

In Memoriam:

Jack Yantis (August 4, 1948 – January 23, 2008)



Late in the fall of 2005 and not so long after the horrendous tragedy and devastation of Katrina, our friends from Louisiana pressed on and hosted the Third Annual Complexity Science and Educational Research conference on the lovely grounds of the Solomon Episcopal Conference Center in Robert, LA. As with every other CSER conference, many exciting and unexpected friendships, collaborations, and collegial opportunities emerged and sustained themselves in the spirit of curiosity, openness, care, and love for one another. One such wonderful friendship for me took shape on the evening of the first day of the conference.

I was standing at one end of the grand foyer of the conference center when I spied a curious creature from across the expansive room: I'm sure that's exactly what I thought as I stared at this man across the well-lit room where the conference attendees had gathered for drinks after the first keynote presentation. This "creature" was Jack Yantis.

I know I thought "How odd! Is he one of the conference participants? He doesn't look like someone who would attend a conference." But here stood a man dressed in cut-off fatigues, a t-shirt, Doc Martin boots, and a fiery orange mohawk haircut. As we have all heard before, "First impressions count." And, what an impression!

Jack, I soon learned, was a man with an indomitable, loving spirit and passion for life. This much was evident although our time together at the Louisiana conference proved to be rather short. Still, during those warm lovely days in the Louisiana countryside, Jack had not only enticed me to participate in early morning theatre games, stretches, meditation, and dance, he was so present and open to me that it felt like we had been friends for years and years. Soon after the conference, we were chatting by

phone every other week, catching up, engaging in shared readings of books and articles, presenting at other conferences, and laughing—there was much laughter.

Jack had spent much of his life as a dancer and a performer. He completed his BFA and MFA in dance performance from the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. Prior to this, he also attended the University of Oregon, Lawrence University, the London School of Contemporary Dance, the University of Utah, and Jacob's Pillow and Balletakademien in Stockholm. Throughout his life, he held a number of consultancy positions, school residencies, and choreographic appointments.

In time, especially throughout the 1990s, he moved into the classroom as a dance faculty member and instructor in a number of schools, academies, retreat centers, and local congregations. From 2001 onward, he worked in the teacher education program and MAED program at Antioch College in the area of arts education. In 2004, he also joined the faculty at City University, Bellevue, WA, as an adjunct instructor for the Creative Arts.

To be sure, Jack's passions were many and diverse—focused on the arts, movement, and generative conversations for learning contexts that could draw upon collective wisdom and the possibility of creative play for people of all ages and abilities. He was hopeful that the sacred could be returned to the everyday—be it in learning and teaching, working and playing in diverse communities, and helping others to attune to the delicious aliveness of it all.

Everybody who knew or even briefly met him would say that he had a fiery spirit. He was a person who would leave no stone unturned and, sometimes, no turn unstoned! I recall one moment in particular at the annual chaos theory conference in Baltimore, MA where a presenter was speaking about a research study on the chaotic movement of amateur dancers that, in the presenter's description of the dancers, sounded like stick figures in motion. And, Jack, antsy to offer his two cents worth, couldn't have been any more fired up by the ridiculous conclusions presented—"That's not dancing!" I'm sure that he would have sashayed down those steps to the front of the hall and showed the presenter what real dance look like!

At the 2007 CSER in Vancouver, Jack and I decided to do a presentation which we called "Playing with Ourselves". Naturally, we thought that the title was mildly amusing—well, really, it was hilarious, even if no one else thought so. (As I said, we did like to have a good laugh.) In any case, as we were mapping out some of the territory for our work the day before our presentation, we ended up butting heads. Of course, we got past it, but later I told him that I had learned something of great importance about our relationship. I summed it up as follows: Jack liked the possibility of the unbridled power of water. I (on occasion) liked to build up banks along the sides of rivers. I then pointed out that our work together, however, required both—the water and the banks needed each other. And, like any river/bank, our relationship continued to evolve and emerge in much the same way.

In the last few months of Jack's life, he had been thinking of doing many things with his life, including going back to school to do doctoral studies. Naturally, his studies would have had some complexity connection. I think that Jack knew complexity

because, as Mary Catherine Bateson would say, Jack “knew it with his life.” He did everything with gusto and brought great life to everything he did. He also knew how to connect with people, including many of us at the CSER meetings, in those lovely quiet moments of getting to know a new friend. Somewhere out there, I am sure, Jack is dancing his butt off—perhaps down by a rushing river! To be sure, this beautiful “creature” is missed by his many friends.

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