

“In Loving Memory of Richard L. Howey”
Bill Devlin

I was blessed to be a student and, subsequently, a friend of Richard L. Howey when I attended the master’s program at the University of Wyoming in 1999. Richard was a brilliant professor of philosophy. To borrow from his own comments regarding his mentor in philosophy, O.K. Bouwsma, I was fortunate to experience “the joy and terror of studying” under Richard. The joy of studying under Richard “derived from the excitement of dealing with a mind constantly in movement, constantly probing.” Meanwhile, the terror “arose from the fear that one was not well-prepared enough and not quick-minded enough” to keep pace with his brilliant momentum and movements. As a professor of philosophy, Richard was an artist. In his lectures, he danced across the continental-analytic divide by highlighting the intersections between Frege and Husserl, and Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Ever the Renaissance man, in a single lecture he would create a symphony of ideas drawn from Greek tragedies, ancient biology, existential parables, classical music, and contemporary microbiology. Richard was adored by his students, both undergraduate and graduate alike. Many students enrolled in his courses, not because they were drawn towards the topics of continental philosophy (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre be damned!), but because they were drawn to him. For his seminars in Hoyt Hall, it was imperative to arrive early to get a “front seat” at the conference table to avoid having to sit on the outside row of chairs against the walls.

Still, to those students unfamiliar with Richard, he may appear solemn, intimidating, and even menacing. I occasionally had conversations with students at the University who reflected, “I just don’t know how to interpret him” or “I think he doesn’t like me.” While it was certainly possible (maybe probable) that he didn’t care for those specific students, it was also possible some students misinterpreted him. Sometime after I graduated from UW, a descriptor Richard and I bantered about for one another (and a few other friends) was “joyful cynics.” We agreed that, in some sense, we held a distrust of other people’s purported integrity and instead pessimistically recognized other people’s actions motivated by self-interest. Nevertheless, we found humor and comforting joy in adopting this cynical view. Allow me to begin with the “joyful” part of Richard’s outlook (I’ll get to the cynical part later). Here, I cannot help but associate Richard with the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who writes “I should only believe in a God that would know how to dance. And when I saw my devil, I found him serious, thorough, profound, solemn: he was the spirit of gravity - through him all things fall. Not by wrath, but by laughter do we slay. Come, let us slay the spirit of gravity!” Richard embodied this idea—the spirit of gravity was his devil and the path towards overcoming it was to kill it with laughter. He invited us to laugh with him. Whether it was channeling the humor of W.C. Fields, Henny Youngman, Mel Brooks, Winston Churchill, or Steven Wright, Dr. Howey—our existential physician—served laughter as the elixir to overcome the heartaches of life.

We see such joyous frivolity in his publications. We readers of Micscape may recall his article “A Micro-April Fools’ Month” (2010) or his many “lectures” and “letters” from “Mrs. Malaprop” (those unfamiliar may start with his 2012 article, “Mrs. Malaprop Discovers Natural History”). Some readers may be familiar with his recounting of being a schoolboy in 5th grade dipping his classmate’s braid in his inkwell (“Hirsute Reflections: Part 1” (2013)). One of my favorite articles by Richard is “Questions To Ask A Creationist” (2007). Through pragmatic incisiveness,

he encapsulates the absurdity of literal interpretations of the Bible and the great flood. From issues of housing 300 genera of dinosaurs, to concerns about waste disposal, to epistemic issues with Noah's cataloguing system, to the questionable immune system of Noah and his family—Richard dissects the ark myth with such playful charm and analytic precision. I've used this article in some of my courses, to the delight of many and horror of some.

Alternatively, as the Don Rickles of academia, Richard's humor could hit harshly with pinpoint accuracy. In his article, "Author Rant About the Price of Books" (2008), he refers to New Jersey as "the Garbage State" before correcting himself, "oh, sorry, that's the Garden State." This throwaway line—meant to add levity to a serious concern about book prices, cognitive biases, and price manipulation—turned out to be offensive to some. As Richard recounted to me one day, a reader contacted him to convey how insulted they were by his comments about the Garden State. Though I am too demure to make such accusations about my home state in public, I reassured him that as both a New-Jersey native and former garbage collector, his comment was accurate. We chuckled like two schoolboys near an inkwell.

Nietzsche further suggests that a true educator of philosophy is one who serves as an example of their philosophy in life. Richard was a true educator of philosophy, as he was not only a master of seminars, but was also one who demonstrated valuable philosophical lessons and virtues by exercising them. Existentially, Richard defined his character and cultivated meaning through his actions and way of life. Here are several lessons and virtues we can glean from Richard as a true educator.

