

Peter Calamai, 1943-2019

The best of the old school

By Tim Lougheed

In early 2008 Canadians found their collective attention drawn to a nuclear reactor that few of them had probably thought about in a long time, if they even knew it was there. The National Research Universal (NRU) in Chalk River, Ontario, several hours' drive west of Ottawa, had been shut down for repairs and created an international shortage of Molybdenum-99, an isotope employed in millions of cancer-scanning procedures every year. Since this 50-year-old facility had been turning out close to half the world's output of this exotic product, its absence left patients with unexpected and often agonizing delays in diagnosis.

It was a story that was bound to confuse many observers, including reporters trying to sort out the intricacies of how an isolated research facility built at the beginning of the cold war wound up as the lynchpin of a medical supply chain for a sophisticated imaging technology used in hospitals all over the world. Peter Calamai, on the other hand, was just getting warmed up. He had been writing about the NRU for 10 years at that point, getting acquainted with dozens of nuclear engineering experts from across the country, religiously attending public meetings of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, and making Access-to-Information requests for documents about the reactor's operator, Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. By the time the "isotope crisis" had arrived, no one was better positioned to write detailed, meaningful articles about what was happening, why it was happening, and what it meant to Canadians. And he did just that, exploring the politics, economics, and technical intricacies of the situation in language that was engaging and accessible.

It might have been easy to conclude that Peter was in the right place at the right time, but any of us who knew him well understood that this kind of coverage was emblematic of the way he covered science. Like the proverbial hockey player, he was forever skating to where the puck would be, sorting out scientific patterns and then choosing those topics that would ultimately demand a greater public awareness. Perhaps more important than this enviable skill, however, was his adherence to the most venerable principles of journalism. At a time when vast media empires lie in ruins and news cycles are driven by social media feeds that resemble the barking of dogs in the night, it is worth remembering that the best reporting is built on nothing more than asking simple, honest questions. Peter never forgot, nor would anyone who ever saw him ease up to a microphone in order to put such questions to a speaker in straightforward, stentorian tones — never rude, but generally not the typically dissembling manner in which Canadians approach these situations; not "Sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you could tell me ...?" but rather "Has the emperor taken a good look at what he's wearing?"

This passion for reporting characterized his approach to science and served as a valuable model for the rest of us. The success of his work demonstrated the value of sifting through page after page of dreary technical literature, attending boring bureaucratic events, and setting aside your ego in order to get inarticulate geniuses to explain their work in terms that anyone could appreciate. This is the old school of journalism, which is still very relevant in our contemporary information chaos, even if we tend not to think of it as an immediate career option. It is also the rock upon which Peter and his colleagues built the Canadian Science Writers' Association, now the Science Writers and Communicators of Canada. They lived through the changes in technology and business that yielded the science writing landscape we know today, but their underlying objectives are still the ones that we all hold most dear — tell a story, tell it right, and make sure people will listen to it.

His most admirable quality may have been his insatiable desire to transmit that same passion for old school journalism to a new generation in danger of losing it. Those of us who knew him well always wanted to spend time with him at an event, but he was always more interested in seeking out the new faces in the room, eager to bring them into the fold. He did not want to see anyone miss the fascinating stories that revolve around science, or worse, to take those stories for granted. Writing in the Re\$earch Money newsletter in 2008, he highlighted the “tragedy of the media commons”, a decimating of the ranks of journalism.

“When the Canadian Science Writers' Association was founded in 1971, there were at least 30 staff newspaper reporters in Canada whose beat was science, sometimes combined with medicine,” he said. “That number included full-time science reporters with all three news services – Canadian Press (CP), FP publications and Southam News – and with the news divisions of both CBC radio and TV. Today there are about six such reporters, with neither CP nor CBC news having one.”

Paradoxically, he added, there was more demand and interest in news about science than ever, but it would be carried out by a more general cadre of reporters who would be unable to develop even a passing familiarity with the subtleties of their subject matter. For this reason he championed the creation of the Science Media Centre of Canada as a body that would attempt to improve the quality of such reporting.

His roots in old school reporting reached even deeper, to the most fundamental level of ensuring that people could even make sense of words on a page, a concern that became the basis of a Michener Award that enabled him to take full stock of the state of literacy in Canada, which was far poorer than most of us would like to assume. For anyone who purports to make a living from the published word, Peter's lifelong devotion to this field serves as yet another reminder to check out even the most obvious of facts.

When Peter took his final leave from us on January 22, 2019, science writers across the country lost a friend, a mentor, and in a very real sense, a founding figure of a

profession we still take very seriously. Even as I type this I hear his gruff tones, complaining that this tribute has gone on for too long and will I ever learn to shut up? I may not ever learn that, but I do sincerely hope to never stop hearing that voice, from which I have learned so much.