

My Friend Paul Wong

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My relationship with Paul Wong goes back many years. He arrived at Trinity Western in 1994 as founder of the graduate counselling program a few years after my own appointment there in psychology. My first encounters with Paul and Lilian were in the dark, dingy former library building, which initially housed the nascent graduate program. We were soon deep into discussions which ranged far beyond psychology. Paul's consistent, optimistic sharing of Christian faith encouraged me as my early attempts to navigate the academy sometimes left me perplexed and discouraged. As I became involved in the graduate program, research projects, and supervision for several of the students, my encounters with Paul challenged me to go beyond my own aspirations as researcher and teacher. Even today, thirty years later, Paul's twitter feed is a source of encouragement and hope in the face of suffering.

The start of a counselling program naturally requires the creation of a human research ethics board, so Paul initiated and chaired the first REB at TWU and drew up the first policy papers. He managed to talk me, reluctant though I was, into joining the committee and eventually, with his encouragement, I followed him as chair. His stress on servant leadership, rather than power, seemed to be at the core of his relationship with others as well as his ethical stance. Being on the REB was initially an easy task while the program was starting, but then the Canadian research councils revised the guidelines and standards just as I assumed the chair of the REB. I was thankful that Paul's early policy papers from his first year at TWU provided such a clear source of ethical values and guidelines for practical implementation to work through the new regulations.

In 2004 Paul was planning the third INPM conference at the same time that I, as program chair, was planning the annual meeting of the combined American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) and Canadian Scientific and Christian Affiliation (CSCA). With members across the US and Canada, the ASA and CSCA represent Christians who are actively involved in scientific research, teaching and in industry, along with others in adjacent disciplines. The theme for the annual meeting in 2004 was neuroscience and I had already lined up several psychologists, neuroscientists and others as plenary speakers. Realizing that our two conferences would overlap in time, Paul came up with the plan to hold a joint event on focused on finding meaning in suffering which would be held the day between the two conferences. Together we submitted a successful grant proposal for funding from the John Templeton Foundation. I believe the joint program that we held that day was quite unique in that it included several prominent researchers who had struggled to make sense of the suffering they personally experienced due to dementia, pain, or paralysis afflicting their own loved ones. It was a unique sharing of personal pain redeemed by hope and faith. The message of meaning found in the midst of suffering challenged both research and counselling participants even as it has been the ongoing theme in Paul's own work and life.

Yet there was also a light-hearted side to the serious work of forging a friendship with a colleague. One year I found a jello mold from which, with suitable mixing of peach and lime jello and milk, a life-size opaque gelatine brain could be fashioned and with a large knife used to demonstrate the orientation of brain sections—horizontal, sagittal, coronal—in my class. One morning a pale grey brain sat on a table just outside my office door, glistening from the oil used to grease the mold. Walking past my office Paul came upon my teaching aid and began to loudly berate it. "I've never seen such a poor excuse for a plastic brain model. That looks so phoney!"

Slightly embarrassed I tried to explain, “Paul, it’s not plastic...” Paul was known to be very emphatic and direct in his critiques and immediately interjected, “Of course it’s plastic. Anyone can see that it’s plastic. I’ve never seen such a phoney brain model in my life.” And with that, he grabbed the brain and tried to pick it up. As his hand wrapped around the cold, slippery jello, he became pale and let out a shriek. “I tried to tell you it’s not plastic,” I said. “That’s horrible! What a shock! You’ve shocked my whole being,” he exclaimed. Hours later Paul came back to my office and said, “I couldn’t eat my lunch today because of your awful brain.” And we were able to laugh together.

One year my family held a surprise birthday party for me and invited, among other people, several of my colleagues from the university. Paul was the only colleague who took the time to come to the party, and on that day I was moved to realize that Paul was really more than a colleague; he was truly my friend. And so I wish to honour him, not only as a valuable colleague in the research endeavour, but as my friend, from whose wisdom I have learned much and with whom I have also laughed. And I honour his message and personal example of hopeful faith in the midst of suffering.