

May 19, 1997

To: Kevin Kelly  
Editor, *Wired* Magazine

From: Jim Dator  
University of Hawaii at Manoa

Re: Your Article on Tom Mandel

I normally thumb through *Wired* when I get it, just looking at the pictures. I generally ignore the words the first time through, and go back, if at all, to do the reading later.

So it was a shock when I turned to page 109 of the May issue and saw a hollow-eyed Tom Mandel gazing out at me. It was really too much to bear. I had to put down the magazine and sob for a while. And it was not until the June issue arrived, and I saw no comments about Tom there, that I finally summoned the will to read what Katie Hafner had written about him.

Tom had told me that he was dying. But then, he always told me he dying whenever his back would act up. Not knowing how really close to death he was, I believed him when he wrote that he intended to come to Hawaii soon, and that we would see each other here. So when I went to the *Contact* conference in California not far from his home, in late March 1995, I did not bother to go by to see him.

Tom died shortly thereafter, and I have never forgiven myself for not making the effort to visit him before he died. I may never be able to forgive myself, and the picture of Tom that Ms. Hafner painted makes it that much harder.

The Tom Mandel she described might very well be the Tom Mandel the Well Beings knew. But he is not the person I knew. And I suspect I knew him longer than any of them.

Tom was my student, and his death hit me like the death of my child. I was supposed to have died long before Tom, and he should have had the pleasure of marking my passage. Tom had done what any teacher--any parent--craves: he had responded to my ideas and then taken them to heights far beyond anything I imagined.

Tom was the very first graduate of the futures program at the University of Hawaii, in 1972, even before it was a formal entity. He had created a Non-Major Major BA in political futures here, and then had gone to San Jose State to study in one of the few future-oriented graduate programs available at that time. Tom dropped out of San Jose, having been lured into futures consultancy by the Stanford Research Institute where he worked as a resident futurist (under varying labels) until his death. Tom had found a way to be a successful futurist with nothing but a self-made BA from the University of Hawaii, a pit stop near the end of the known world.

Tom had been very active as a student here, fully and creatively involved in various projects--a TV course we did called "Tune to the Future"; a project, coincident with the revision of the Honolulu City Charter, to make Honolulu a City of the Future; a multi-media show called "Dreaming the Undreamt Dream", and many more. Of course, Tom was but one of a rich pool of students of that time who went on to become significant shapers of the future, in Hawaii and beyond. Tom, however, was the only one who

became a professional futurist.

When the futures program was finally officially established at the University of Hawaii in the mid 1970s--where it still flourishes--Tom would always come by whenever he was in Hawaii visiting his parents, and then after their deaths, and tell the enthralled budding futurists in the University classes what a real grown-up futurist did--though he would point out he could not REALLY tell them the interesting stuff, because it was all proprietary. Whatever material was not secret he would leave with us. We used his description of scenario writing for many years.

Folks would usually join Tom at Anna Bannanas for some beers after class, where maybe some secrets were revealed, but mainly Tom would just complain about the fact that neither the patrons nor the decor ever changed at Anna's--it was, and is, forever frozen at the best point of time the world ever knew, in the late 1960s--which of course made Anna's the perfect place to talk about the future.

Tom touched the hearts, minds, and sometimes bodies, of many people here, off-line and in person. And while everyone he met here would certainly agree that Tom was a "realist," cynic, and iconoclast with a low tolerance for any bullshit but his own, I think they would also agree that he was primarily a warm, vulnerable, insecure, loving person--loyal and caring beyond anything else.

I don't doubt that everything Ms. Hafner said about Tom is true. I don't know myself. Though invited by Tom and others to join the Well, I never did. Having also been on Murray Turoff's original EIES, an email addict from the earliest times, and a friend of some of the earliest Well Beings, I never saw any reason to pay money for the privilege of communicating with them--and I couldn't stand then, and can't stand now, any list that permits flaming.

For Tom to be portrayed mainly as a flaming asshole is regrettable. So I wanted to get my experience of Tom Mandel into the *Wired* record. It was the loyal and caring man I cried out for when his eyes grabbed me as I thumbed through the pages of your magazine.

PS: *Wired* did not publish this letter. Figures. That's called "Freedom of the Press."