



## Randy Udall – A Comet Passes

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[Ed: For those who may not have heard, James "Randy" Udall, a co-founder and driving force in building ASPO-USA, died recently while hiking in Wyoming's Wind River Range. Below is a tribute from three friends who enjoyed many years working alongside Randy as volunteer leaders for ASPO-USA. Their words speak for many of us. This remembrance was first published in [Peak Oil Review](#).]

By Sally Odland, Steve Andrews, and John Theobald

*"There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as if everything is."*

– Albert Einstein

Last week our universe was rent asunder by the untimely death of our great friend, colleague and mentor, Randy Udall. The passing of this lanky, unprepossessing comet of a man with his wide-ranging intellect, uncompromising honesty and stiletto wit leaves a wide vacuum in its wake.

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We knew Randy primarily through his crusade to bring honest discussion of America's energy predicament into public dialog and policy. Randy started tracking and writing about world oil and gas depletion in the 1990's. He co-founded the US chapter of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil in 2005 and spearheaded five highly touted and provocative energy conferences, creating for a few years the ultimate big tent for international energy thinkers. He was famed for his poetic speeches, wicked humor and accessible metaphor. And also for his insistence on speaking truth to power, no matter its rank.

Randy was a formidable autodidact. When he designed and built his passive solar house by hand, he taught himself plumbing. Auto mechanics? No problem. In his two decades working with CORE—his Colorado energy efficiency group—and ASPO-USA, he taught himself the math and technologies of renewable energy and fossil fuels along with a fair bit of geology. He learned by seeking out smart doers and leaders to probe them with questions that could vault him up the learning curves.

Randy was a contrarian thinker. He worked problems from all angles, refusing to succumb to groupthink and revisiting old assumptions whenever new information came to light. Because of this uncompromising truth-seeking and refusal to toe a party line, he held the respect of many people and groups that would not normally sit in the same room much less at the same table. On any given day, his inbox might field emails from climate scientists, exploration geologists, energy historians, economists, utility operators, environmental groups, and—maybe his favorite—the people actually steering the drilling rigs.

He admired the immense brainpower and ingenuity of petroleum geologists and engineers to find and develop fossil fuels, and he understood exactly how much we rely on them to support the American Dream. All the while, he looked for concrete ways to move houses off energy 'life

support', individuals to a lower carbon budget and his country towards renewable energy flows.

There was always solid research behind Randy's picturesque quips. When he threw out one-liners like "Oil shale has less energy content than pig manure," you could be sure he had calculated the per-ton BTUs of both. If he noted that "Energy extraction is now the dominant land use in America", you knew he had run down comparative numbers on acres leased for drilling versus agricultural acreage.

Always present in the moment and engaged with his audiences, Randy connected the abstract world of energy use to ordinary people's lives. He avoided graphs to tell the story, preferring visceral and iconic analogies. To illustrate the power needed to fuel our electricity appetite, for example, he would show a slide of nude Lance Armstrong on bike, share data from a personal correspondence with Armstrong's trainer, then inform us all that the most powerful man on earth can't generate enough juice to run our hair dryers. A presentation to hundreds of professionals in Boston might divert into a technical discussion of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The same presentation to a group of college students at UC Davis would morph into an analysis of the energy demands of their campus.

Unlike many pundits, partisans, educators and activists, Randy never punctuated his public conversations and presentations with moral judgments. He refused to jettison facts or objectivity on behalf of a moral crusade. As Garrett Hardin has said, "the tender flower of objectivity is easily crushed by what is taken to be the necessity of the moment." While Randy made damning comments like "Time may be our most precious resource . . . D.C. is fiddling that away while the petroleum burns" and "Without a scorecard, our policy responses are liable to stay stuck on stupid," he did not characterize the American life style as evil. Instead he dubbed us "the Oil Tribe" and made people aware of what that actually meant.

"'So much for peak oil' is a popular meme right now" he would say. "But there's a difference between reporting and quoting. All this talk about Saudi America is misleading boosterism. "

"This notion that 'it's morning in America' is simply hype. The pore throats in shale rocks are 20,000 times smaller than a human hair. On these rocks, we've bet our energy future."

"Eventually, the politics of energy has to surrender to the physics of energy."

Randy never played off the Udall family name. Virtually without ego, he shunned all self-promotion. With his eloquence and charisma, people thought him a natural for politics and urged him to run for office to further his message. But, in fact, he had no taste for that. He exercised his public persona at great personal cost and would retreat for long stints to the wilderness to recharge his spirit and soul.

Randy died like he lived, questing nature's energy flows, in the Wind River Mountains he so loved. Death snuck up and felled him on the trail. It is not hard to imagine Randy, led by his boundless curiosity, walking through the portal separating his last worldly step from the universal energy.

We loved Randy like oxygen and will miss him desperately. His was a light the rest of us could navigate by. What a privilege to have been hitched to his star for the ride.

*Sally Odland is a former oil geologist and ASPO-USA board member, now at Columbia University. Steve Andrews is a retired energy consultant in Colorado and a co-founder of ASPO-USA. John Theobald teaches at the University of California, Davis. Each worked closely with Randy to build ASPO-USA and advance critical discourse on America's great energy challenges.*



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