
My unforgettable moments with Walter and Judith Munk

It gives me great pleasure to share some of the experiences of my meeting Prof. Walter Munk in USA. I found Prof. Munk to be one of the greatest scientist (combining old world charm with modern outlook) and the most gracious human being that I have come across in all my life.

The occasion was the US Memorial Day – Monday, May 25, 1998 – a US Holiday. I was invited to Prof. Munk's residence for a "Pot-Luck" lunch arranged by the International Center of the University of California, San Diego. At that point of time, I was working at Scripps Institution of Oceanography of the UCSD as a Visiting Scientist and as Associate Project Director of Multinational INDOEX Project funded by US-NSF.

It turned out to be a remarkable/memorable experience. The whole Munk house was thrown open – it was not a mansion, it was not a big gorgeous bungalow, but it was a dream house – a house created and nurtured by a scientist with unmatched commitment for Science of the Oceans. It was a testimony to his great adventure in Oceanography. The living and bedrooms all carried the impression of a great scientist and nature explorer – with books, souvenirs and mementos. It was a private museum in a way. In spite of the walls, it gave the impression that it was open from all sides – reflecting the openness of the ones who lived there – Prof. Walter Munk and lady Munk. The back portion of the house extended into a small gorge and into a sloping wooded expanse leading eventually to the Pacific Coast downhill. The back of the house had a small porch with a wonderful view of the quiet Pacific. Inside the porch was located a huge binocular, of the type one sees in the tourist places – like the one I saw, during my last visit to US in 1986, located on the Manhattan coast to watch the Statue of Liberty on the far away Ellis Island. In fact, it seemed to be exactly one like that – with a slot for inserting coins allowing one to watch distant horizon for a limited period. One has to keep inserting coins to continue enjoying the scene. Its location in Munk's house gave the impression of a ship's 'watch' on the bridge. In fact, the whole house was perhaps designed in such a manner as to give the impression that one is standing on the bridge of a ship providing a clear view of the vast expanse of the ocean right to the horizon.

Facing the other side and up the gorge, was a small doorway structure with a winding jungle track leading to the Pacific slopes if you move towards right, and leading to the house if you take left. A 45 degree sector of the gorge had been converted into an amphitheatre with circular rows for sitting in squatting posture. Each row is backed up by a row of flowering plants separating one row from the next.

The day was bright and sunny and the weather was absolutely fine. I enjoyed this beautiful weather while walking up from the Nirenberg Hall side along the La Jolla Shores Drive. Reaching the Munk house at 9530 La Jolla Shores Drive, I could not figure out any activity as the house was tucked slightly inside behind a small garden with a Chinese/Japanese doorway. One has to walk a few steps down into the front lawn to reach the main house. On entering, I was welcomed by my friends – Alma and Bill Coles, who had invited me to the gathering. I had been especially instructed not to bring any food items as I was living in La Jolla alone and my family had not joined by then. (In fact, they were to join me a few days later). Alma promised to take care of my contribution. It was nice gesture on their part. This way, I was the only 'guest' in that lunch party celebrating the US Memorial Day. All others were hosts in some way. Prof. Munk and Lady Munk were the real hosts.

When I entered the inner courtyard, I was taken by a pleasant surprise – there were already lots of people – families in colorful costumes – some representing their countries of origin, and the vast variety of dishes were all already laid out on long tables covering three sides of the rectangular lawn towards the right side of the porch. Everyone was in a festive and relaxed holiday mood. There was some music in the air and welcome drink was served. My hosts introduced me to several of their friends – many American families and many others from China, Korea, Italy, Netherlands, Germany etc. Many of the younger couples, with small babies in prams were post-docs working at UCSD and were specially invited with the aim of making them feel at home in this great land of opportunity. My invitation from Alma and Bill was also expressly for this purpose for they were under the impression that I was visiting US for the first time, whereas in fact I had earlier visited the Eastern side for a short period almost 12 years ago to the day. But the southwestern state of California was indeed so very

different – with its vast expanses and the sunny climate. Life and people were altogether different here and perhaps needed a familiarisation.

Soon the lunch was announced and everyone started to queue up and relish dishes of their choice. Being a vegetarian, I had to be guided by Alma – but there were umpteen choices even for me. There were delicious cakes and cookies and salads etc. that I enjoyed to the core. There were drinks too, but I restricted myself to usual cold drinks – basically lemon soda etc. As people were still busy filling their plates and palates, suddenly there was announcement that the ‘funfare’ is about to begin. We were asked to shift to the amphitheatre and as people moved to the terraces, a team of 4-5 dancers appeared from the doorway on the small stage in front of us. They went on presenting dance after dance items in quick succession from different European and East/North European countries all with folk music and with different costumes too. The transformation from one dance form to another was unbelievably swift and smooth. It was a marvelous fiesta of the kind I had never witnessed earlier. It was an outdoor performance par excellence for a select audience. Due to the beautiful setting and wonderful weather everyone enjoyed it to the fullest.

