

JLH: In memoriam
HSS 2024 Matthias Dörries

Let me start with an immodest claim: I may be one of the few people, who brought John to his knees.

The proof? Well, it is here with this photograph: We are back in 1990, when John was still vice-chancellor in Berkeley. Those familiar with OHST will recognize John's office with its brownish/yellowish/grey-whitish colors, to which John, himself, like a chameleon, had adapted perfectly.

You can also see my younger self, a post-doc at the time. I had an earthshaking start in the Bay Area, having landed in San Francisco on the 17th of October, 1989, just an hour before the major 6.9 earthquake struck. However, the warm and open welcome at OHST by John soon made me feel more than comfortable in Berkeley. I underwent a challenging crash course in the history of science, profiting immensely from the stimulating and exciting intellectual atmosphere at OHST and beyond. Over the years John's mentorship turned into a lasting friendship. One memorable moment was the 19th of October, 1991, when I was with John at his house on Alvarado Rd when the immense fire wall came rolling down the Berkeley hills. Fortunately, the house survived the fire, and, with it, John's library, his archive, and one million paper slips full of John's minute scribbles. One wonders what direction John's historical production would have taken without all that material, which he had collected over thirty years?

Back to the photograph. You see on the floor a significant number of photocopies. What were we doing? Well, we were selecting pictures for a chapter on 18th-century physics and astronomy in a well-funded Italian publication. John had jumped on the unique occasion to include an unusual number of high-quality pictures, almost 150 in total, many of them in color.

Was this the only occasion that brought John to his knees? No! Here again a photo serves as proof: We are in June 2012, in Strasbourg. The photo shows John together with Abigail Lustig, one of his doctoral students and incidentally my wife, exploring our kids' CUBORO marble run system. As you can see, John is still fully in the spirit of his recently published Galileo book, studying the marble's movement on an inclined plane.

Why have I chosen these two pictures?

Well, the first photograph reminds us that John not only excelled as a writer, but also systematically strived to include numerous illustrations, prints, paintings and photographs in his publications. He even made a painting the centerpiece of one of his late publications. The second photograph reminds us of John's fondness for the tangible side of science, experiments and instruments, ranging from astrolabes, Galileo's telescope, and meridian lines in churches, to Coulomb's torsion balance and Lawrence's cyclotron.

So, to conclude, what brought John to his knees? Well, the history of science, which served as a never-ending source for his endless curiosity.