

# In Memoriam: Thomas C. Schelling

(Dated: December 13, 2016)

Tom Schelling, master of the important idea in a complex world, passed away today, Tuesday, December 13, 2016. His work on mutual assured destruction and on segregation showed he knew what the most important questions were and had the ability to answer them. In each case we gained new insight as well as essential aspects of dealing with important real world problems.

In the former, he identified the way we could survive nuclear confrontation between the US and Soviet Union, showing the way to stability through mutual assured destruction—whose recognition would provide not just deterrence but calming assurance—an incredible force for peaceful coexistence in a century of the massive conflicts in world wars and political uncertainty that actions might be taken leading to global destruction.

In the latter, he recognized the central insight of complex systems science, the ability of individual agent choices to result in collective behaviors. He understood that the connection between them might, and often is, not clear to a casual observer, but yields to the right kind of analysis. In this case, the choice of individuals who prefer to live near others of the same type, manifests in the creation of segregated communities.

Both of these contributions to our understanding reflect deep and important questions, and remarkably clear and (in retrospect) simple answers. And the answers

were, and are, essential to our understanding of the world around us and the challenges we are facing.

This spring when I learned of concerns about North Korea from the National Security Council and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, I spoke with Tom to learn from his insights into this version of the nuclear confrontation. He was clear and straightforward in his view that we should not be concerned, and should not act with concern. After some thought about the unique conditions of the North Korea confrontation, I understood better not only the reason for his statements but their wisdom—the greatest destabilizing force is the concern itself.

Perhaps we should formally define the difference between intelligent and wise as the ability to include one's own words into the frame of analysis.

I am sure I still have much to learn from Tom and will be reading his papers and books for years to come. Still, I will miss the chance to talk with him.

There are many who have gained from his intellectual contributions, there are few if any who have not benefitted from his wisdom. We are diminished at his passing.

*Yaneer Bar-Yam, New England Complex Systems Institute, Cambridge, MA*