

## In Memoria: Larry Ventis

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Various conditions affect the way one experiences the Covid-19 pandemic. Obviously, your health and the health of those you know and cherish is an important factor. However, your experience is irreversibly changed when infection leads to death. And, as distance sometimes impacts the regularity of the contact you have with people you know, and even cherish, news about the tragic circumstances of a person's death may reach you when you cannot do anything about it.

I was informed vicariously and accidentally of Larry Ventis's death. Larry passed away on April 11th, 2020, due to complications from Covid-19. All the private and not necessarily good jokes I had entertained till then (never marry someone you cannot be confined with for months; never have more children than you can handle in a pandemic, etc...) disappeared as the effects of this deadly virus became apparent in the face of my dear friend and long-time supporter, Larry.

Larry was a Professor Emeritus of Psychology and a Clinical Psychologist, who broke ground with the therapeutic application of humor in the treatment of phobias.<sup>1</sup> His research focused not only on the psychology of humor, but also on the psychology of religion. He co-authored *Religion and the Individual*, a widely used textbook. He was a member of the executive board of the International Society for Humor Studies for six years and President of that society. He also was a member of the Board of Directors of the Workshop Library on World Humor for many years.

Larry received his B.S., M.A., and Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Tennessee, and completed his clinical internship at the Palo Alto, California Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospital. Hired in 1969 at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Larry retired in 2016. He was the Chair of the Psychology Department from 1999 to 2005. His university says he was a freshman advisor for 42 years and played a significant role in the development and operations of the four-institution Virginia Consortium Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology. He was awarded the Arts & Sciences Governance award in 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> His work is featured in a show ("The Laugh Factor") for the Discovery Health Channel: he demonstrated the procedure with a College staff volunteer who had a phobia of spiders. She was able to touch a tarantula by the end of the episode.

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He loved tennis and ski; and music: he sang many years at the choir of Williamsburg Unitarian Church. I remember his love and tolerance for others; I do not remember him complaining of anything; he had a great sense of humor, an even greater humility, and he was a true friend. He was the kindest man ever. He was a great man.

Larry loved his daughter, and I had the chance to make her acquaintance in a trip after a humor conference to which he kindly invited me. Larry was instrumental in my career in humor studies: he invited me to his university as a visiting scholar in 2001. The library was well endowed with books of humor, and John Morreall was there as well. He told a childhood friend about my project and related back that I should include the Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana, in that project. At that time, I knew nothing of Santayana, but did as I was told.

I am eternally grateful to him for the kind invitation to Williamsburg and for his support of the project of the philosophy of humor I was initiating with his help.

In a Santayana zoom conference held this year, a Santayana scholar told us of the recent loss of his childhood friend to Covid-19. I had a terrible feeling (Larry?), but I could not ask: I was afraid that if the answer would be positive, I would not be able to talk when my turn arrives; I was new in that crowd. After the conference, I found out that indeed it was Larry, and that the person who talked about the loss with tears in his eyes was the friend Larry told me about, the one that urged me to include Santayana.

Thank you, Larry, you perfect host, for elegantly allowing this connection.