

My enigmatic advisor

Several times in the past I was asked to comment on Rob Kirby as a mathematician, and as a friend. The most recent invitation was from my academic brother Chuck Livingston, who was preparing *Celebratio Mathematica* article about him. I told Chuck “I had already praised him as a mathematician in the Gokova Conference Proceedings book, honoring his sixtieth birthday, this time let me to comment on his non-mathematical side frankly; but you have to promise me you won’t censor what I will write”. Unfortunately, he couldn’t agree, and I ended up not writing that article (accolades in the absence of frankness are mere platitudes). Now that I have more time on my hands, I will put down some thoughts and memories about him.

No doubt as a mathematician Rob deserves all the accolades. As a grad student, he was my mathematical hero (along with Denis Sullivan). But as a person he has been a total enigma for me. I must have spent a good part of past 50 years, arguing his racist bigoted views (my bias opinion). Discussing politics with him would always put me in a state of spiritual abasement, strangely I wouldn’t mind finding myself outside of his circle of favorite friends.

Mathematicians are always in competition with each other; I never felt comfortable in math receptions or dinners, where this is most visible. They’re usually the places to gossip behind people. Nonstop jokes and laughter, can hardly hide hostility and prejudices (If you’re a muslim like me be prepared to face callous questions as well). I must say Rob might be bias but at least honest with his views, which sets him apart from the rest. He might be stubborn, but he doesn’t hold grudge. Even after a brutal argument, he would come back to make up readjust and repair his stance, which might have bothered his conscience. His best quality is his constant struggle to improve his conscience.

-While discussing math with him in a Berkeley cafe, he suddenly asked me “Do you know why I didn’t support you in MSU during your dismissal?” :), Surprised, I said “I donno why, could it be racial?”. Then he got up angrily left the cafe. We ran after him, and brought him back to the cafe. Next day we continued our math discussion as if nothing happened :)

-While discussing math with him over my kitchen table, he suddenly asked “Selman why haven’t you gotten enough recognition for your work over the years?” :), I came back with “I donno, could it be because they’re asking you?” He got angry, started to leave my house, We ran after him, brought him back. We made up. Next day we continued to discuss math where we left out :)