After these dance items, there were some little presentations and we were free to move around, mingle and make friends. Some were looking like great serious scientists and some were looking like young geniuses – but all were in a holiday mood enjoying the sunny day. There was no hesitation in the air. Everyone was feeling totally relaxed. I met and exchanged pleasantries with several of the couples. Some with their little cute kids jumping here and there. And there was a good sprinkling of the ‘rich and famous’ SIO scientists – many of them living in bungalows adjacent to Munk’s. In fact several of the UCSD professors – young at that time – I was told, had acquired this piece of land overlooking the Pacific and just next to Scripps in the early fifties and had settled there. A great deal of Scripps achievements were due to this fact that many scientists – oceanographers often going on ship cruises to different parts of the globe – or setting up of their test experiments on the Scripps pier – lived close by and right next to the ocean. It was their 24 hr, 365 day, lifelong affair with the ocean.

A moment later, I noticed Prof. Munk talking to someone. I approached him, and after waiting for their conversation to finish, I extended my hand and introduced myself to him. When I told him, I was from India and have come to work for the INDOEX Project at Scripps, he was so elated and excited and went on enquiring about my work and my interests in different fields. I could not help but express my feeling of great satisfaction in having been able to meet the most cherished of the great scientists, of the Cox and Munk (1954) fame. I have always wondered how come a 1954 post-war research result created by Cox and Munk stood the test of 4 decades – without even a single refinement!! I told him that I have ventured into studying the SUNGLINT using INSAT-VHRR. I told him of the unique experiment that I successfully undertook of looking at the Sun glint simultaneously from two vantage points in geo-stationary orbit. I explained to him the advantages from such experiment in brief and solicited his guidance. He was thrilled and wanted to know more and more. I told him that subsequently to this work many years ago, I have not been able to make much progress. He shot back “ I too haven’t made much progress”. Great submission indeed to encourage me. He invited me to visit his office later to discuss more details about this remarkable study.

As we were talking, I saw a gracious old lady slowly pushing her wheelchair towards us. Prof. Munk immediately moved close to her and called me. He introduced me to her by her name, Judith. I was taken aback to see her in a handicapped situation. Amongst them, there was no trace of being deprived of any thing in life. They looked to be happiest individuals enjoying life to the core. I was highly impressed to see Mrs. Munk. A tall well built Beautiful lady with a great poise, in spite of her apparent handicap. She was looking old though, but very majestic and gracious. She started talking to me and began asking about my family. When I told her that they would be joining me next week, she felt so sorry that had they been here they would have really enjoyed and it would have been great to watch my daughter’s Bharatnatyam Dances. I could feel that she was almost on the verge of making the announcement about me and my family from India, but only dropped the idea as she felt people were busy in their own conversations. But the glint and the excitement in her eyes were so very clear. She talked and enquired about India and how they had enjoyed their trips to Goa etc. She was all praise for India and one could see the genuineness of all she told in her eyes. Meeting Prof. Walter and Judith Munk, was like meeting my grandfather after a gap of 40 years. Their warmth, their openness, their gentle demeanor, their respect, interest and appreciation made me feel extremely happy and elated. Unforgettable moments indeed.

Subsequently, I enjoyed taking a tour of his house – it was a marvelous experience indeed. The house was intentionally kept open for all to visit and enjoy. Beautiful living room, bedrooms, inner courtyard and the porch - all tastefully done – simple and elegant. A small verandah like kitchen – covered in nice cobalt blue tiles and stocked with rows and rows of beer mugs and glasses neatly laid out. The kitchen maid and her young daughter turned out to be my bus mates and she was very happy and forthcoming to show me around with interest. No escort was of course needed as everything was flung open and inviting. In the living room there were several mementos. There were books and study material in living and bedrooms.

I left the Munk house after saying good bye to Walter and Judith and numerous other scientists and their families with whom I had short interaction during the last three hours. And to Bill and Alma, who so lovingly invited me, I expressed my sincere thanks and gratefulness. Alma had in fact been taking care of my requirements months ahead of my arrival in US. She had pre-arranged for my stay with one of my PRL friend whom she met by chance at the International Center, and she arrived within half an hour of my reaching La Jolla, equipped with the basic needs like mattress, pillows and linen etc. She is a marvelous lady indeed and she is so well known across the campus due to her numerous activities - cultural and others, associated with the UCSD International Center.

After a few days, remembering Prof. Munk’s invitation for discussions, once I decided and went to his Room at SIO loaded with my reprints and prepared to face all the questions that he may ask. Unfortunately, he was not there and it was my folly to have gone there without checking in advance.

Later, a few times when we crossed steps on the way to Nirenberg Hall, he would always remember and say usual ‘Hi’ in American style. But behind the impersonal style, I could see the genuine interest in keeping a relationship alive. On one occasion, to my utter astonishment, I saw Prof. Munk driving slowly down the La Jolla Shores slopes on a simple indigo blue moped, much like the Indian Bajaj SUNNY - attired in shorts and a white cool typical San Diego sweat shirt. I was more than overjoyed to respond to his raised hand. That scene has remained etched in my mind forever.

There is no facet of Oceanography that is not touched upon by the greatness of Prof. Walter Munk. He has contributed fundamentally to all aspects (waves, currents, tides, transport, remote sensing, climate, instruments, ships, aircrafts, deep sea drilling, satellites, ideas, theories, discoveries, reviews, memoirs, books, and above all leadership par excellence) and has been honored with all the prestigious prizes that can be showered on an American Scientist and he has won numerous prestigious international awards. Munk’s name is linked to the Oceans forever.

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