Wonder

As Richard intimates in his article, "Magnificent Silence: Some Reflections" (2009), ancient Greek philosophers shared the view that philosophy begins with a sense of "*thauma*—wonder, astonishment, amazement." The philosopher marvels at the world above and the world within. There is a mystery as to the origins and causal mechanisms behind phenomena, and the philosopher yearns to discover, understand, and explain them. As Richard suggests, this sense of *thauma* underlies microscopy as well. Quoting Einstein, he relays "[t]he most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed." Both the philosopher and the microscopist approach nature and the world around us with awe as both experience the mysterious. Likewise, in his "10,000 Reasons Why You Should Have a Microscope", Richard tells us that the #1 reason you should have a microscope is that (sorry, Richard, spoiler alert!): "Microscopes give us access to realms of wonder in the world around us that, because of their size, remain largely hidden." The mysterious and awe-inspiring microscopic world was unknown to humanity prior to the 17th century. And though Aristotle shared his wonder in his studies of the sea urchin, I find it fascinating how he would have considered the world witnessed through even a starter stereoscope. Perhaps, like Richard, he would have tabled writing purely abstract philosophy in favor of analyzing the little creatures of the sea.

Richard embodied this sense of marvel and intrigue as he exuded a fascination with the microscopic world. For sixteen years, I taught as a summer instructor at the University of Wyoming. During those summers, I'd visit Richard and his wife, Adri, on a weekly (sometimes

daily) basis. There, I enjoyed experiencing a point he made in his article from last year, “A Child’s Garden of Micro-Wonders” (2022): he was “still a child in some respects” given his “boundless curiosity.” When I visited him during the mornings or afternoons, he’d greet me at the side door and immediately take me upstairs to his lab to show me new “critters” discovered in one of his recent collections of pond scum from one of the lakes near Laramie. On some occasions, I’d be fortunate to join him on such excursions. Our ritual remains vivid and meaningful to me. On Saturday, we’d head off together to the prairie lakes to collect samples in the morning. While I’d leave in the afternoon to grade papers, Richard would satiate his curiosity by exploring and analyzing our collections. When I visited him the following day, he’d once again exude the excitement of a child on Christmas morning, eager for me to see the specimens we had collected the day before. Such “boundless curiosity” about the microscopic world was so deeply engrained in Richard’s character that his vacationing or nomadic friends knew that we should never purchase a souvenir as a gift for him on our travels. Instead, whether it was a beach, a pond, a lake, a creek, or any natural habitat for protozoa, algae, and bacteria—we knew the best gift was to send him a collected sample from our adventures.

Passion

But Richard not only embodied this sense of wonder, he also fervently shared it with others through his passion in both philosophy and microscopy. I had the honor of serving as his teaching fellow during my final year at the graduate program at UW. As a lecturer, he was not just concerned with introducing philosophical ideas, theories, and arguments. No, Richard was equally devoted to sharing his passion for philosophy. For Richard, philosophy was more art than methodology. So, too, teaching philosophy is akin to creating a work of art. Leo Tolstoy writes that art is essentially a “contagion of feeling.” The true artist both expresses and evokes emotion. Through the work of art, the artist infects his audience with the feelings he, himself, experiences. Richard was a true artist as professor. His passion was infectious. With his classroom as his canvas and philosophy as his paint, he constructed sublime works of art. His performances were inspirational, especially to his proteges. To this day, my own lectures on Søren Kierkegaard are constructed centrally from Richard’s style and design. I’ve witnessed other proteges of Richard channeling his Kierkegaard in their lectures as well.

Furthermore, Richard was driven to deliver each lecture perfectly. Ever the perfectionist, he would lament any self-perceived failure to connect with his students. Sometimes, upon exiting the classroom after lecture, he would pause with his fingers pressed against his forehead and wonder aloud, “What did I do wrong?” Even when his lectures were marvelous, he second-guessed his performance. Here, Richard embodied the idea of the Zen monk, Shunryū Suzuki who wrote, “Everything is perfect. However, there is much room for improvement.” Richard concentrated on ensuring his students could share his passion for his philosophy. At the same time, his immediate response to such lectures reveals another virtue: he allowed himself to be vulnerable with his proteges. This resonated with me as an existential pedagogical technique, as he was able to demonstrate his passion and indefatigable commitment towards creating electrifying lectures that generate the spark of philosophical reflection in his students.

Richard’s passion for philosophy was perhaps matched only by his passion for microscopy. He had a tireless devotion towards writing in the field. In his home, one could encounter stacks of spiral bound notebooks with hand-written drafts of Micscape articles. Echoing Bouwsma,

Richard charmingly referred to these drafts as his “scribbles.” These stacks adorned his house like decorations—in his study, his lab, and elsewhere. When I’d visit around lunchtime, Richard would be in the kitchen scribbling in his notebook. Most of the time, he had completed articles for *Micscape* months in advance so that he always had future publications ready to go. When I was completing a Ph.D. program in Boston, my professors suggested this would be the most intense amount of time I would put into research and writing. I always wondered how Richard didn’t get that memo! Not that he would have ever taken such an ordinance seriously. Kierkegaard emphasizes that a meaningful life involves kindling and living by the passions that define who you are. Clearly, when Richard was seven years old and purchased his first microscope (a 1913 Bausch and Lomb with a 10x ocular), he kindled one of his lifetime passions.

