

Peter Calamai, Mentor of Many Charms

By Margaret Munro

I met Peter Calamai at Southam News in Ottawa in the early 1980s – me a recently hired young science correspondent; Peter a feted foreign correspondent just back from a posting in Africa.

Our flamboyant boss, Nick Hills, would herd the staff in the bureau overlooking Parliament Hill into a crammed conference room for morning news meetings. Nick would run down the stories expected from Southam's far-flung international bureaus; national reporters would lay claim to the hot stories of the day; and columnists Charles Lynch and Allen Fotheringham would pontificate for the assembled crew.

The political junkies were kind, but were about as interested in my science and environment stories as I was in their scoops on the inner workings of Pierre Trudeau's government.

All except Peter, that is. He'd often swing by my office after the meetings and grill me. Did the genetic engineers tinkering with Atlantic salmon appreciate the the implications of their work? Why was the university issuing breathless press releases about experiments that has just begun? He'd suggest a scientist or policy wonk I should call for comment. Or, another angle – or two or three – I should pursue.

What sticks with me is how interested Peter was. And how validating his interest was as I worked to establish myself as a young journalist in a bureau filled with newspaper legends and egos. Yes, Peter's confirmed, the science stories were important. And yes, readers were interested in acid rain, nuclear safety and genetic engineering.

I'd long been a fan of Peter's dispatches from Africa and Europe – and marvelled at his prolific output. (Little did I know Peter's wife Mary kept him organized and on task.)

Now here he was in the flesh, a master of the journalistic craft, popping into my office to suggest how I might improve a story, or to pass on an idea. And to recruit my help after the Trudeau government passed the Access to Information Act, opening the vault to government information.

Peter was keen put the legislation to the test. Never one to do things by half, he roped in Mary to organize and track the requests, and leaned on me to start asking for government files.

Documents soon started flooding in, piling up on our desks, and overflowing into boxes on the floor. Some stories were obvious, like one on the way that federal departments were redacting and censoring identical documents differently. "Arbitrary censorship undermines access to information," read the headline.

The minutes of the Atomic Energy Control Board meetings were more of a challenge. I remember feeling overwhelmed by the documents, but Peter helped me weave the revelations into a compelling narrative. “From crisis to crisis: the secrets of Canada’s nuclear regulators,” read the first instalment of the series we wrote.

Peter did not ask if I wanted a mentor.

And I’m not sure he ever really thought of himself as a mentor to the legion of the journalists and science writers he encouraged and helped over the years.

For Peter, it seemed more a case of him recognizing and engaging with kindred spirits. His drive to learn, to hold power to account and to tell compelling stories, was infectious.

Peter cared about the ethics of journalism, and was clear about the rules of engagement: Journalists don’t serve politicians, corporate masters or academic interests — they serve the reader.

“The truly egregious sin of journalists and especially of specialist science writers,” he would say, is that “we tend to be cheerleaders for science.”

Peter was also an extraordinary networker. Once engaged, he was not one to let go. Through diligence, charm and tenacity he created an eclectic professional family that was bound by his irrepressible curiosity, interests, and generosity.

He knew just who to reach out for help to get his latest project off the ground.

He’d pontificate but was also thoughtful, remembering and celebrating milestones and children, and checking in to see how your life — and your stories — were going.

“MM,” he wrote after reading a story I’d written in 2014 about northern gannet chicks starving on a bird colony in Newfoundland. “Why didn’t you tell me you needed photos of the gannets at Cape St. Mary’s? Here’s one of a bunch taken when we visited in August 2008. The Parks Canada guy Chris Mooney held onto my belt as I leaned over the edge to get shots of them diving.”

Peter, still relevant, engaging - and lovingly offering input - long after he retired.