A Conversation with Walter J. Karplus

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I remember Prof. Karplus as a man of few words – very few words. In my forty some years of association with him, I recall only one occasion on which I had an extended conversation with him. I will come to that in a moment.

I first came to know about Walter in 1964. I still remember very vividly the occasion. I was attending evening classes at Purdue University Extension at Indianapolis while employed at RCA’s Home Instrument’s division. During one of my visits to the campus (now IUPUC), I happened by chance to see a book entitled High-Speed Analog Computation by R. Tomovic and W. J. Karplus in a glass display case. I jotted the name and address and wrote a letter to Dr. Karplus expressing my desire to work for a Ph. D. under his tutelage. Within a week, I received an application form with a note containing a “half-sentence scribble” urging me to apply.

Some time later, I received an admission letter. What do I do with it without some financial assistance? I pulled my courage, rehearsed what I was to say, prepared notes for any possible grilling and called Professor Karplus up. His secretary Maya answered the phone and told me that he was about to go to Europe and patched me through. Prof. Karplus picked up the phone and said, “Yes, there is money to support. You can come.” With that he was about to hang up. I prevailed upon him to send me a written statement to that effect. This time, I lucked out; I received one full sentence! It simply stated, “You are appointed as a Research Assistant at $2.75/hour.”

During my four years at UCLA, I can actually count the number of times I had a “conversation” with Prof. Karplus. They were infrequent and utterly brief. This is not to say that he was not interested in me. After passing my written qualifier examination, I wanted to go home to visit my parents in India; it had been four years since I last saw them. On the eve of my departure, he gave me R. S. Varga’s Matrix Iterative Analysis and asked me to read it while in India. As I was leaving, he said, “Fill your time cards for the summer and leave them with Maya.” That is vintage Karplus for you.
Now I would like to relate a really extended conversation I had with Walter. We were both attending a Neural Networks conference in Houston, Texas. I bumped into him and we had a cup of coffee in the hotel lounge. To my great surprise, Walter said, “Rao, let us go out for a brief walk so we can chat.” I simply could not believe my ears. During that rambling conversation, he was talking about the purpose of life. We talked about J. Krishnamurti’s philosophy and Indian (Hindu) approach to life. We talked about life and about death. He envied, he said, the Hindu way of life, “It prepares you so well for death.”

He felt that he did not do enough; he could have done more. Was he referring to his contributions to the profession or to life itself? I was not sure. To cheer him up, I started reciting a litany of his accomplishments. I even took the liberty – for the first and only time – to point out how close he came to inventing what we now call “Hopfield net.”

“Rao, let me tell you a story. This is a Kipling story. You probably know it already. I read a German translation of it when I was a kid.

“You see this was a story about an Indian bureaucrat. He rose to a high position in government, wielded a lot of power, felt he was “in charge” and eventually retired from service.

“In spite of a string of successes in his professional life, he was unhappy. Dissatisfied. He felt that there was a void in his life. He did not do enough. He could have accomplished more. That was the source of his anguish.

“He finally decided to go the Himalayas. He selected a secluded cave on a high mountain slope, sat cross-legged and began to meditate – in his search for satisfaction in life. In no time villagers in the valley below came to know of the new “swami.” They visited him with reverence. Offered him flowers, fruit and milk. Sought his blessings. And they asked him for his words of wisdom.

“What could he offer? He himself didn’t know what the question was. He nevertheless accepted their offerings and gave them a mystic smile.

“One day a big earthquake shook the whole valley floor. Mudslides and floods soon followed. The villagers ran helter-skelter. It would take weeks for any assistance to reach them from the government. The only thing they know how is to pray. And they did.