Modesty

Another of Richard’s remarkable lessons and virtues was his modesty. Though he had boundless passion and the brilliance of a Renaissance man, he embodied the epistemic humility of Socratic wisdom. Twenty years ago, when I excitedly told him that I tracked down and purchased a copy of his out-of-print book, *Heidegger and Jaspers on Nietzsche* (kids, Amazon was still in its infancy stage then, so I was so proud of myself for acquiring it), he light-heartedly replied, “Oh my. Why did you buy such drivel?” Even after studying and practicing microscopy for nearly eighty years, he still referred to himself as an “amateur” or “novice.”

Though he did not suffer fools gladly, Richard still suffered them with humility. Well, most of them. He had absolutely no tolerance for the arrogant ones. While I could use many others as an example here, I’ll follow Richard’s modesty (and avoid a defamation case) by using myself instead. The UW graduate program in philosophy had a policy that graduate students devote their last semester to completing and defending their master’s thesis. Students were not to enroll in any courses for credit. During the spring of 01’ a fellow graduate friend and I began our final semester in the program. Richard affectionately referred to us as “Heckle and Jeckle” (though on the day of this story, he may as well had referred to us as two impetuous hooligans). Jeckle and I loved Richard and his courses. When we learned that he was offering a seminar on Kierkegaard, we immediately agreed we must audit the course. We attended the first meeting of the seminar that semester, hoping Richard would permit us to sit in. While he certainly would have allowed us, our approach to seeking this charitable gesture was audaciously backwards. We brashly walked in minutes late, giggling, and seemingly looking down upon the lowly undergraduates and ‘first-timers’ in the graduate program. With the hubris of Icarus, we brazenly presumed that, given our status as upper-level members of the program and fans of Richard, he would certainly let us in *and* allow us to come and go as we please! But this was one episode where the two magpies did not win the day by flouting the rules. Richard sternly and loudly asked why we were there. When Jeckle responded, “Um...we’re wondering...if we could...audit this course,” Richard asked if we were committed to attend *every* class, promise to not miss a single meeting, *and* complete all graded assignments both written and oral. After we stumbled and mumbled through our answers of “no” and “I don’t think so”, Richard banished us from the seminar, retorting, “Then get out. And don’t return to this seminar.” Jeckle left first as I sheepishly apologized and slowly exited the seminar room, utterly embarrassed—not by Richard’s comments and sentence of exile, but by the fact that I insulted my mentor.

But just as he was intolerant of arrogance, so too was Richard distinctly sensitive towards the feelings of those he cared for deeply. Years later, this class-audit debacle innocently came up during one of our summer evening get togethers. While I laughed aloud and reiterated my apologies for my then foolish and brazen irreverence, Richard carefully dissected and explained his decision to deny our request to attend the seminar. In one sense, he wanted me to understand his justification (which was clearly and reasonably to set a precedent for enrolled students). More importantly, he was still genuinely and deeply concerned that I was hurt by the rejection. Such sensitivity was a mark of Richard's character and, I think, a strikingly admirable characteristic that many may have missed (including those students that couldn't figure him out). Mindful of the first noble truth of Buddhism, Richard recognized the centrality of suffering in human existence. But further, embodying David Hume's emphasis upon sympathy as the grounding for natural human virtues, he empathized with other's suffering and remained acutely sensitive towards their feelings and well-being.

Cynicism Optimism

This brings me to my last point about Richard—he and I were only half-right about being joyful cynics. Richard was joyful, yes. But as you've probably noticed by now in this memorial, he was not a cynic. Quite the contrary, Richard had an intrinsic faith, or maybe it's best to say hope, in the integrity of others. As his prefatory remarks in his Mrs. Malaprop articles suggest, he demonstrates a "spirit of foolish optimism". But I think it's fair to substitute "foolish" in this spirit with "hopeful." Let Nietzsche have active nihilism. Let Camus have absurd freedom. Howey flourished with hopeful optimism (my word, I can imagine the Rickles-esque zingers he'd aim at me for writing that! But I stand by it).

Even during our conversations this past August, Richard continued to share his optimism as an educator. As professors (and the world) find themselves scrambling to properly respond to generative AI, I shared with him my reservations and concerns about an increase in academic cheating. At that time, I focused my attention on formulating exam questions that would be immune to generative AI answers, thereby ensnaring would-be cheaters in a trap of AI distractors.

Sympathizing with my plight, Richard relayed his experiences and tests with ChatGPT and pointed out numerous inaccuracies it generated in philosophy. But, even after our conversation closed, Richard passionately and enthusiastically continued to focus on this issue as if to unravel the mystery of the best possible solution. True to his optimism, he emailed me within days to offer a creative strategy which involves nurturing in the students an awareness of both the limitations of AI and the rewards of critical thinking and self-reflection. Rather than cynically focusing on catching potential cheaters in the act, he suggested an assignment where students utilize their knowledge of course material as they attempt to trick generative AI by formulating questions that could lead to inaccurate answers. Students would share these answers with classmates and the instructor through in-class workshops where participants would analyze the types of errors in the AI generated response.

Richard's strategy is premised on the belief in the integrity of the students and that a true educator can cultivate virtues in their students through ingenuity, guidance, and practice. Even with his advice here, I find that Richard, as an educator (both to me and, by extension, to my

students), exhibited the values of wonder, passion, modesty, and optimism. Likewise, his strategy suggests he was a microscopist at heart: essentially, his solution calls for young minds to go out, collect samples, analyze and study their collections, organize their data, and draw conclusions accordingly.

