A Tribute to Kei Aki
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After getting my B.Sc. degree in 1982, I left Israel for an open-end trip. My plan was to work on the road, live in various places, and after a few years go back to graduate school. This worked well in Europe and parts of the US, but eventually I got stuck in LA with only 4 dollars. Since it was difficult to find a reasonable menial job in LA, I looked for one requiring a B.Sc., and got hired as a geophysics technician at USC. This was fun, so I hung around until 1985, when I felt it was time to go back to school. Exactly at that time Kei moved from MIT to USC and his arrival created an intellectual atmosphere conducive to working on theoretical problems in seismology. That was a very strong addition to the other attractions of USC, so I stayed and became Kei's student.

I graduated at the end of 1990 and moved to Harvard to work with Jim Rice on fault mechanics. After six years I felt ready for a faculty job, and exactly then Kei decided to leave USC to take a position in La Reunion. This produced a vacant seismology position at USC, which I ended up getting. However, Kei had a chaired position and I was hired as an assistant professor, so the chaired position remained open until it was filled 3 years later by Tom Jordan (who had replaced earlier Kei at MIT when Kei moved to USC).

In some ways I was still not ready for the faculty job. For one thing, I didn't even have a decent suit. Then one day Kei showed up at my office (which had been his) with a nice "colors of Benetton" suit and asked me if I would like to have it. I tried it on, and it fit perfectly, so I accepted happily. That suit is still my default choice when I need one.

My experience with Kei illustrates that reality follows spiral patterns that are controlled by a mixture of causality and chance. We tend to remember the causal aspects, ignore the chance, and put ourselves at the center of the experience. So from my perspective, Kei showed up at USC just when I needed an advisor, he left USC just when I needed a faculty position, and he gave me a suit just when I needed one. I thank him sincerely for all these things, and more importantly for exerting a lasting positive influence on me and the entire field of seismology.

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