In memory of my beloved father, Alan S. Zuckerman

Delivered at memorial event sponsored by the Brown Political Science Department

January 5, 2010

I’d like to begin by thanking Jim Morone, Patti Gardner, the Brown Political Science department, and the larger Brown community for organizing today’s event. It means so much to me, my mother Roberta, my brother Greg, my sister Shara, and our children, that my father was so beloved and appreciated that you would take time out of your schedules to organize and to participate in this event today. We know that you do this for you; but you should also know how much it means to us.

I also want to thank the wider set of colleagues and students, some of whom were able to make it today despite great distance and at significant personal hardship. I know that you are here due to your own relationships with my father, but you should know how much it means to us as well.

[Read letter from Jack Neusner]

I’d like to say a few words of my own. This is both difficult and very easy.

It’s difficult for obvious reasons. But it’s easy because if there is one topic that is easy for me to talk about, it is my father’s influence on my career. In fact, I simply cannot remember a time when my future did not include my becoming a social scientist. And I can point to specific instances when my father’s guidance was crucial for my career. Many of you have been doing social science for a long time. But how many of you can say that, when they were at freshman orientation, their father picked out a name in the freshman course catalogue, said “Oh, this guy
does interesting work on such and such—in this case, social networks”—and then that became the specific type of work that I did, with that guy becoming my dissertation advisor? And my father was with me every step of the way, including giving me invaluable advice on how to manage very delicate situations with that same dissertation advisor years later.

Now when one encounters a biography like mine, it is tempting to interpret this as a case where the father steered the child into his profession, and perhaps to imagine something more coercive than “steering.” That is, one might interpret this as a situation where the son had “little choice.” I am sometimes guilty of that suggestion myself. When people ask me why I became a sociologist, my routine is always to begin the same way: “well, my father was a political scientist.” I do this in part to snarkily push back against the idiom with which we account for our career as a series of choices, and to suggest that in fact constraint plays more of a role than we would like to admit. Clearly, such constraints drive much of the action. That being said, there was certainly nothing coercive about any steering that took place in my case. Rather, “doing social science”—to paraphrase the title of a book by my father that was based on PS 50, and which I had the great pleasure of taking with him one summer—was presented as a salient option, one which very few other kids are fortunate to be exposed to. And then the question is why I in fact chose it, and why—especially as I grew and other options became salient as well—I became so reinforced in my choice.

It is again easy to answer that question: my father enacted a vision of the work and life of a scientist, and social scientist in particular, that was compelling and inspiring. (In fact, another idiomatic imperative in our culture is that you can’t say that you followed in the footsteps of your parent because you admired them and saw them as a model; but in the current setting, I can
finally admit this). I believe that this is why we are here today. Now the term social scientist is sometimes invoked ironically, as if it is something of an oxymoron. And my father could laugh at the pretensions of social scientists as heartily as anyone. However, if there is anyone who represented a vision of what social science can be, and what a social scientist should be, it was my father. This is true in two respects.

First, my father presented a vision of the social scientist who, despite recognizing the unique features of the subject matter—our matter can learn and adapt to the scientist’s theory about it!—and despite the way that the scientific enterprise can be corrupted, can make advances in human understanding based on disciplined inquiry. My father rightly had no patience for those who shrank way from the task of developing falsifiable models of social and political processes. At the same time, my father was not one to suffer from physics-envy. He worried about those social scientific enterprises that were too formal and too simplistic and which did not have a good sense of history or the complexity of human behavior. He had an unerring eye for the possibilities and limitations of the social scientific enterprise.

Second, and I’ll conclude with this, I think we can understand the vision of social scientist that my father represented, in terms of the four norms that govern science, as argued by Robert K. Merton. They are:

- **Organized Skepticism** - all ideas must be tested and are subject to rigorous, structured community scrutiny.
- **Universalism** - according to which claims to truth are evaluated in terms of universal or impersonal criteria, and not based on the identity of the scientist;
- **Disinterestedness** - according to which scientists are rewarded for acting in ways that outwardly appear to be selfless; i.e., citing others.

- **Communism** - the common ownership of scientific discoveries, according to which scientists give up intellectual property rights.

Since Merton, it became fashionable in sociology of science to point out how these norms are often not observed, and that science was no more than ideology and/or careerist self-interest backed by power. And my father could be as cynical about people and institutions as anyone. However, the enduring vision that my father embodied represents a powerful antidote to such cynics. Sure, these norms are often violated. But the scientific enterprise becomes a source of inspiration to us all when, perhaps in rare cases, these norms are actually observed.

And so, I close by asking you, who knew my father so well, in the various roles he filled as a social scientist, who embodied these norms better than my father did?

My father was the sharpest critic you could find anywhere, and was highly committed to the integrity and productivity of our institutions of organized skepticism, such as peer review and the promotion and review process. His participation in those processes was always guided by meritocratic ideals as he paid no attention to the social demographics of the author of the work. Similarly, my father embodied disinterestedness and communalism. Every scholar can talk a blue streak about their own work. My father was passionate about other people’s work—whether it was Huckfeldt or Katz and Lazarsfeld on networks, Ernest Gellner on social history, or Paul Meehl on the limits of scientific reasoning. And, as exemplified in Doing Political Science and his edited volumes on comparative politics, my father had a field orientation.

Indeed, most of the conversations I will miss so much had little to do with his work or my work,
but with engaging with others’ ideas that we found interesting, and essentially enjoyed play with.

I think that that this playfulness, which is both enjoyable and perhaps the key ingredient in being a creative scientist, is only achievable only when one relaxes one’s careerism and thinks of oneself as part of a larger community of work, and is open any and all influence.

So yes, these norms may be observed only in the breach. But my father not only observed them, but in his passionate embrace of them, he showed us all why doing social science can be a noble, productive and, yes, fun pursuit. And so, while it pains me that I will no longer be able to have those conversations with my father, I know that his model and the very work he did in building social science will forever represent shoulders that we all stand on.