. Dennis assured me that they were “robins” that were “just curious” about who was in the boat. But, of course, I know they were bats!!!! I am a bit like John with snakes when it comes to bats, and Dennis realized this and kindly decided not to tease me about them.

When Dennis was on The Force and lived on The Street, he got into the best shape I have ever seen him in. It was a new way of seeing him, and I often think of how he looked that summer – tan, developed muscles, etc. I doubt that he was even aware of his newly acquired musculature, but it was interesting to see this physical side of him. He was very popular while on the Force and I think he may have won an award or two for his helpfulness and for his overall contribution to PLP.

As you know, Dennis wrote to me when I was in college. His letters were amusing and often ornately illustrated. Often he would suggest that I should come visit so I could meet his roommate. I suspected that this was a Dennis way of asking for a date. I would have gone if he had made it clear that it was to be a visit to him, but he was never direct enough to actually ask me and I was not bold enough to ask him if that is what he meant. In any case, I remember that I wrote back whenever I got a letter, and I tried to match his humor and detail with some of my own.

I remember one summer when Lynn and I were into writing movie reviews. Dennis suggested that we write reviews of the worst movies we had ever seen. I clearly remember writing a review of *Spartacus*. A particular feature of my review was describing that I had caught a detail in a scene where Spartacus or some other gladiator has a life and death fight with a lion and the camera allowed a brief view of the wheels that the lion was mounted on. It was pretty funny, and I was thrilled to have some grist for the humor mill. I remember that Dennis loved the review so much that he had Lynn call me up so we could all talk about it. Notice that he didn’t call me! I was, of course, thrilled that Dennis found my writing amusing. I think he later wrote a review of his own and sent it, but I do not have that any more. I might have sent it to someone else because I am certain it was very clever and very funny.

Bill, I would love it if I could actually remember some of the stuff he did on the radio, but my elderly memory is stuck mainly in visual mode. I remember how things looked and felt, but seldom remember actual words that were spoken. The letters had Dennis’s words and humor, but I was reluctant to even read what I did at the Dennis remembrance party at your house because I think of him as such a private person that I have hesitated to reveal his letters without his acquiescence.

Hope this helps. If I think of more, I will email or call.
Best, tansy

Followup:

I am assuming he did the radio show when he was in Junior High. I guess that would make him 13 or thereabouts.

I definitely remember Bob and Ray. They were terrific radio personalities. I suspect Dennis was riffing on their satiric skits about radio when he did his own stuff. I also remember that we listened to a repeat broadcast of the famous Orson Welles production of The War of the Worlds from 1938. We were all fascinated; especially Dennis.

Fri 11/19/2021

While re-reading all this, several scattered thoughts came to me that I did not include in the emails. The first of these is something I remembered him saying in a conversation with me. As you know, he never gratuitously offered up facts about himself, but this is a response I recall when I asked him about his becoming a computer scientist after doing PhD work in math. He said quite simply: "I wasn't a very good mathematician." I remember being shocked by that statement. On reflection, I remember wondering if he suffered from "Imposter Syndrome" vis-a-vis math. He told me that he had gone to a talk one evening at Harvard about the emerging field of Computer Science. Apparently it set off a lot of bells and whistles in his head and he told me that this was something "new" that he could imagine would be well worth his time and attention. He still had the doctoral thesis hanging over him at that time and I have the suspicion that he simply lost interest in it and became eager to follow what seemed to be a field better suited to him. I wonder if Imposter Syndrome made him reluctant to be judged in a field he felt he wasn't particularly talented in. Of course this is a ridiculous concern in his part, but he was only human and like so many of us might have suffered from some feelings of inadequacy.

Another detail I don't recall seeing written down was his devotion towards his family. As he wasn't particularly social and was not married, it seemed to me that he was always thrilled to see and be with his family during visits to the Poconos and, in the case of his only sister Lynn, delighted to travel to the UK to visit her and her two daughters and second husband Chris Potter. One time he was in a rehab facility to get intensive rehab for his broken leg and later for post surgery care for the cancer. I was visiting him when one of his colleagues (John someone who was at the time a volunteer EMT) told me that the only way he could crack DMR's shell with certainty was to ask him about his siblings. He would reply "like a proud father" about their accomplishments.

A third aspect of Dennis that I always noticed was a sort of silly humor that he was good at and enjoyed. The Halloween severed fingers were an early aspect of that. The next phase was definitely the appearance of Mad Magazine. He shared his copies with us and always enjoyed recalling parodies, running gags and quotes by characters such as Melvin Koznowski, Alfred E Newman and others. A favorite "inside joke" we repeated often to get him to pay attention to us was "What me worry?. It was always good for laughs and never seemed to get old. My relationship with Mad Magazine was forever stuck inaccurately in my mind as "Harvard Humor" and Dennis became a sort of living symbol for Harvard.

Tansy