

Powers William

Obituary



William T. Powers died of emphysema in Lafayette, Colorado on May 24, 2013.

Born in Salem, Oregon, he grew up in Hinsdale, Illinois. His boyhood was filled with a love for the stars, science, and music. He worked at Argonne Cancer Research in the medical physics department where his interest in control systems began. Powers credited Norbert Wiener's book, "Cybernetics," as the inspiration of his often lonely, difficult journey, introducing a revolutionary concept of living control systems.

The late Phil Runkel, Professor Emeritus, University of Oregon, one of the first to understand the importance of Bill's work wrote: "In a decade or two, I think, historians of psychology will be naming the year 1960 (when your two articles appeared in "Perceptual and Motor Skills") as the beginning of the modern era. Maybe the historians will call it, "the Great Divide." The period before 1960 will be treated much as historians of chemistry treat the period before Lavoisier brought quantification to that science."

Powers' graduate thesis proposal at NU was rejected, but it became his life's work, and the foundation for his classic, Behavior: The Control of Perception (Aldine: 1973).

Many books and research articles followed, based on his control theory model of living organisms, now known as Perceptual Control Theory (PCT). The response to Powers' first book was significant (Thomas S. Kuhn, professor of History and Science, Princeton U. wrote: "Powers manuscript is among the most exciting I have read for some time.") Powers continued to develop his control theory model of living systems until the end of his life.

He succeeded in leaving an important legacy: His work has reached professionals in the fields of biology, neuroscience, psychology, mental health, education, sociology, philosophy, economics, marketing, robotics, artificial intelligence, and human factors. His greatest accomplishment,

Perceptual Control Theory, and Bill himself, will be honored at a memorial at 3:00 on June 8, 2013, at the Boulder Outlook Hotel. Please inquire at ControlSystemsGroupConference@gmail.com if you would like to attend.

Family and colleagues will share their thoughts about the life and accomplishments of this great man. Our family thanks the many people who have been responding to the news of his passing with words of support and comments about the contributions he made to the betterment of humankind.

Powers leaves behind and is greatly missed by his son Denison Powers (Longmont, CO and Piedmont, VA), daughters Alison (Lafayette, CO) and Barbara Powers (Durango, CO) as well as his grandchildren Sarah Sorensen (Lafayette, CO), Derek and Hailey Webb (Durango, CO), Ethan Webb (Lakewood, CO), his sister Alice McElhone (Bloomfield, NJ) and her extended family, as well as his late wife, Mary's, extended family and many devoted supporters throughout the world. In his memory, our family will appreciate if you would please quit smoking, and send a contribution to the Control Systems Group.

"PCT is the biggest bite out of the fruit of the tree of knowledge that's been taken in 2000 years."
— James Wilk, Professor of Philosophy, Oxford University, England.