Thomas Budzynski: My Mentor, My Friend

Thomas R. Allen
Ocean Springs, MS
Keywords: Thomas Budzynski, neurofeedback, biofeedback, storyteller, psychotherapy

This article is a personal story involving the life of Thomas Budzynski and his friendship with the author. The focus is on the organizing stories of Dr. Budzynski’s life and his interactions with others, including patients. Most of all, the endeavor in this article is to demonstrate the power of Dr. Budzynski’s belief that the story, when masterfully told, is an irresistible and soft method leading toward learning. Budzynski used storytelling in his personal and professional life for many purposes. This article focuses primarily on how some of Dr. Budzynski’s stories affected the author and how certain organizing stories affected Dr. Budzynski throughout his own life.

How does one memorialize a person like Tom Budzynski? There were so many dimensions to the man that I find it challenging to cover the complexity of his nature, or even his scientific career. So I will tell you about the mentor he was to me, and who he was as a person and as a storyteller. Most of all, I want to tell you who he was as a friend.

Over the years, Tom and I grew to know each other as well as two friends could know each other. At first he took on a mentor roll in my life. He took me under his wing and made it his task to teach me “the ropes.” I really never knew why he took an interest in me. He just did, and I was honored that he did.

As friends, we helped each other through the tough times, and we enjoyed each other’s good times and accomplishments. We spoke of the tough times when there was something to learn from them. With Tom, there was always something to learn from experience, so we spoke about ideas and life frequently.

We collected stories from each other throughout our friendship. Inevitably, some of them were funny and some of them profound. But the most common thing we shared was our passion for collecting gadgets, friends, and stories! Collecting stories I learned from him. Collecting gadgets I learned on my own. Collecting friends has always been an important thing for me as it was for him. He loved people and had a charisma few people possess. Tom and I were fortunate to have shared that type of friendship that leads to each becoming a better person. As one enters their senior years, you learn these are the treasures of life. Because Tom was as near a master storyteller as I ever knew in my lifetime, I will memorialize him in the form of stories that will shed a reflection on the man who shaped portions of my life for close to 28 years. I will also discuss his professional and life legacy as I perceive it.

Tom’s legacy was important to him because he believed it to be one of the ways a person achieved life beyond death. He saw this in the broadest sense as being in his family, among his friends, professionally, and within the wider world community. He was a man of destiny, and he saw the strength of a person as the ability to influence life and history and to live it every moment.

Tom made every effort to carry forth the tales and communicate his respect for accomplishments of others he found to be significant. He studied their biographies to make sure he had the facts right. This applied to people he knew and people who lived years, even centuries, before him.

His favorite person from the past was William James, and Tom told tales of his importance as a psychologist and philosopher throughout his life. Although he pioneered the discipline over a century ago, Tom believed that William James’s ideas were far ahead of his time and that psychology was just now beginning to catch up with many of James’s views. Tom saw James as the first true psychophysiologist as he was both a professor of physiology and psychology at Harvard. Tom believed that much of what James said and wrote was a preamble to his own career and ideas. As James had studied medicine, physiology, psychology, and philosophy, Tom studied electrical engineering, clinical psychology, psychophysiology, and the electrical systems of the human body. Tom was an integrator and synthesizer of disciplines like James. Tom was a systems thinker, and this became more prominent with age. He was fascinated with the complexities of the living world and its way of interacting with itself in predictable ways. His interests were far wider than the time he had on this earth to explore them. And again, in this way he was much like his favorite historical figure, William James.
As James’ reputation, biography, and ideas have prevailed years well past his life, I believe the same will be true of Tom Budzynski in the years to come. Tom always seemed to be a step ahead of the present, and he thought well into the future. I believe we will see that Dr. Budzynski’s ideas will influence the future just as William James’ have. As more open and fluid minds populate the fields of psychology, medicine, clinical biofeedback, and neurofeedback, which he helped pioneer, and psychophysiology, scientists will mine the ideas of Dr. Thomas Budzynski and they will find gold.

If one reads the papers of Tom Budzynski, one can observe that he anticipated movements that happened later in his life but were not completely appreciated when he first presented them. One such idea was that of behavioral medicine. Tom saw this possibility many years before it blossomed into a separate field of specialty in psychology. He also anticipated the field of medical psychology. Many years before his death, Tom spent time studying the energy fields of the human body to see if he could “crack the code.” He was a man who thought beyond the present and saw far ahead to shape the future.