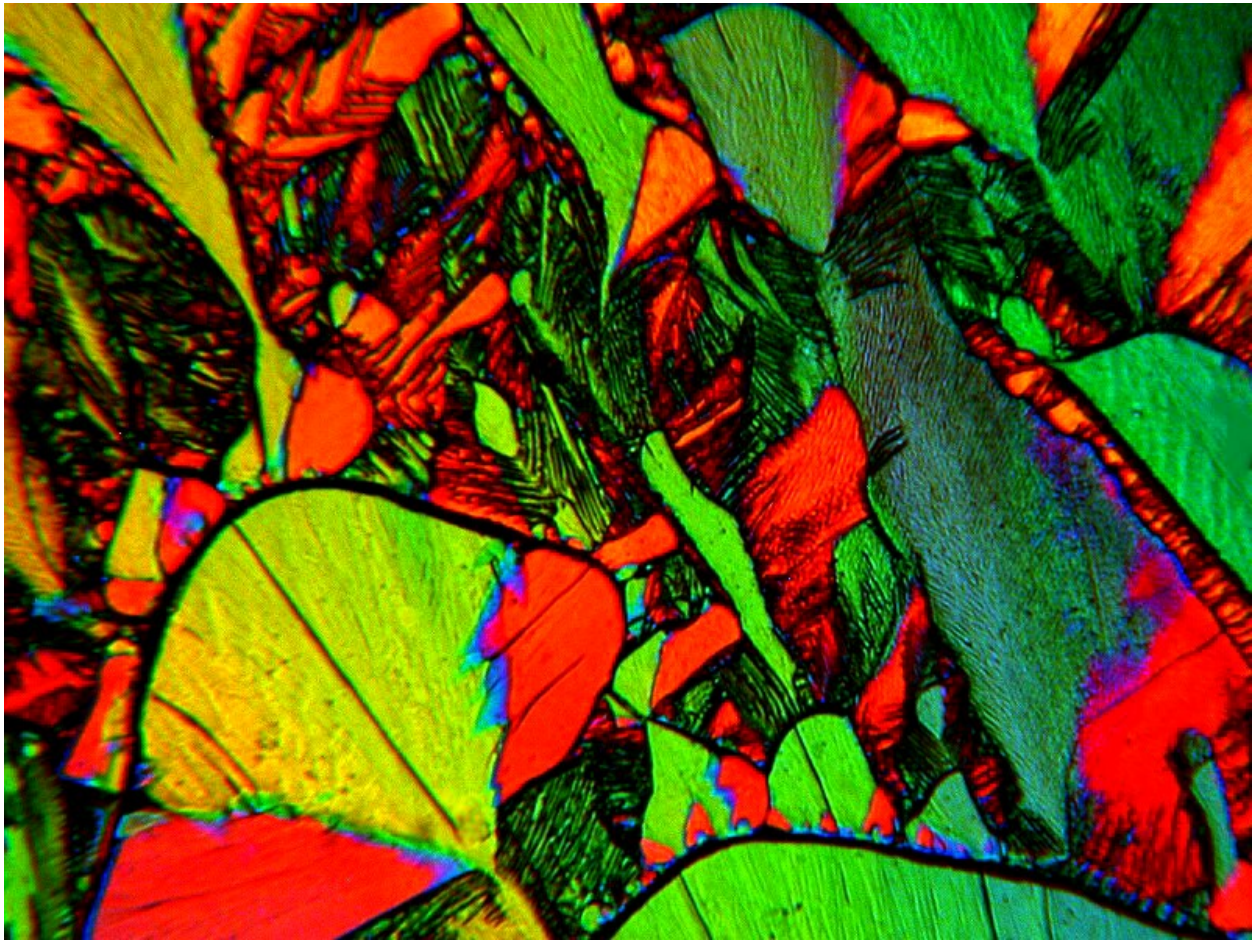
To see Richard's hopeful optimism in others, you can look back at his lifetime devotion to pacifism, civil rights, equality, and non-violence. For his genuine kindness towards individuals, you can turn to Micscape's own contributor, Joseph B. Kelly, who encapsulates a heart-warming story of Richard's earnest guidance in purchasing one's first microscope "in such a way that a passion is kindled and fanned into life" ("Life after Richard Howey" (2009)). Or you can look at me, just one of his many devoted students. Though officially, Richard was my professor, advisor, and thesis director for two years, these services do little to capture a modicum of who he is to me. For nearly twenty-five years, he was my cherished friend. As I tell my colleagues and students, Richard was my mentor in philosophy. As I tell my loved ones, Richard is one of the dearest members of my family. To me, he was that and so much more. He was someone who profoundly changed my life and continued to shape my life through his twenty-five years of guidance, Dutch uncle counseling, endless loving support, and wisdom. At every milestone I achieved—publications, a Ph.D., tenure, full professorship, starting a family—I was grateful for him. Ever the hopeful optimist, Richard took a wayward kid—Heckle, the garbage collector from the garbage state—under his wing and guided him to success in academia, happiness in philosophy, and joy in life.

