

Lament for Douglas  
By Richard Dawkins  
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This is not an obituary, there'll be time enough for them. It is not a tribute, not a considered assessment of a brilliant life, not a eulogy. It is a keening lament, written too soon to be balanced, too soon to be carefully thought through. Douglas, you cannot be dead.

A sunny Saturday morning in May, ten past seven, shuffle out of bed, log in to e-mail as usual. The usual blue bold headings drop into place, mostly junk, some expected, and my gaze absently follows them down the page. The name Douglas Adams catches my eye and I smile. That one, at least, will be good for a laugh. Then I do the classic double-take, back up the screen. What did that heading actually say? Douglas Adams died of a heart attack a few hours ago. Then that other cliché, the words swelling before my eyes. It must be part of the joke. It must be some other Douglas Adams. This is too ridiculous to be true. I must still be asleep. I open the message, from a well-known German software designer. It is no joke, I am fully awake. And it is the right – or rather the wrong – Douglas Adams. A sudden heart attack, in the gym in Santa Barbara. “Man, man, man, man oh man,” the message concludes,

Man indeed, what a man. A giant of a man, surely nearer seven foot than six, broad-shouldered, and he did not stoop like some very tall men who feel uncomfortable with their height. But nor did he swagger with the macho assertiveness that can be intimidating in a big man. He neither apologised for his height, nor flaunted it. It was part of the joke against himself.

One of the great wits of our age, his sophisticated humour was founded in a deep, amalgamated knowledge of literature and science, two of my great loves. And he introduced me to my wife – at his fortieth birthday party. He was exactly her age, they had worked together on Dr Who. Should I tell her now, or let her sleep a bit longer before shattering her day? He initiated our togetherness and was a recurrently important part of it. I must tell her now.

Douglas and I met because I sent him an unsolicited fan letter – I think it is the only time I have ever written one. I had adored *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Then I read Dirk Gently's *Holistic Detective Agency*. As soon as I finished it I turned back to page one and read it straight through again – the only I time I have ever done that, and I wrote to tell him so. He replied that he was a fan of my books, and he invited me to his house in London. I have seldom met a more congenial spirit. Obviously I knew he would be funny. What I didn't know was how deeply read he was in science. I should have guessed, for you can't understand many of the jokes in *Hitchhiker* if you don't know a lot of advanced science. And in modern electronic technology he was a real expert. We talked science a lot, in private, and even in public at literary festivals and on the wireless or television. And he became my guru on all technical problems. Rather than struggle with some ill-written and incomprehensible manual in Pacific Rim English, I would fire off an e-mail to Douglas. He would reply, often within minutes, whether in London or Santa Barbara, or some hotel room anywhere in the world. Unlike most staffers of professional help lines, Douglas understood exactly my problem, knew exactly why it was troubling me, and always had the solution ready, lucidly and amusingly explained. Our frequent e-mail exchanges brimmed with literary and scientific jokes and affectionately sardonic little asides. His technophilia shone through, but so did his rich sense of the absurd. The whole world was one big Monty Python sketch, and the follies of humanity are as comic in the world's silicon valleys as anywhere else.

He laughed at himself with equal good humour. At, for example, his epic bouts of writer's block (“I love deadlines. I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by”) when, according to legend, his publisher and book agent would literally lock him in a hotel room, with no telephone, and nothing to do but write, releasing him only for supervised walks. If his enthusiasm ran away with him and he advanced a biological theory too eccentric for my professional scepticism to let pass, his mien at my dismissal of it would always be more humorously self-mocking than genuinely crestfallen. And

he would have another go.

He laughed at his own jokes, which good comedians are supposed not to, but he did it with such charm that the jokes became even funnier. He was gently able to poke fun without wounding, and it would be aimed not at individuals but at their absurd ideas. To illustrate the vain conceit that the universe must be somehow pre-ordained for us, because we are so well-suited to live in it, he mimed a wonderfully funny imitation of a puddle of water, fitting itself snugly into a depression in the ground, the depression uncannily being exactly the same shape as the puddle. Or there's this parable, which he told with huge enjoyment, whose moral leaps out with no further explanation. A man didn't understand how televisions work, and was convinced that there must be lots of little men inside the box. manipulating images at high speed. An engineer explained to him about high frequency modulations of the electromagnetic spectrum, about transmitters and receivers, about amplifiers and cathode ray tubes, about scan lines moving across and down a phosphorescent screen. The man listened to the engineer with careful attention, nodding his head at every step of the argument. At the end he pronounced himself satisfied. He really did now understand how televisions work. "But I expect there are just a few little men in there, aren't there?"

Science has lost a friend, literature has lost a luminary, the mountain gorilla and the black rhino have lost a gallant defender (he once climbed Kilimanjaro in a rhino suit to raise money to fight the cretinous trade in rhino horn), Apple Computer has lost its most eloquent apologist. And I have lost an irreplaceable intellectual companion and one of the kindest and funniest men I ever met. I officially received a happy piece of news yesterday, which would have delighted him. I wasn't allowed to tell anyone during the weeks I have secretly known about it, and now that I am allowed to it is too late.

The sun is shining, life must go on, seize the day and all those clichés. We shall plant a tree this very day: a Douglas Fir, tall, upright, evergreen. It is the wrong time of year, but we'll give it our best shot. Off to the arboretum.

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