



SYMPOSIUM TO CELEBRATE THE LIFETIME CONTRIBUTIONS OF
PROFESSORS EMERITI TOM PAULAY AND BOB PARK

Tribute from Joe Maffei

As promised, I've written a few recollections of my experiences with Professors Park and Paulay. I have made my comments brief rather than comprehensive, realizing that all who know Bob and Tom will have their own favorite recollections.

I arrived in New Zealand in July 1992, never having met Park or Paulay -- but if you had asked me at that time to name a famous New Zealander, those are the two names that I would have produced. (I hope the Kiwis will forgive me, but until I got to New Zealand, I thought that Sir Edmund Hillary was English.)

On my first day in Christchurch, the Civil Engineering department was having a group lunch at a Chinese restaurant, and the famous Professor Paulay took the initiative of introducing himself to me. He did this by offering a beer and saying something like "We expect Fulbright scholars to be good drinkers."

Perhaps the most striking thing about Tom and Bob, in light of their remarkable technical and professional accomplishments, is their openness and humility and how they never let their work take on more importance than their social interactions. They always showed a personal interest in their students and colleagues. When I phoned Bob two weeks ago his first words were "So are you married yet?"

Bob Park was my PhD supervisor for the three and a half years that I was in New Zealand and every moment of that time was a pleasure. I think Bob was the perfect advisor for me. He gave me a free reign to determine the scope and focus of my work. He helped arrange the right contacts and funding, and let me go at it. Bob and I didn't need to meet often, but whenever I had a question for him, I got back a wise and thoughtful answer that I trusted completely. Much of Bob's advice I still remember, and now his words take on the character of proverbs that I can pass on to younger colleagues. Whenever someone has too many slides in their PowerPoint presentation I can say, "As Professor Park once told me, it is better to make a few points well than to try to cover too much material."

I have always admired Bob's skill and efficiency as a leader, and I still work to understand and learn from his approach. It was on a white-water rafting trip that I thought of an analogy that explain Bob's leadership style. Negotiating rapids in a small boat depends mostly on being in the right spot when entering the rough water. Anticipation is key. One well-placed paddle stroke early on is worth ten later, and once it's too late, a flurry of desperate paddling won't get you where you want to be. An expert rafting guide can navigate a river with a fraction of the effort of someone less capable.

Professor Park knows when and how to deliver that key paddle stroke to get the ship on its best course. Better than anyone I know, Bob embodies the ancient wisdom of the Tao Te Ching that

states: “The master leads by standing at the center of the circle and letting events take their course.”

When I arrived in New Zealand, Tom Paulay had already spent three years in “retirement,” a word that in this case carries no meaning whatsoever. Has anyone yet explained to Tom that a Professor Emeritus is not expected to work so hard?

Like many students and visitors to Canterbury, I was privileged to have long conversations with Tom, sometimes daily, about whatever topics interested me. Mornings are the best time to catch Tom, so if a question or topic occurred to me after noon, I would be excited for the rest of the day about the opportunity to walk into his office the next morning and ask “well what about this idea of redundancy?” A short question like this could catalyze an hour or more of discussion, after which I would walk out with a handful of sketches and a brain-full of new information to digest.

Tom’s generosity with his time applies not only to discussions but also to thoroughly reviewing any written material that I ask him to look at. In my case this has included thesis chapters, papers, and proposed material for US codes and standards. From Tom’s reviews, I have learned the value of precise language, and how imprecise language is a warning that imprecise thinking might also be present. Never again will I write “energy absorption” when I mean “energy dissipation”, or “capacity” when I mean “strength”.

As with Bob, Tom’s wisdom extends beyond the boundaries of technical expertise. When I asked Tom once about the secrets to writing a good building code, he said “first of all, try to have a committee without any bastards on it.”

Bob Park and Tom Paulay are a demonstration of the great achievements that result when technical brilliance is combined with the personal qualities that make this genius effective and useful. Beyond their notable professional accomplishments, clear thinking, and practicality, what impresses me most about Bob and Tom is their warmth and friendship to those around them.

Bob and Tom have had a tremendous influence on structural and earthquake engineering around the world, and I feel privileged to have been able to experience this influence first hand.

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