

Peter Wegener: A personal recollection

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I knew Peter between the years he was 60 and 80, give or take a bit on either side. In this period, he was comfortable with himself, in good health, with no particular regrets about anything from the past. I knew him as a generous person free from envy, and as one who knew both his talents and limits. He taught me a lot without ever making me feel insecure. People have told me that he was a bit brash when he was younger, impatient with his junior colleagues as well as his own children; and, as we know, he was different in the last few years of his life. But that is not the Peter I knew, and so will skip over those facets of his life. I will remark on Peter partly by telling you about how he was instrumental in shaping

my academic and personal life. I have missed him for several years now already and will continue to miss him.

When I came to Yale for a job interview in March of '79, Peter was on sabbatical in Karlsruhe so we didn't meet. And he had not yet returned when I joined Yale only a few months later. B.T. Chu, one of Peter's long-time colleagues and mine as well, showed me a letter that Peter had written to him about me. Peter didn't know me from before, but yet had said some very nice things. I was touched by them and wrote my first-ever letter to him. Peter has told me more than once that it was one of the best letters he had ever received. Thus was our friendship formed --- if friendship it can be called between a well-established, somewhat aristocratic, insider at Yale that Peter was, and a younger person by some 30 years with hardly any roots in this university.

This did not mean that Peter was lax in what was expected of me. Everyone who knew Peter agrees that he had very high standards, especially for the junior faculty in the department. Fortunately for me, at some point in the first two years of my stay at Yale, he took it upon himself to make extensive inquiries about me, and satisfied himself that I surpassed the threshold. Thereafter, he was always in my corner.

About two years after I joined Yale, I was still struggling to find proper space for my laboratory. Peter had two adjacent labs at that time and knew my plight. He called me one day to his office and said that I could have one half of one of his two labs. That offer was timely because I had just received a grant, and needed the space. He saw that I was serious and so, one year later, said that I could have one of his labs entirely. It wasn't long before he gave me the control of both labs, except for a small corner of the

second. With this, I formally inherited Peter's labs and the equipment that he had accumulated over time.

But that was not all. By now, it was some five years since I had come to Yale. He knew that the simplest way I could be tenured in principle was for him to formally inform the administration of his intent to retire a couple of years ahead of schedule. This he did with *extraordinary* grace. And so it came to pass that six years after joining Yale as assistant professor, I was elevated to the ranks of a full professor and was able to make Yale my home for a total of some 22 years.

I don't really know if I would have been similarly successful if Peter had not given me his implicit and explicit support. To me this is not important. What is important is that Peter made a tremendous difference to me during those years. I have heard him say to a few visitors that I was the best thing he did for Yale. And for that undeserved

generosity which made me feel good about myself, I have always been grateful.

I remember Peter for many other things as well. I remember that he was in tears in my office when Annette once went for a surgery. He cared deeply for her and was proud of her talents and free spirit in amazing ways. That is the side of Peter that very few of his colleagues knew. I remember that, when he retired, he voluntarily moved to a small office in a corner of Mason Lab, and distilled all his documents of more than 40 years into a mere drawer full; he got rid of the rest without showing any attachment to his possessions. His point was that there was a time to accumulate and there was a time to jettison, and, for him, that was time to jettison. I remember well, with pride and pleasure, that among the small number of documents he kept in his drawer were the drawings made by my two little sons.

I also remember what Peter told me once. A common colleague of ours said something quite nasty to me one day, for reasons which I regarded were a sign of intentional mean spirit. When I went to see Peter, somewhat agitated, he calmed me down and said something profound, which I never forgot and have often repeated to several younger colleagues when they found themselves in similar situations. Peter said, “If someone is harsh to you, it is most likely because he is ignorant, not because he is actively ill-willed. In any case, even if he is ill-willed, it is better for you to think as I have said. It will keep up your spirits a lot better.” How wise! I have always followed that advice.

I don't know if there is something in humans that transcends their bodies and minds. I don't know if Peter is with us today. He would almost certainly be embarrassed by the fact that we are celebrating his memory; he was not comfortable with praise. I will

take the risk and now address a few sentences to him directly, assuming that he is here in our midst.

Dear Peter, you showed me how to be generous to younger colleagues, and how to stand back when they are expanding their horizons. You showed me how one can be both demanding intellectually and be humane in interpersonal relations. You told me once that one cannot change the entire world, and even warned me, “Don’t you go in that path!” Although I have ignored that part of your advice, I have rigorously attempted to follow something else you taught me: to create around oneself an honest atmosphere with very high standards even if things may be falling apart on a global scale. I hope that you will approve what I have done with things I learnt from you. I will always be grateful to you for everything that you gave me and taught me. May you live in our memories for ever!