

When the Cold Wind Blows

by Eric C. Wat

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BEFORE I CAME on board at SSG in 2003, its research and evaluation unit had been run by an octogenarian volunteer by the name of Tak. In spite of his age and health, he was so passionate about data use by the community that he would take the bus from his home close to Museum Row, twice a week, to volunteer at our downtown office and do whatever we asked of him. Having been a researcher all his life, Tak was a data genius. If there was a statistics for something, he could find it. Sometimes I would bring him a research report someone else had done. Two days later, he would tell me there was a mistake in this or that table.

I always suspected that Tak had something to do with my getting hired at SSG. He liked my concept paper on community research, and his approval would mean a lot to my bosses. The truth is, we were very different people. A few times, he had chuckled when I shared with him an idea sparked in my head, and called me a “go-getter.” It struck me as funny because I never saw myself as ambitious. He was unassuming and detested the spotlight even more than I. Even his lunches were Spartan. Without fail, he packed a lunch of a thin sandwich and a handful of carrot sticks. Mine always came in a Styrofoam box soaked half with grease or dressing.

Also unlike me, he rarely shared his personal life, unless asked. If he didn’t come to work for a day, we’d get worried because we usually wouldn’t find out if he had gone to the hospital days later it happened, when it was after-the-fact and safe to bring up in polite company.

Despite these differences, we complemented each other with our work styles. In his quiet ways, Tak was a straight-shooter. He was easily frustrated when people couldn’t articulate what data they needed. After our first meetings together, he marveled at how I took people with little research background through a process and eventually made them realize that the data they needed was not what they had asked for originally. He asked how I did that. I told him that I always tried to figure out what the others’ self-interest was, what made them move which way, and never revealed my own unless it was necessary. It was basic community organizing approach. Though it was not meant to malicious (and I try not to practice on my friends), it was nevertheless a subterfuge, a form of manipulation to get people to do what you want them to do, even for their own good. But I didn’t have to say more. He chuckled. Afterwards, we worked out a system: I was the front man and met with our community partners, and only after we agreed on what they really needed, would I bring the request back to Tak, sparing him any negotiation. I was always modest with other people’s compliments and sometimes too critical on myself. He had taught me to value both my strengths and my weaknesses.

One day in early 2006, Tak was at his desk typing away with a single-minded determination.

He seldom got up from his seat. I didn't know what project he was working on, and there was this "do-not-disturb" air around him. You learned to read these cues when you shared an office with someone for a couple years, and I left him alone most of the day. Just before 4 p.m., his usual departure time, I heard paper coming out of his printer. Then some staples clacking.

He came over and handed me his resignation memo.

It was attached to some tables he had been putting together for me. He had been talking about "retirement" ever since I had been hired, but this was it. His body was too frail to make these bus trips to downtown twice a week. It was time. I was shocked, but I knew immediately why he retired without notice. He knew we would want to make a fuss, and it was the last thing he wanted. I barely had time to call my bosses or anyone else. Without ceremony, he left.

I HAD THOUGHT about Tak occasionally since he left two years ago. Some co-workers and I had talked of visiting him and taking him and his wife out to dinner. He didn't want a big celebration, but we thought he would like to sit down with a few of us and break bread. There would be more time.

When we came back from the holiday this year, my boss got a phone call from Tak's son. He had called to let us know that Tak had passed away a month ago, after Thanksgiving. He was in his late eighties. How stupid of us to think that we would have more time.

THE LAST TIME I had seen Tak was several months after his retirement when we invited him to attend our annual staff luncheon. He and his wife had moved to a smaller condo on the Westside, and I gave him a ride to the event at Cal State LA. When we were planning the event, we discussed how we would recognize Tak for his contributions to SSG. Knowing how much he hated being the center of attention, it took us all but thirty seconds to rule out any kind of presentation that required a plaque or him walking up on a stage. I told the organizers to just have our Director say a few nice words about Tak, and he could stand up and be recognized. It would be a nice, simple gesture. And I think I could get Tak to agree to at least that. Of course I didn't tell him the plan on the phone when I invited him, nor when I picked him up in my car on the way to the event. I kept silent while he was catching up with everyone at the luncheon. Then when the time came for our Director to recognize various staff members for the year, I told Tak what he was about to say about him. Tak grimaced.

I told him it would be short and all he had to do was to stand up. I said, "Sometimes you have to be generous with other people's generosity." Slowly, his frown disappeared. He knew he had been manipulated. When the time came, he stood up graciously while a room of 200+ people applauded. He sat down.

On the way back, he asked me if I had the latest issue of Amerasia Journal on same-sex marriage. With the move to a smaller space, and at his wife's nagging, he was finally paring down his papers and books. I told him I would love to have it. When I heard about his death, I thought about this last thoughtful thing that he had left me. At least that was what I thought.

A few days after he passed away, I was finally clearing his desk. Even after we hired a new person to occupy that space last August, I hadn't touched the desk since Tak's retirement. (There would be more time.) I found two stray dollar bills on the top drawer. Was he being forgetful? Or was this just small change that he had kept at the office in case he forgot to bring his bus fare? I remembered a business trip we both took to D.C. several years ago. I had loaned him a couple dollars for lunch. I had refused the money when we came back to LA. I'm not sure if that was why he left them there, waiting for me to discover. He could have. You can manipulate an honest man. But in the end, he will have his way.