Memories of my Father
Alison Marsden

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I’d like to begin by thanking you all for coming, and for your care and support for my father through a difficult time. I have known many of you since I was a small child, and many of you, especially his students, are like my extended family and academic siblings.

I’d like to acknowledge the members of Jerry’s family who are here today. His wife Barbara, and her parents Fiddi and Freddy; my brother Chris and his fiancée Lisa, my aunt Judy and her husband Bud, my cousin Cindy, my brother-in-law Andy, and my husband Mitchell.

I would like to also take this chance to say a special thank you to Wendy McKay, for whom the title assistant does not do justice, and for the many years of dedication, support, and loving care she gave to my dad and his students.

In addition, I would like to thank my father’s doctors for their dedicated care and support. My dad told me during one of his treatment visits, “Maybe in my next life I’ll be a biologist.” I told him “Dad, really you’d hate biology—it’s too messy!” But he replied “No no, we just haven’t yet discovered all of the underlying organizing principles, because it must be a beautiful subject.” We can all only hope that his wish comes to pass, because a young biologist Jerry, eagerly working in a lab somewhere, may be our best hope for a future cure to cancer. I have always felt lucky and exceedingly proud to be the daughter of Jerry Marsden. Not only was he a brilliant mathematician, but he was, as many of his colleagues also know, a kind and generous person with a gentle soul. As a wonderful and caring father,
he encouraged me in the most gentle of ways, always pointing out things to explore, and things to wonder about. In addition, it’s not every father who can read your Ph.D., thesis in computational fluid dynamics and actually make useful comments! He encouraged my early interest in math and science, not by pushing me towards success, but by allowing his own love and curiosity to rub off on me. As a young child, he would take me up to his study and make me hand draw math workbooks where we would do multiplication using pieces of toast and he would make me draw integrals, sum signs, and other esoteric symbols. Always a fan of weather, he would take me in the backyard to check our rain gauge, and then I would be assigned to do a coloring project to graph the weather of the day. While many children would consider this a form of torture, he did it with such enthusiasm that I loved every minute of it. That is, except the times when he made my brother and me file math papers is his office in Evans Hall! He usually finished our episodes with some sort of “lesson in life,” like “you should always do things while you’re thinking of them,” or “you have to make things nice and neat.” Then there was his favorite saying: “We’re grown ups, we can do what we want!”

My dad had a special way of wondering about and pondering the world. I have a particularly clear memory of him tucking me in to bed, at about age 5 or 6, and telling me “Alison, look at your hands. Do you ever stop to think—I’m alive!” This sort of thinking must have started at an early age because, as my aunt Judy reports, he used to spend hours tying and untiring his shoelaces as a young boy. While nowadays that would certainly get you diagnosed with something, he was likely planning the future trajectories of space orbits, or contemplating bifurcation theory. He took time to wonder about things, and to think about them deeply. From a 1961 article on his high school science fair project, “he spent over half an hour every night for five months counting cosmic rays with his homemade Geiger counter” I wonder what teenage boy today would have the patience to wait outside in the dark for hours at a time with a Geiger counter—for five months. In my schoolwork as a kid, my dad always encouraged me to take my time, never to rush, and to always make sure I understood things. I came to understand that this was the way he approached his work, and this became another important lesson in life, which I still try my best to emulate. In his eyes, it was never important to finish first, or be a prodigy, but rather to do your best, make a difference, and take good care. I have always admired his ability to maintain a calm outlook on life amid the hectic pace of life going on around us. I followed in his footsteps to become a professor because I saw how much he loved his work, his students, his teaching, and his colleagues. I thought “what other job could I have that I would enjoy as much as he enjoys his?” He used to tell me that if he had to pick an alternate career, it would either be as a weatherman or a truck driver, because this would give him lots of time to think. Fortuitously, my brother followed my dad’s dream to become a truck driver, and sends us wonderful written accounts and photos from the road.

On the lighter side, we had many fun times together, and though you may not realize it, he had a wicked sense of humor. He told silly bedtime stories that he would make up on the spot, always beginning with “One upon a time, far far away, long long ago” sung in a sing-songy voice. He used to name his cars things
like Morris and Morton. He loved science fiction, and was always making up contests—like making me guess our arrival time when driving to a destination, which I went along with until I realized that he was in control of the car. He and my brother would race each other, on skis, on bikes, or anything that could be turned into a contest. This once landed him with several broken ribs. He always knew the best strategy in Monopoly—you should buy the orange and yellow properties and build as quickly as possible. He and I used to play Frogger together on our first Mac 512 computer (of course we never had any other computers in our household!). You may not know that in college he did gymnastics, pole-vaulting, and squash! Later on, when I was a kid, he was a runner, cyclist, and backpacker. My dad was legendary in the family for being absentminded, and once left the car at the grocery store, walked home, and then got up the next morning and thought it was stolen. The times he got himself in trouble became known as the “Daddy blew it” stories. He once got in trouble at my elementary school for telling kids he had a monster in the trunk of his car. He once told my brother that the raisins in his raisin bran were flies. Once, in an attempt to play “Mr. Fix It” at home, he fell off a ladder flat on his back in the juniper bushes. As he lay there groaning, he said “But I'm an academic.” We all decided he was better off contributing to the world in other ways.

People have always asked me “Is it hard being the daughter of Jerry Marsden?” “Isn't it hard to stand in his shadow?” But I always felt the opposite, and I think any one of his students would agree with me. He didn't cast a shadow. Instead, we all existed in his warm glow of light, and it illuminated all around him who had the pleasure of sharing his company. I have always felt lucky to have him as a guide, mentor, role model, loving father, and a caring grandfather to my children, Eliza and Isaac.

In closing I would like to read a tribute to my dad that was written by one of his most recent Ph.D. students. Like my father, he was too modest to let me use his name, because he felt it would echo the sentiments of all of Jerry's students.

“The most significant and cherished influence over my studies has been the kind and gentle tutoring of Dr. Jerrold Marsden. I have learned during my travels to conferences worldwide, that when I introduce myself as a student of Dr. Marsden, I am immediately afforded friendship and respect far beyond that merited by my contributions or virtues of character. Indeed, I feel that regardless of my future achievements, my greatest career honor, and the honor that I can reflect upon with the warmest of memories, will be to say: ‘I was a student of Dr. Jerry Marsden.’ The opportunity to learn from Dr. Marsden (as well as from his amiable collaborators—a veritable School of Athens!) is personally exhilarating. Dr. Marsden's breadth of insight and contributions, and his willingness to share these with students, are rare in a scientific community where research is evermore narrowed, splintered, and hurried, and, in my opinion, place him in company with the great Fathers of our field. In my mind's eye, I can imagine in the world of spirits 'across the bar,' a salon frequented by Euler, Poincaré, Lie, Hamilton, Whittaker, Jacobi, and Cartan, where they are all seated around a table discussing and comparing, all the while leaving a chair open for Jerry Marsden.”
Unfortunately, the time has come all too soon for him to take that seat. Dad, we love you and will miss you always.

Alison Marsden, La Jolla, CA.