



Honoring the Life of Jean Bourgain

May 31, 2019-June 1, 2019

The Friday night speeches concluded with Peter Sarnak reading the following two letters.

Good evening,

Thank you all for organizing this magnificent ceremony to honor the work and life of my brother Jean. My name is Claire and I am the almost 7 year younger sister of Jean. This means that he has always been part of my life and also my sole older parent when our mom and dad passed away. The past five months have been difficult. My only sibling, the one who shared my childhood memories, who had that unique insight of me as a person and who ever accepted unconditionally all choices I made without giving a single negative comment is gone. It still feels like a part of my own life has gone with him.

Jean, it is said that when I was born, you welcomed me by giving away all your most beloved toys, including your very special favorite -you couldn't sleep without-rabbit. Your protective attitude and sweetness towards my person stand for a lifetime.

Remember how you made me your little partner in crime to drive our mother crazy with your incredible inspiration for mischief? Once you piled up her most delicate precious crystal glassware into a huge complicated tower. I was a 4 or 5 year-old toddler watching you; pretty confident you wouldn't break anything. When our mom came in almost getting a heart attack, you whispered with a grin: 'schhht we are almost finished, just one more glass to put on top'...

Your teachers at school were not spared either. You had the talent to be so innocently nerve wrecking, that you were almost sent away from school. It took our parents tons of patience to fill the gap between you and school. Nobody in this room would believe calculation was a big issue for you at that time, as your brain seemed unable to deal with a teaching method consisting of visually adding up apples instead of abstract numbers.

When you discovered mathematics, you got more serious. It would become your sole interest in life and at the end, your only reason to live for. Practical things in life like paying a bill were far too complicated for you, or you just did not care. Material property didn't interest you at all. You always used to say: unfortunately I am only good in maths, although I am a bit slow at that too...

I became used to the fact that having the best marks school each year would ever go unnoticed as you would always manage to win a tremendous award at the same time. However, this was never an issue. You praised me with my scientific achievements, although I didn't understand your maths and you didn't understand my medicine, you were probably my greatest fan.

When you moved to Princeton, you strictly separated the US and the European part of your life. Once, maybe twice a year, you would phone me for a couple of hours to catch up with all the news. People just could not believe I didn't even know your phone number. Elly Gustafsson would be our intermediate to communicate for any urgent matter. Elly, I never met you, but through Jean, it feels like I know you very well. Thank you for your invaluable contribution to Jean's well being.

Jean, although your visits to Europe were rare, my children and grandchildren adored you. The very rare times we met your son Eric just confirmed we could have a strong family bond, even barely knowing each other. Coming to Europe was a feast for you, especially to enjoy great food and wine. You could eat a full five-course lunch and immediately after ask what we would have for dinner... After a week of your presence, we all asked for mercy to spare our poor overloaded stomach. You bought us the most incredible, expensive and useless present... like taking my six-year old daughter to a 3 star Michelin restaurant... certainly you were not a conventional brother.

The news of your cancer was a shock. You came to live with us in our home, you were so confident that I would help you through. We tried every possible therapy that was available, your incredible will to live helped everyone of the medical staff to push away the boundaries and go on searching for a cure. Even after your terrible stroke, you found the strength not to give up and to pursue your beloved mathematics. This also deserves a special thank you to everyone at the IAS, who allowed you to continue your work remote. Without doubt, to be able to work was a major contribution to improve your health.

Despite all the pain and fear, curiously we also had a great time together during your illness. We resumed gastronomic events whenever you felt well enough, we showed you parts of Europe you had never seen before, you enjoyed to fly with us in our ultralight plane, we had long walks and vibrant discussions... My husband Bart was by your side too, and I cannot thank him enough for the almost five years of constant support in a way no other brother would have done.

Jean, I am so sorry that despite all efforts, it has not been possible to keep you alive with us.

You will always remain special in our hearts.

Claire Bourgain



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From Mei-Chu Chang and Eric Bourgain

In the past four years many times we thanked IAS and Jean's colleagues in our hearts for what they did for him. Particularly, while he was physically away, his colleagues shared his duty and still made him feel as being in the team.

The 2016 conference was extremely appreciated.

When his postdocs suggested a 60th conference six years ago, he said no and joked that he would not attend because he did not want to sit in all talks. With the 2016 conference, he did watch all videos (at his convenience, and some of them more than once), and joked that he got to hear all things probably would be said in his "Celebration"

Thanks again for everything done for Jean!

Mei-Chu and Eric