

Jordan Smoller

I'm Jordan Smoller and I've known John and Leda for more than 40 years. And for all that time, John-and-Leda has always been one word. I first met them at the end of my freshman year in college in 1980 when I was assigned to be part of Leda's sophomore tutorial group. Little did I know it would become one of the most important friendships and relationships of my life. For the next three years I had the unbelievable privilege of becoming their student and friend. We'd hang out together at their place late into the night—and sometimes John and Leda would be designing experiments on their laptop. Now, wait a minute, you're thinking—it's like 1982—nobody had a laptop, right? Wrong—somehow John had a laptop.

Anyway, we had dinner together with friends almost every night for three years in the dining hall of North House at Harvard. I don't think a day went by when I didn't see them. And it was magical. They taught me how to think, how to reason. They opened new worlds of thought to me. The idea that you could understand so much by starting from first principles—the idea of liberty as the foundation of a just human society and of course the idea that the human mind made sense if you understood that it was shaped by natural selection.

When I was telling my 14-year-old daughter Ava that I would be here sharing a brief memory of John, she asked me what he was like, What I remembered about him from those early days. And I said “you know, it was so long ago—sometimes its hard to remember the details and the day to day of it.” And I said for some reason what comes to mind is asteroids. Not the actual space rocks—the arcade game. North House had a small arcade room that had an asteroids machine—many of you are not old enough to remember that people went to arcades to play video games on these big hulking machines. Anyway I have these strong memories of playing asteroids with John in North House. And I told Ava that seemed like such a trivial memory considering who he was and what he and Leda meant to me. And she said, —“no, maybe it's not, there must be something really important about it if you remember it so clearly after 40 years.” And that caught me off guard. And then I realized she was right.

But what was it? And I realized it was such a purely happy memory—John and Leda and a couple of our friends would go there most nights after dinner or meet there late at night (which was John's peak hours because –I don't think I'm breaking news here but he was not a morning person). And we'd go there, our pockets full of quarters to feed the machine, and we'd spend hours playing and laughing and talking. And it so captured an aspect of John that I feel when I remember him—here was this intellectual giant who was envisioning new paradigms of understanding human behavior and one of the most cherished memories I have is how playful and funny and silly he could be and the joy of those hours of just laughing and playing together... And so in the midst of the loss I feel as I remember John, I know I will treasure those days, among many others, forever.