Postscript

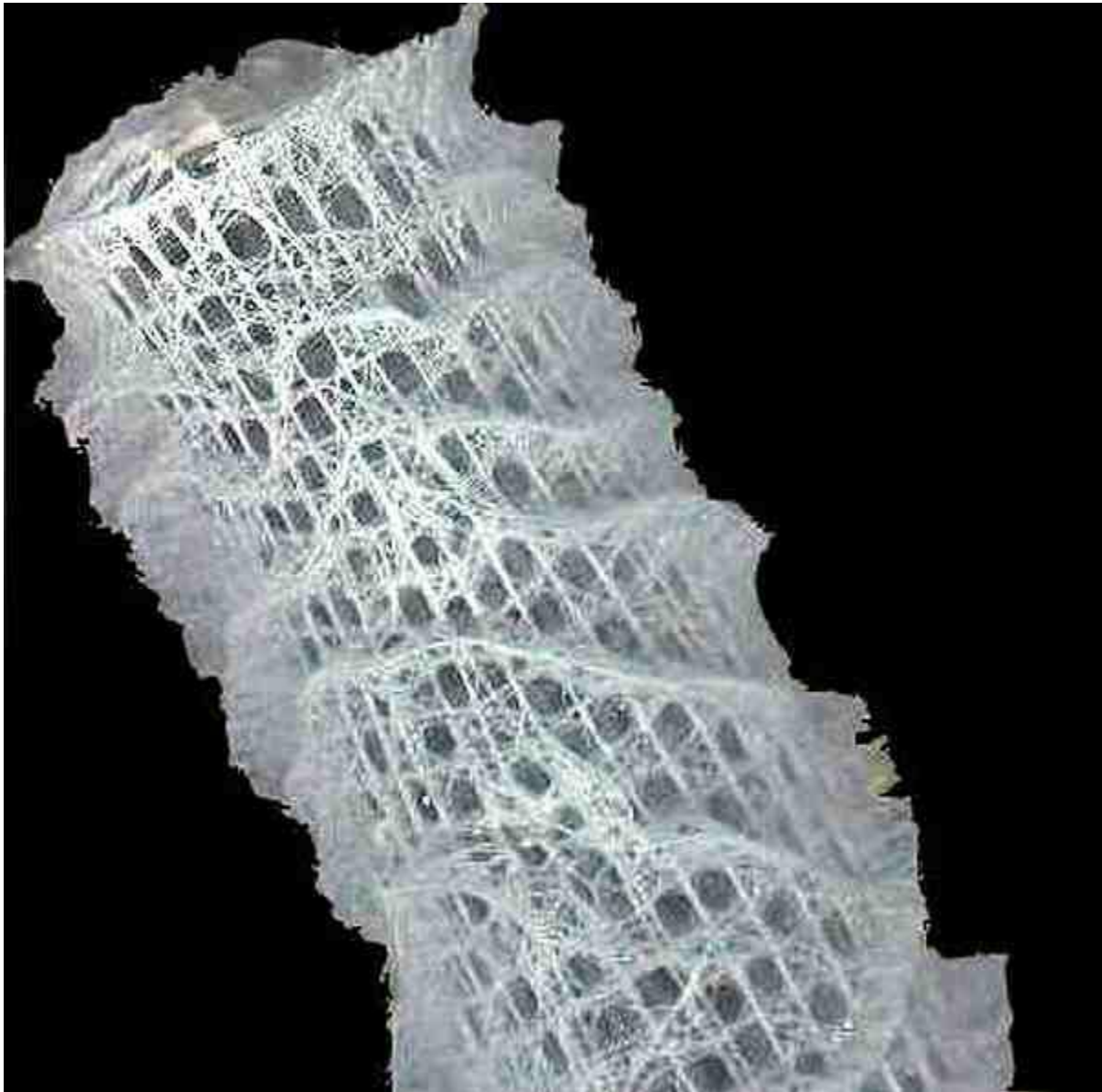
For a glimpse of Richard as a true educator and his virtues of humor, love, and optimism, I encourage readers to explore the catalogue of his hundreds of articles on Micscape. In the meantime, here is a selection of my favorite images in microscopy that Richard has created and developed over the years.

I am grateful to Adri Howey for her permission in allowing me to use these images. I am thankful to David Walker and Mol Smith for giving me the opportunity to honor our beloved friend on Micscape.