It is hard to say whether Tom was primarily an electrical engineer, a clinical psychologist, or a clinical psychophysiologicalist. Tom thought like an engineer and felt like a psychologist. I recognized this, as I was an electronics technician earlier in my life. He was a creative problem solver, as all good engineers are. One of the first things he would tell people is how he had been on the electrical engineering team that developed the SR-71 Blackbird for the U.S. military. He was very proud of that. What he did not tell people often was that he was the chief engineer on the SR-71 inertial guidance system design and implementation team. This unprecedented project demanded novel and creative thinking. That inertial guidance system had to be the first of its kind. It was this organizing idea of “developing the first of its kind” that drove Tom’s life. Whether this meant being the first to have a certain idea or the first to develop the first electromyography biofeedback instrument, he wanted to chase that seminal thought or development.

In the field of biofeedback, Tom was fascinated with other engineers and creative problem solvers. Problem solving is central to engineering. I never met an engineer who did not love gadgets. Tom loved all the gadgets of biofeedback and energy medicine, but other gadgets also. He liked light stimulation, cranial electrical stimulators, cold lasers, passive infrared trainers, every piece of software ever made for biofeedback, and his own original surface electromyogram trainer and Twilight Learner. He loved them as they had the potential to affect his patients, or himself, positively.

He liked the engineers in our field, such as Herschel Toomin, Chuck Davis, Jeff Carmen, Robert Austin, Hal Myers, Tom Collura, John Picciotitino, and others who made many of the biofeedback systems and products we use every day possible. He used to say that it was the engineers who drove the future possibilities of biofeedback and that they did not get the respect they deserved. He was convinced that it was the engineer and software developers who had to understand every detail of the science and then apply it, and practitioners just had to learn how to use the devices. He believed it was usually the engineers who created systems that changed the way people would think and practice.

He also saw the importance of technically oriented practitioners and other professionals who had many of the ideas that inspired the electrical and software engineers to move their art forward. He was one of those who knew both sides and who was always working on all sides with psychologists, physicians, software developers, and engineers. He and I had that in common, and it was the glue that kept us growing deeper as friends.

Not only was Tom interested in the gadgets, engineering, and production of biofeedback systems, but he also had a respect for the entrepreneurship that it took to establish an idea and turn that idea into a company that produced something. He believed in the entrepreneurial spirit and practiced it himself throughout his life. He was always coming up with ideas, testing them scientifically, and then turning them into products and selling them. After all, that is something engineers do!

In 1989, when Microsoft Windows™ was finally becoming viable, I began to conceptualize a Windows multimedia biofeedback system. I envisioned something that was capable of applying many channels of sensors to a person to measure electroencephalography (EEG) in all its variations and the peripheral nervous system in such a way as to actually multiply the effects of biofeedback for the clinical patient.

Tom and I had a long discussion on the phone about my ideas. The next thing I knew, he was standing at my front door wanting to see my visual mockups so we could talk about them. He corrected some of my misperceptions, but he caught onto the idea and encouraged me to move forward with it and build a product. It was the enthusiasm he had that moved me forward.

Shortly after Tom’s visit, I was introduced by a friend to a software programmer who was looking for some help with his EEG biofeedback system. His name was Erwin Hartsuiker. I discussed my ideas with him, and he got on a plane in 1991 from Holland and came to my house. We
collaborated for some time together, and then Erwin, Harald Holtij, and I developed the first BioGraph™
Windows-based biofeedback system. Without Tom Budzynski’s initial encouragement, BioGraph never would
have been realized. Of course, the rest is history. Thought Technology licensed the software, and it became a useful
clinical and research tool.

Stories were one of the special ways Tom communicated with and taught a person. He always told stories with the
grace and humility of a master communicator. By the end of many of Tom’s exchanges with me, he would tell me a
story followed by a chuckle and a smile, with a glint in his eye that said you had just been taught something or, in my
neck of the woods, you knew you had just “been schooled.” Tom was a graceful and gentle man, but as a friend when
you needed a twist in your ear, he did not hasten to do it. But he did it with a story or a strategically placed question!

During that very first visit to my home to discuss my ideas, Tom told me one of his famous stories about a
graduate student he knew who was always coming up with research ideas. Tom said the guy had more hypotheses than
he had time in this life to test. He told me that he had the job of getting the guy to focus his thoughts and efforts on
just one hypothesis that he could test, so he could move on and finish his master’s degree thesis. Right in the
beginning, I recognized myself.

Tom said every morning the guy came into his office and had many ideas and never could make a decision about
which to pursue. Tom found all of his hypotheses to be very interesting and found it hard to distinguish the fire of
creativity in the guy. He decided to encourage just one idea by getting excited about it for him, so he told him one
morning that the particular idea he had come in with that morning was perhaps the most important idea he had heard
from him.

