

## MEMORIAL MINUTE

# John “Jed” Erickson Deppman, 1967-2019



Jed Deppman, Irvin E. Houck Professor of Comparative Literature and English, died on June 22, 2019. He was 52.

Born in Washington, DC, John Erickson Deppman grew up in Middlebury, Vermont—where, as he always emphasized, he was a full-blown townie. At 18, he confirmed his love of languages and discovered the value of mental tenacity during a year as a high school exchange student in northern France, where he completed the demanding Baccalauréat—in French—placing second in his class. In 1990, he graduated from Amherst College *summa cum laude* with Phi Beta Kappa and a senior thesis on mental heroism in European folklore.

Jed went on to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, to earn his MA and PhD in comparative literature with a dissertation on Dickinson, Valéry, and Joyce. While in graduate school, he earned a Diplôme d'Études Approfondies in philosophy and epistemology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, where he studied with Jacques Derrida. After a short visiting stint at Oberlin and a detour to Texas, he and his wife, Hsiu-Chuang Deppman, Professor of Chinese and cinema studies, rejoined the Oberlin College faculty in permanent positions in 2003. Before long, their daughters, Formosa and Ginger, became star players in the Oberlin school

orchestras, on violin and viola, respectively.

A prolific and original author, Jed wrote about Joyce, Borges, Whitman, Nancy, Sophocles, 19th-century lexicography, and Dickinson, on whom he published and edited three books, including his 2008 monograph *Trying to Think with Emily Dickinson*. He also edited and translated a seminal volume on genetic criticism and completed a novel, *Taking Chemo with Nietzsche*.

At Oberlin, Jed directed the Comparative Literature Program almost without interruption for 15 years. Under his leadership, it became Oberlin's flagship humanities program. Jed also conceived and organized Oberlin's legendary annual Translation Symposium.

Jed was driven by a profound belief in the transformative power of literature, art, music, and thought. He was deeply committed to rigorous humanistic scholarship as a means of deepening our understanding of life, death, and the world. A dynamic and innovative teacher and sought-after advisor, he was ferociously demanding of his students while offering them his unconditional support.

In his life and work, Jed embodied the border-crossing, eclectic ethos of comparative literature to a tee. A specialist in 19th- and 20th-century literature, postmodern and poststructuralist French thought, genetic criticism, translation theory, and philosophies of death, he had a near-native command of French and spoke Spanish, Portuguese, and Mandarin as well. In high school and college, he distinguished himself in math and science. At different points in his life, he excelled as an ice hockey player, an academic translator, an ultimate frisbee athlete, a sponsored-program officer, and a line cook in a Parisian restaurant. He was a fiercely competitive table

tennis player. Although he lived by the Deppman family motto—"Henceforth, suck it up: no whining"—he was a compassionate and supportive father, husband, son, brother, and friend.

At Oberlin, Jed taught many popular cross-listed courses. He was known for his first-year seminar *Ars Moriendi: Death and the Art of Dying*, in which students not only read, thought, and talked about death but also paired up with residents of Kendal at Oberlin to connect with people for whom the end of life is an imminent reality. It quickly became one of the most transformative courses in the First-Year Seminar program. He taught it almost every year.

The seminar gained an unexpectedly personal dimension in the fall of 2008, when Jed was diagnosed with stage IV cancer. For the next 11 years, he nonetheless taught full time, traveled the world, lived abroad, and continued to produce scholarship of the highest caliber.

Jed Deppman is remembered for his deep love of his family and friends, dedication to his students, fierce intelligence, sharp sense of humor, extraordinary mental tenacity, and thirst for adventure. In his final essay, "Living and Dying with Emily Dickinson," he concluded: "We can identify impressive moments we have witnessed or imagined, work them into dynamic images, and use them to organize our attitude toward life and death. Similarly, we can always rethink the limits of who and where we are. We have always been connected to so much—our loved ones, people who have died already, our childhood, our past and future selves, our past and future places—that we can always think about new ways to belong to them."

**Sebastiaan Faber**  
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