A slide containing a mixture of Nickel sulfate and Urea; from “Recruiting Amateur Microscopists and Natural Historians” (2013)



Euplectella aspergillus , a glass sponge popularly known as Venus' Flower Basket; from "Questions to Ask An Intelligent Design Theorist" (2007)



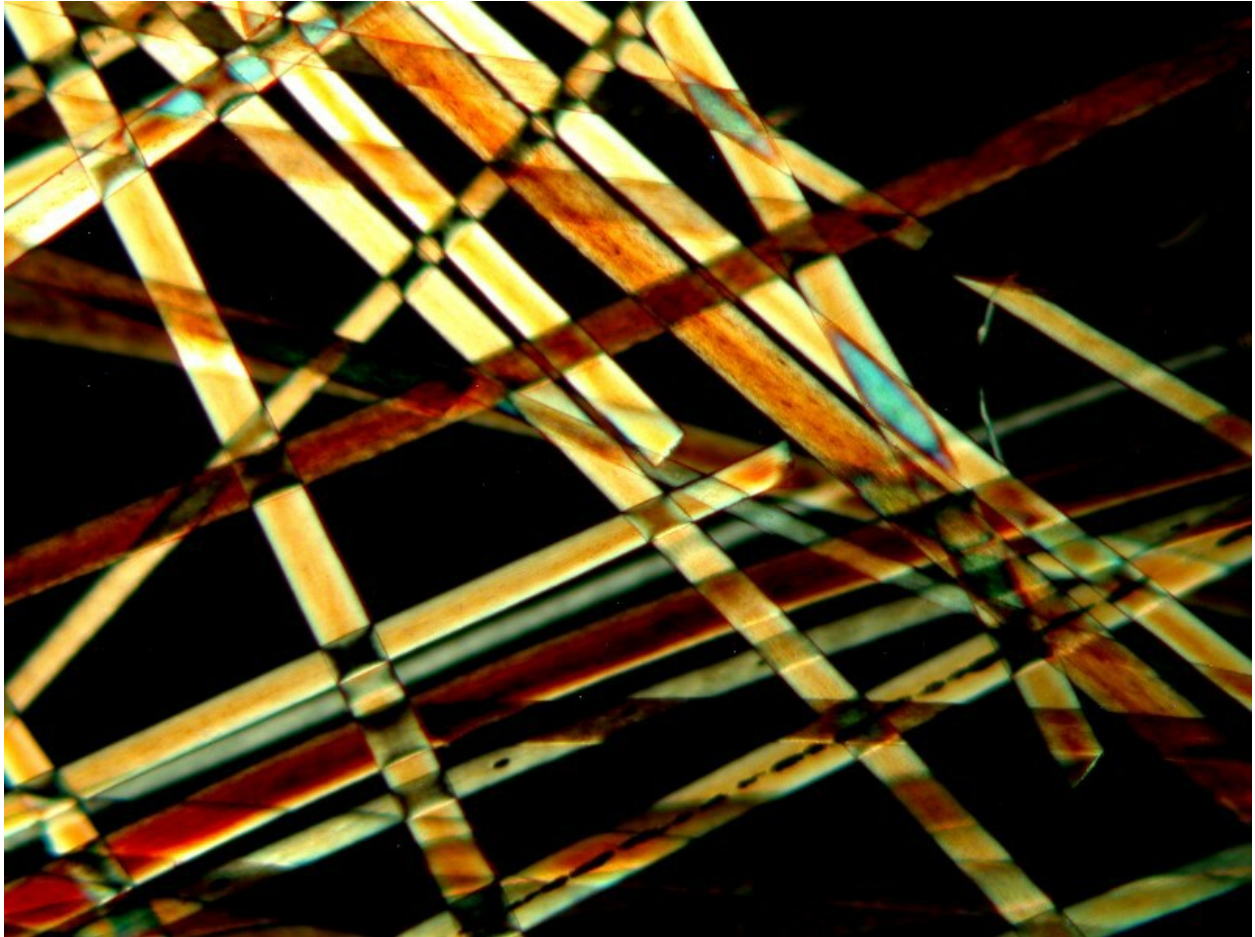
The crystalline structure of sea urchin spines; also from “Questions to Ask An Intelligent Design Theorist” (2007)



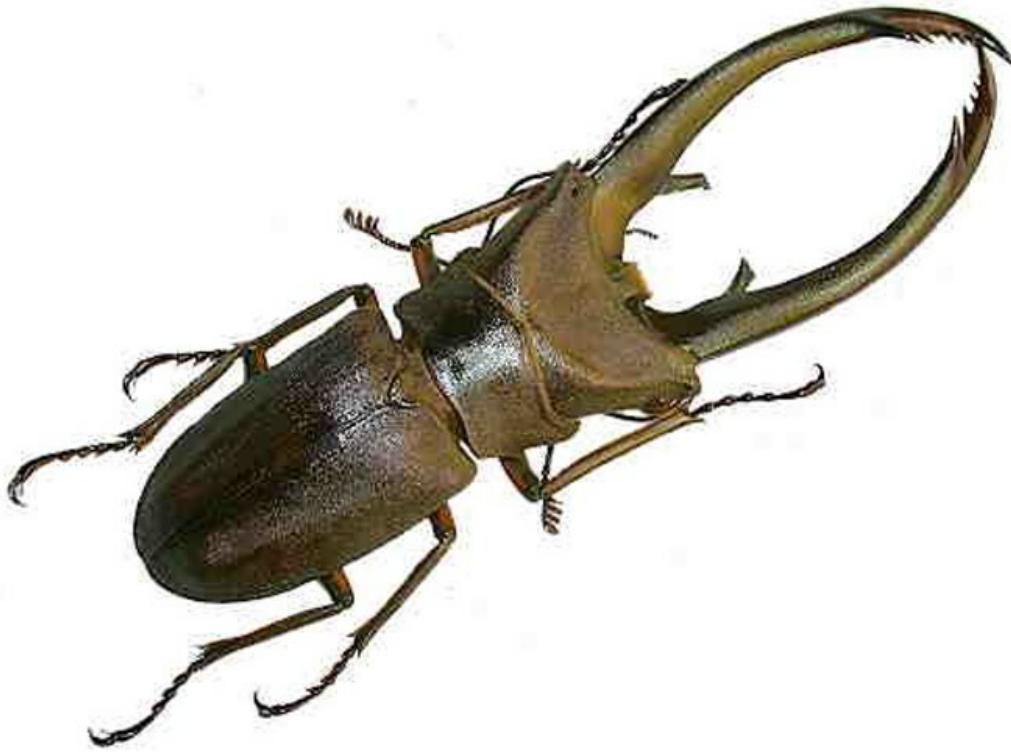
Hypotrich collected from Lake Hutton; from “An Eccentric Amateur Naturalist’s Dream Vacation” (2011)



