

LIVES LIVED

Being at sea with Tim Parsons meant having the mysteries of the oceans revealed

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Photo Tim Parsons. COURTESY OF FAMILY

Timothy Richard Parsons: Oceanographer. Mentor. Dad. Joker. Born Nov. 1, 1932, in Ceylon (Sri Lanka); died April 11, 2022, in Sidney, B.C., of pneumonia; aged 89.

A visit with Tim could be a dangerous experience: you risked ambush by a fake spider, a whoopee cushion or a snake in the peanut jar. It was also exciting, filled with talk of fisheries, pollution and overpopulation, as befitting a renowned marine scientist. But Tim's path to the top of his profession was not easy.

He left his tropical birthplace at age 4 with his mother and older brother, following the accidental death of his father. Rejected by the paternal grandparents, who feared financial responsibility, the family moved to the vicarage of his widowed grandfather in Cornwall. Here Tim was introduced to the English climate and became fascinated by the natural world of hedgerows and beaches.

His education at Christ's Hospital, a private boys' boarding school, happened only through the generosity of a family friend. He was a mediocre student, preferring to observe nature by dreamily watching birds and butterflies. One teacher understood Tim and sent him off to record changes in the same patch of meadow over several months. The experience set Tim on a lifelong quest to study relationships within natural systems.



After graduation, a scholarship brought him to McGill University. He arrived in Canada at 16, utterly alone. He studied biochemistry and after completing his PhD in 1958, took a job at the Pacific Biological Station in Nanaimo, B.C., because he could study the sea.

While at university, Tim met fellow student Anne Hodge. Anne recalls talking with him in the dark at a party. When the lights came on, he turned out to be a dashing blond Englishman, smoking a pipe and wearing an ascot, all very exotic. They married in 1958 and spent their honeymoon on the train headed for the West Coast. In 1971, they moved to Vancouver and the University of British Columbia.

Tim's work showed that the number of returning salmon could be greatly increased by adding nutrients. He laughed when explaining how he drank a glass of water containing the nutrients at a public meeting to prove it was safe. The program was so successful that it continues today. Being at sea with Tim was like that, having the mysteries of the oceans revealed. His work examining marine ecosystems gained him worldwide recognition and many awards, including the prestigious Japan Prize in Science and Technology in 2001, the Order of Canada in 2005 and a medal established in his name.

He and Anne had three children, Stephanie, Allison and Peter, all of whom he loved dearly. Tim's upbringing in a fatherless home, and years spent in a boys' boarding school, often left him floundering in personal relationships. And yet Allison fondly remembers him dressing as Santa and climbing up to their bedroom windows at night, or leaving footprints around the chimney to be found on Christmas morning. Stephanie's death at 15 devastated the family. Tim blamed himself for being away so much, and his marriage dissolved.

In 1980, Tim married Carol Lalli, a professor of marine science at McGill. They collaborated on research projects, wrote books and travelled widely, lecturing in Chile, China, Japan, Taiwan and Southeast Asia.

Tim loved creating and illustrating stories for his grandchildren, often about a hobbit who lived in his backyard. When the children came to visit, John Hobbit was never there but left notes such as, "Gone to Hawaii for the winter." He was frugal with himself (cutting his own hair) and generous with others but there was no mercy on the tennis court from his wicked back slice. Tim also funded a student at Christ's Hospital school, as was done for him.

He was an impatient man, always early for appointments, believing that time should never be wasted. But this belief served him well. He was a prolific scientist who mentored colleagues and made a tremendous impact on our understanding of the sea.

Ian Perry is a colleague and former student, and Carol Lalli is Tim's wife.