The next day, the student came into Tom’s office and asked him if his research design was sufficient for the study
and presented it to Tom for his review. He had sat up that night designing his thesis study and had already been to the
library to start looking over the literature relevant to his hypothesis. Tom concluded that all he needed was a little
encouragement. Shortly after that, the student had a master’s degree and was moving into his doctoral studies.

Tom’s stories generated solutions. After hearing the story, I decided to move forward with my idea for a Windows-
based system.

Tom had many stories he used with his patients, and he would share them with me on occasion. He found stories
were not intrusive to the personality of a person, so in clinical situations, he used them. I began to develop a few of
my own from my experience in life and began using Tom’s technique and a few of his stories in my own practice. His
stories were true stories from his life, and that is why they had the impact they did. I believe it was from this natural
belief in storytelling as a gentle way into the mind that he developed an interest in subliminal and twilight learning as
therapeutic interventions.

I will bore you with one last story.

My first contact with Tom was through using his audiotapes in a therapist’s office. Those tapes went home
with me and helped me to learn to relax and let go of things while undergoing biofeedback and relaxation therapy. At the
time I needed this badly, as I was working with addicts, alcoholics, and probation and parole clients and had just left
working in a super maximum security penitentiary some time before. I was grinding my teeth both in my sleep and
during the day, and every time I put that tape of Tom’s voice into the tape player, I just drifted away to another place,
which resulted in peace and tranquility. I also had Tourette’s syndrome and had a few tics acting up. Through the use of
biofeedback therapy and Tom’s audiotapes, my battles with stress and Tourette’s syndrome were greatly assisted. But a
change in my career path also proceeded. Recognizing the effectiveness of such things, I pursued them in my career.

As a counselor and therapist in these environments, I often found myself working much harder for my clients
than they were working for themselves. I thought maybe Tom’s tapes might help some of my clients in the same way
they were helping me and perhaps get them working a bit harder for themselves. I called Tom to get some audiotapes
with the belief that, just possibly, this might reduce my stress by reducing my clients’ stress.

I remember when I called him for the tapes; he asked me why I was buying so many sets. I explained, and he asked me
why I was so willing to work harder than my clients for “their life change.” I had no answer and spent weeks, even
months, working through this one little question. This was not the first time I had heard this question, but it was the way
he put it that made me ponder the thought. It was not only Tom’s stories that had power, but also the penetrating nature
of his questions and observations that were transformative.

Then he set out to tell me a story about a friend of his who had to quit being a therapist because he worked too hard
at it and found patients’ stories intrusive and overwhelming. The therapist was well trained, but after a few years in
practice, he just burned out from striving and taking on his patient’s problems. He told me that he eventually went into
research, where he established a very distinguished career.

Tom finished the story and began to talk about sailing and how fighting the wind got you nowhere. Then he
started telling me about clients he had in his practice over the years who had demanded the same types of things from him. Tom learned early on that his pillow felt better at night if he let the client do most of the talking. He learned to emphasize listening to the client and posing a good directive question to be optimally effective. This seemed much easier than tiring himself by striving with a patient. I later called this the “listen, question wisely, and let live” story. That phone call lasted for close to an hour, and I was a virtual stranger to him. That first phone call was the beginning of our friendship.

I used this story wisely, as I did many over the years. Tom called this process of learning from stories and other subliminal means “soft methods,” and he called them “nonresisted learning.” Though he was a biofeedback master and pioneer, he was definitely a master of therapeutic and didactic storytelling, which often went unnoticed by others. But that was the point! I can see smiles as I write this!

Taking a note from his hero William James, who developed the idea that people developed their personalities through “organizing stories,” leads me to ask: What were the organizing stories that formed Tom Budzynski? I think I know a few.

First and foremost, the story of living a principled and meaningful life drove Tom. The value of family and friends had a special place in his life. Being an engineer organized his approach to science, which was solution based, as was his functionalist therapeutic approach. Having an open mind was very important as long as “one trusted, but verified everything.” He was not one just to trust the anecdotal testament without testing it first. He always told me that it was not the method but the master that was important. Tom was driven by seeing what was just over the edge and striving to be the first one to see the possibility of something, but he did not mind sharing the sight of it with others. He had the mind and heart of a pioneer. But, most of all, the most genuine organizing story that built Tom’s personality was that a good story will get you places others can’t go: into the mind and hearts of others!

So long, Tom. I loved you, my friend.

Correspondence: Thomas R. Allen, Ocean Springs, MS, email: biographpro@cableone.net.