Human hair under polarized light; from “Hirsute Reflections: Part 1 Some Thoughts About Hairs, Fibers and Bristles” (2013)



A stag beetle, *Cyclommatus metalifer aenormicans* from Mt. Ibu, Halmahera Island, Maluku, Indonesia; from “Tropical Volkswagens: A Look At Some Beetles” (2015)



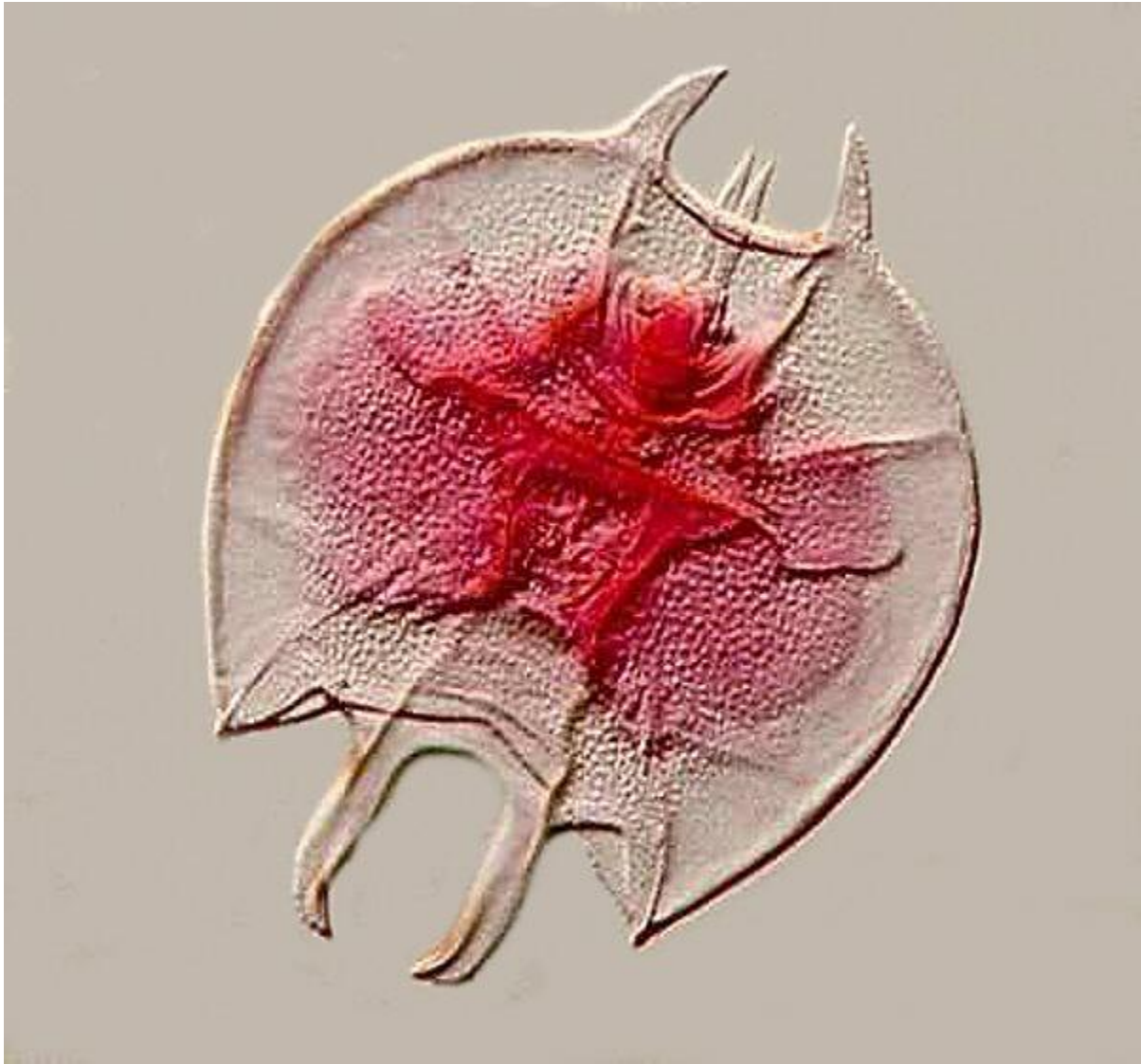
Hyalonema, or “dumbbell spicule”; from “Mother Nature As the Ultimate Terrorist and the Consummate Creator” (2022)



