Losing a Friend

‘But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

In words, like weeds, I’ll wrap me o’er,
Like coarsest clothes against the cold:
But that large grief which these enfold
Is given in outline and no more.’

In Memoriam
—Alfred Lord Tennyson (1849)

Editorial advisory board meetings, like those of most advisory bodies, are full of suggestions that need to be implemented by someone else. The regular editorial column in Current Science has its genesis in a meeting held in 1998. Challenged with the task of providing a fortnightly column, I began my career as a columnist in the middle of 1998. Between 1998 and 2005 when I retreated from writing, diverted by administrative responsibility, I produced 165 columns. The hardest part of writing is, of course, to find a topic of some interest and to avoid the trap of becoming repetitive. Those who do not write, but are critical readers, often underestimate the difficulty of composing even moderately readable essays. In the first couple of years, age and enthusiasm were still on my side. This was the period before Internet access became so facile and Google was yet to become an indispensable weapon in the search for information. Choosing a topic meant that one had to listen carefully to conversations in the coffee houses and read indiscriminately in the library. The task of collecting reference material was physically demanding, requiring a degree of energy which was becoming increasingly hard to generate. Towards the end of 1999, providence smiled and a young man, Riki Krishnan, arrived in my laboratory looking for something to do. He had acquired a B Sc degree in environmental sciences, a few years earlier, and had spent some time working on the ecology of bats. In advancing his claims for a position, he presented a letter entitled ‘Monitoring India’s lifescape’, which bemoaned the absence of bats on a Current Science cover, and a book review entitled ‘Bats of the Indian subcontinent’ (Curr. Sci., 1997, 72, 229; 1999, 77, 188). In my first conversations with him, I was struck by his intense interest in bats, organisms about which I know nothing. This passion for a subject that seemed so esoteric, in one so young and unschooled in research, was striking. In the conversation that followed, I realized he was indeed looking for a position that would develop into a stable career option. For students who choose to avoid conventional paths, careers can sometimes be hard to forge, in an environment where entrance exams of increasing difficulty stand as obstacles in the way of academic advancement. Two qualities stood out in my earliest interactions with Riki Krishnan. He was enormously enthusiastic and friendly and honest to a fault. He completely lacked the ability to promote himself, a trait which must be prized and, as I was to discover later, he was helpful to a degree that is uncommon. He joined this journal as a temporary hand towards the end of 1999. In the decade that followed, he was, in many ways, my most important collaborator in writing these columns. When he died on March 19, a day before I was to begin my fortnightly exercise, the staff of this journal lost a valuable colleague and I one of my closest associates and friends.

Riki Krishnan was indefatigable in his search for topics that might be worth discussing in print. As the years progressed, the Internet became an inexhaustible source of information and he would send me almost every day, unfailingly, envelopes containing hard copies of materials
he felt I ought to read. The range of topics and materials he collected were remarkable in their scope and diversity. His youthful energy (and a powerful motorcycle) provided him with the ability to hunt for books in libraries and bookshops across the city. Even as I write, I am surrounded by envelopes, many containing material as yet unread; his success in collecting background material far exceeded my limited capacity to read and absorb. There have been many times over the years when the task of meeting printing deadlines and word limits has seemed an unnecessary burden to bear. Riki’s childlike enthusiasm for the task of producing this column proved energizing; transforming a tedious chore into a worthwhile activity. In July 2005, when I laid down the pen, Riki posed a question: ‘What shall we do now?’ The 75th year of Current Science was approaching in 2007 and the Centenary Year of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) was to be kicked off in mid-2008. Somewhat casually I suggested to Riki that we begin to collect historical material on the journal and the Institute which might eventually form the basis of articles that could be published. Little did I realize then that Riki’s boundless enthusiasm, coupled with the advantages of my administrative position, would launch us on the road to setting up an institutional archive. His disarming nature quickly served to nucleate a group of colleagues who have enthusiastically carried this task forward. He was untiring in his efforts to search for archival material. He located the son of the first editor of Current Science, C. R. Narayana Rao, discovering materials and facts about the early years of the journal which have been described (‘Current Science: Some Early History’, Krishnan, R. and Balaram, P., Curr. Sci., 2007, 92, 129). In his unceasing efforts at unearthing historically interesting facts about the journal and the institution, Riki chanced upon the articles by Kim Sebay on the Tatas and Higher Education in India. This led quickly to a sudden surge of interest in institutional origins. His enthusiasm drove me to find Kim Sebay on the Internet and eventually have him visit the Institute in the centenary year. In 2007, I began writing again and Riki renewed his efforts to ensure that columns appeared with unfailing regularity. On the eve of IISc’s Centenary Conference in December 2008, Riki was diagnosed as suffering from cancer. He continued to work, as always, with very brief breaks to undergo radiation and endless rounds of chemotherapy. During this ordeal of 15 months his spirits never flagged. His energies continued to be directed towards the task of throwing up topics for me to read, working at a pace which scarcely betrayed his worsening condition. He would call me everyday, unfailingly in the night, to ask ‘Anything to collect, sir?’ This is a question which will remain with me, always. It is with Riki that I explored the early history of IISc. Ignorant as we were, there was a genuine sense of joy and achievement when we learnt about the genesis of the institution (Curr. Sci., 2008, 94, 5) and discovered Burjorji Padshah (ibid, 2008, 95, 1651) and Morris Travers (ibid, 2008, 94, 1109). He urged me to write a longer article reflecting on the Institute as it turned a century (ibid, 2009, 96, 1404).

In 2005, when I decided to stop writing, the last column reflected on my experiences: ‘This column has also, albeit infrequently, been used to mark the passing of men who greatly influenced the environment, where I have worked all these years. . . . I have been sharply reminded of their commitment, dedication and influence. Reflecting on their lives, I have shed a tear, in the solitude of the night, sometimes from a sense of personal loss, at others from the realization that even the most admirable men are only mortal.’ Riki once asked me, with the innocence that was truly his: ‘Did you really cry, sir?’ I have never shed tears more copiously than when I write this. How does one say goodbye to one so young? I can only turn to the poets.

‘I hold it true, what’er befall;  
I feel it, when I sorrow most;  
’Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all.’

—Tennyson

Riki was not celebrated or famous. The Epitaph in Gray’s Elegy comes back to haunt me:

‘Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere;  
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:  
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,  
He gain’d from Heaven, ’twas all he wish’d, a friend.’

P. Balaram