

Appreciation

Tilak Richard Weerasooriya (1950-2022)

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Professor Tilak Weerasooriya left us on 20th February 2022, leaving with many empty spaces within us all.

He held a unique record in the annals of medical education in Sri Lanka being the only medical academic to have held the position of Dean of two faculties of medicine – University of Ruhuna and General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU). Subsequently, he was also the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at KDU. At the time of his demise, he was the Senior Professor of Anatomy at KDU.

Prof. Tilak Weerasooriya was born on 20 November 1950, in Gampola, to Maurice Weerasooriya (1907-1990), Chief Education Officer, and Emily Weerasooriya (1926-2017). His hometown was Galle. He attended Richmond College, Galle for his primary and secondary education, and later entered the University of Peradeniya where he obtained his MBBS in 1977.

After completing his MBBS at the University of Peradeniya, Prof. Weerasooriya joined Kyushu University's Department of Anatomy, Fukuoka for his postgraduate research degree on the electron microscopic microvasculature of the testis. He obtained the degree of Doctor of Medical Sciences (DMSc) in 1986.

He specialized in Andrology and became Sri Lanka's pioneer andrologist. He established an andrology clinic and a diagnostic semen laboratory with facilities for the research and training needs of medical and paramedical personnel; a sperm bank with a donor sperm insemination programme and the National IVF Laboratory at Mahamodera Hospital, Galle, Sri Lanka.

Prof. Tilak Weerasooriya was a pioneer – it ran in his blood. He helped establish the Faculties of Medicine at Rajarata and KDU.

With his passing away, I lost a lifelong friend and confidante. Our friendship has been a long journey; a long story.

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I have known Tilak for over 40 years; ever since I joined as a young lecturer at FOM, Peradeniya in 1980. But before we could get to know each other well, Tilak had to leave for Japan and soon after I left for London for PG studies. Back home from our PG studies - I came to FOM, Ruhuna in 1985, and Tilak in 1986, after obtaining a permanent transfer from Peradeniya. It was then that we got to re-acquaint ourselves after a lapse of about 4 years. I first met Mirani, his loving wife, when she too reported to Ruhuna after her PhD, I think in 1987.

Other than the fact that we knew each other in Peradeniya, what drew us together – since then? What gelled our friendship? I pondered this question since the day that Tilak left us all. It is over 2 years now, but at times it feels like eons past, a long time. But at other times, I feel it is like yesterday. Time has all got warped, distorted, disjointed, coalesced.

Yes, what drew us together? – not only Tilak and I, but our families too. We watched our children grow up from near infancy together. We saw newborn Sahan and Semali from almost day one.

I believe that what drew us together was a mutual understanding of what ethical conduct and behaviour were and a deep inherent sense of natural justice in public life. Natural justice, behavior, and ethical conduct at interpersonal level, at professional level, and at a community and even societal level. We discussed current politics and political developments frequently. I really miss him these days, when our country is in great turmoil; when we would have dissected (an anatomical word, no doubt) every nuance of what is happening today.

Tilak and I had no qualms about calling ‘a spade a spade’. We spoke against unfairness and injustice within and without the immediate confines of our beloved faculty that we gave most of our working lives to. The battles we fought for the rights of academics and even non-academic staff at the University Senate and Governing Council - even as ordinary members – not only as Dean or Vice-Chancellor – when we found that the university administrators were harsh and unjust; when decisions were being made for narrow parochial reasons; when they were not in the best interests of maintaining quality and standards of our university.

I admired his grit and determination many a time when we were in a minority of two to fight the good battle. I remember the many days that stretched into months and years when we spent time – wasted really – in the Matara

Courts to ensure that discipline, ethics and justice are maintained for the whole university community in particular, and even society, in general. Many a time we felt that we were fighting lone battles; “The boys on the Burning Deck” or “Horatius at the Bridge” fighting battles to right what we felt were wrongs. Often, meeting the multitudes face to face.

We spent many an evening that lengthened into nights in each other’s homes – trying to solve the world’s problems! We kept vigil when Tilak first fell ill over 25 years ago and the clock began to tick. My wife and I became closer than ever – giving strength to both Mirani and Tilak.

Nevertheless, to find Tilak gone was still a shock. A sorrow too hard to bear. An empty space that can never be filled. I sometimes still see him, from the corner of my eye, passing my room at KDU on his way to his room – many a morning. And I am momentarily startled!

Let me end with a poem that I learnt a long time ago, in my childhood. It has reverberated in my mind ever since. It is called ‘Heraclitus’ written by William Johnson Cory in the 19th century. A great poem about a friend, who departed. Whenever I re-read the poem, I have ‘pictures’ in my mind, where two friends sat by the sea-shore talking till sunset.

The Heraclitus of this poem is a poet of the third century B.C. This Heraclitus was a friend of another poet, Callimachus of Cyrene. Tilak and I became them – for a fleeting moment in time. When Heraclitus died, probably around 260 BC, Callimachus wrote a short epitaph for him. William Cory’s fine melancholy poem is a translation of that epitaph. Here it is:

*“They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears
to shed.*

*I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him
down the sky.*

*And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them, he cannot take.”*

“... but them, he cannot take” are the memories that Tilak and I shared together with our families. Indeed, they will remain indelibly etched in our minds, as long as we walk this earth.