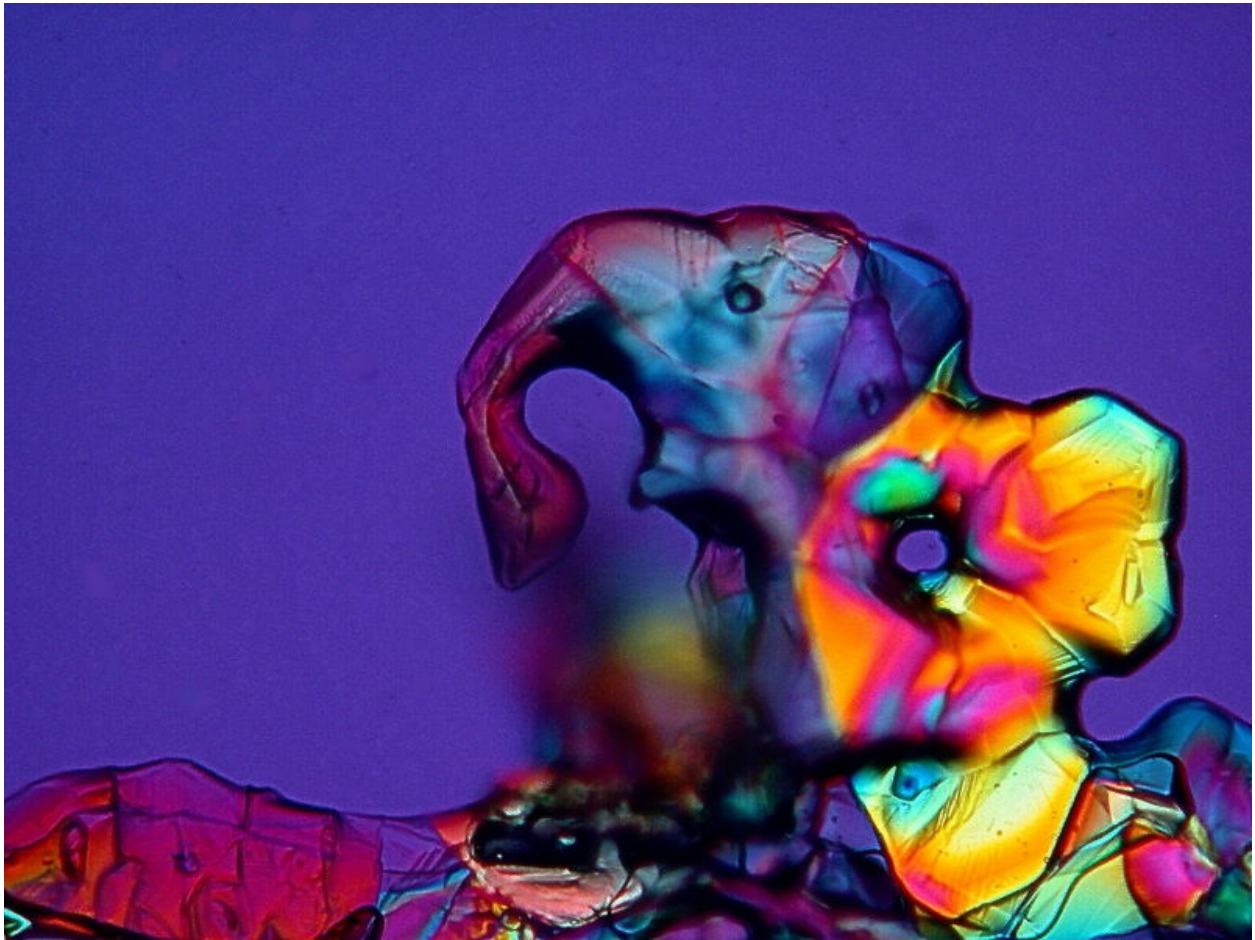
Thecamoebae in a resting state; from “The Nightmare of Classifying Protozoa (and Other Protists)” (2017)



A stained rotifer, *Keratella*; from “A Return to Granite Lake” (2010)



Lastly, my personal favorite: Ferric ammonium sulfate crystals; from “An Album of Crystal Critters” (2020)



Comments to the author, Bill Devlin, are welcomed, email - wdevlin AT bridgew DOT edu.

Links to Works by Richard Cited in this Article

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Plus, Joseph B. Kelly’s “Life after Richard Howey” (2009)

<http://www.microscopy-uk.org.uk/mag/indexmag.html?http://www.microscopy-uk.org.uk/mag/artmay09/jb-rhowey.html>

Richard Howey’s essay ‘[Recollections of O. K. Bouwsma](#)’ was presented on his home page, now mirrored on the archive.org website.

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www.micscape.org