

In memory of Pete Van Ness

Richard Tanter

Peter Van Ness,
born 26 March 1933 in Paterson, New Jersey;
died 4 March 2026, in Canberra, ACT.

I knew Pete less than many of you, and only for the last third of his long life.

For me, Pete was one of five or six lodestones in my life, the people who come to my mind when I look at myself and what I'm doing.

Most of those people have gone - some for a long time, others, only yesterday.

I didn't have siblings when I grew up, though it turned out there were in fact a lot. Pete turned out to be a much-loved older brother.

Pete and Anne provided a Canberra haven for me, often in rather hard times. With Pete it was about conversation, talking reading and thinking together, a lot of laughing, and teaching.

I think I first met Pete in San Diego, where I'd gone to speak about East Timor to a bunch of Asianists. When I met up there again with Chalmers Johnson, he invited me to a party that Pete was at. We didn't get to talk much. Of course, at the time I knew little of Pete's long, and I suspected, complicated, connection with Johnson - Berkeley, China, Vietnam.

And then, by immense good fortune, Pete and Anne and a young Harry came to stay with Luisa and me and our kids in our house in Kyoto.

That was to be the beginning of a friendship and working collaboration over three decades.

Luisa is here today, and Kai and Liz both said they remembered Pete and Anne and Harry, both as children, and as adults, and send their love to Anne and Harry.

I loved coming to Anne and Pete's house, not knowing who I was going to meet over dinner at the end of a working day. But it was almost always someone I didn't know, and who I became grateful to know.

We didn't write much together, but talked and argued all the time, and read each other carefully. Pete knew China in vast depth, and I knew a little about Indonesia and Japan, and Pete had this sharp and complicated relationship to America - and sometimes to China.

I suspect I'm not the only one here who felt Pete could sometimes drive them crazy. On the phone, or when we met up, or in long emails, he would tell me things I already knew, that he had told me before - or even that I had told him. But I realised this was almost always a rehearsal of something he was writing, feeling his way through to something new, talking out the wrinkles in the argument as a story.

Pete was a China scholar with deep involvement with international relations - or the other way around. I was and am neither. As Pete often told people around here,

“Richard knows nothing about International Relations Theory - he never even took an IR class in graduate school.”

The second part was certainly true. At the New School on a Fulbright I took one look at Hans Morgenthau and headed for the door to social theory and psychoanalytic sociology and anthropology.

But at that time in New York I came to practising international relations through intense activism over East Timor and Indonesia, and later militarisation and nuclear weapons.

I did and do care about some of the theoretical issues that Pete taught and talked about, but from a very different background and distinctly different intellectual perspectives. Sometimes he conceded that was helpful, sometimes, he noted, distinctly not.

The one thing we agreed about was IR theory as a “discipline” that took the security dilemma as a major theoretical achievement, useful and mostly ignored though it is, had a lot of problems. But our long lists of those problems were distinctly different, I learned about a pliable, fruitful way of playing with another set of ideas.

Pete was courageous - manifoldly so. It was courage of a quiet sort, with a soft hand, and palpable effect.

Around here, in Canberra, around ANU, Pete stood out. As some of you know, over an even longer time than I knew Pete, I was working closely with Des Ball. One of the least aggressive people I knew well, Pete was never afraid to tell Des where he was wrong on a matter of importance for both of them, in fields about which Des knew, and about which Pete thought Des should know better.

Pete’s courage in the areas of life where I was in a position to see it made me think it was likely very present in the places where I could not.

So too Pete’s creativity, which I valued at least as much. In his teaching, in and out of a classroom, in his writing - about nuclear weapons, about human rights in China and reconciliation in East Asia, about missile defence, about nuclear power after Fukushima - in his ongoing collective projects - making things happen, finding new collaborators, linking them to old ones, pushing to get the book published, moving a group of us onto the next project - well, sometimes.

At the end of each gathering or collective project there was always a party - usually a great one - to heal the frayed edges, re-energise after long days, and laugh a great deal.

That creativity, fused with intellectual courage, and a deep capacity for love and friendship, was what I valued, and already miss.

Pete would probably roll his eyes at what I’m about to say, but in a month or so, I’ll get an email from him through the ether, elaborating on it, or gently setting me straight.

Some of you probably know about this, but I first came to it through the extraordinary psychoanalytic work of Wilfred Bion - winner of the Military Cross in the First World War and healer of deeply damaged minds in the second.

Bion pointed to a letter John Keats wrote in 1817 about what he called, with an adjective that makes us stumble today, Negative Capability:

‘Negative capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’

Strange to say, perhaps, but that was Pete, who I knew and loved.