

Tributes for Neil, 23 November 2018

Jonathan Hofstetter

We are all friends here of Neil - he was so constant in his life, so always the same, that we must all already know him well

So, I wanted as his friend to recount some of my impressions and memories of him, to talk a little about him, and to tell you how he touched my life

1. First impressions?

I met Neil 1982, 36 years ago, bright spring day, we were both at St Edmund Hall Oxford, studying history (too mainstream for him apparently), dressed even then in his usual dark trousers and large sweater (shopping was something of an unknown activity for him)

We met because we were both on the college arts festival committee. Well, of course, Neil made it an alternative art festival - punk rock poets, Jamaican wall hangings, discussions about Papua new guinea traditional boats...bearing in mind that this was the college's first ever arts festival and it was largely known for its rugby prowess, you might imagine the impact...

Neil (and by association Lilli) was the only person in college that lived out in their second year on a long boat. I always remember that year a particularly "boaty" sort of smell whenever Neil visited college.

Both these things were scene setters - throughout his life, Neil always looked at things a bit differently to the rest of us

2. Early career

Prep school and boarding school at St Edwards - I remember only two things he told me about school: first, two inspirational teachers that gave him his intellectual curiosity; secondly, school had left him with this knack of eating his food very quickly (apparently you safeguarded your food this way)

Then up to Oxford as an exhibitioner but claimed to be disappointed with the course - I think he had wanted to design his own course, which might have come as a shock to the dons

Oxford was not so bad though as he met Lilli the love of his life there in the first term.

Neil was a natural historian, and after university he spent some months on his own extraordinary oral history project which involved interviewing 40 or so villagers in this and neighbouring villages - he always had such a love for and a wealth of knowledge about the local traditions of these villagers as a

result of that - a walk with Neil in this area always produced an anecdote taken from one these local interviewees...

Then two years in India at Delhi University studying anthropology

3. India

I think was a huge influence on his life - he loved India, the beautiful revealing chaos of traditional village life, the strong carnival tradition, he learnt about palmistry, he met Holy men, his natural openness to otherness his passport to understanding Indian wisdom and culture

...when he got back he came to visit me in Ladbroke Grove - I lived close to where Charmian lived at the time - and I was surprised that he spoke at high speed in a strong Hindi accent, so absorbed had he become in Indian culture. I remember also he had no idea what he wanted to do...graduate schemes just didn't fit the bill

4. Married life

Then it all fell into place - he married Lilli, he apprenticed to a local carpenter who he knew and started to learn a trade, he bought the house in Lane End and had 5 beautiful children. So Neil became rooted, via his community and his family which he loved above all else. I admired Neil, and in truth I was a little envious of him and his life.

- he just seemed to have endless talents - a talent to talk interestingly about all sorts of subjects, a talent to be curious about and solicitous of other people's lives, a talent to break into that easy laughter of his where he seemed always to be laughing with you, a talent to be the centre of attention and to light up a party (raucous evenings playing drinking games; and that annoying thing about him that when you invited Neil to a dinner party he always became the focus of attention, everybody ended talking to him).

5. Neil had a passion for projects, usually community ones or ones that would cause him a head ache - he led the youth club in Lane End through thick and thin, he was involved in the PHAB club for disabled kids, he propped up the village cricket club, running the annual Quaker camp week, and of course he was a leading light in maintaining the vitality of this church, the church he loved and in which so many spiritual rites of passage in his life took place.

6. One of these passions was for the environment and this led him, via the early building company that he set, Neil may Builders, to his forming Natural Building Technologies. This became a leading supplier of sustainable building materials. And through it Neil became the leading UK expert on sustainable building. [I remember a specialist building contractor coming to see me once and how amazed he was that I knew Neil, his "hero" in his

industry]. It was tough though and when I think of Neil and NBT I think also of Jobe. His persistence and determination with NBT were just mind-boggling.

7. The essence of Neil, though, was spiritual; his relationship with God, at least with the spirit, was central to him, ..was him. One couldn't do anything with Neil - go for a country walk or have a pint - without the conversation being steered to discussions about spirituality, or recommendations of some book that had been particularly enlightening. He had strongly held views about the interconnectedness of the material and spiritual worlds - and wrote about this. He inspired without ever evangelising - maybe something that came from his Indian experience. So much of his life was devoted to reading and considering his favourite subject, theology (in particular his theological heroes Eckardt, Ibn Arabi, Julian of Norwich and... Heidegger), and undertaking the practical side of worship by attending and often leading lessons in this church and retreating to Quarr Abbey the Benedictine Monastery on the Isle of Wight with which he had a long and enduring relationship.

8. In one sense Neil found life easy but he and his family had to face the appalling loss of his son Benny - and I don't know that Neil ever fully came to terms with this loss. He also had to confront his own close collision with death two years ago when his aorta burst, his survival that time on a number of fronts being close to a miracle.

These were extraordinarily hard events to deal with. Neil, because he was Neil, sought to find enlightenment in them, saw them as disrupters to normalcy that might reveal spiritual truth. In these events, like in everything, he tried to concentrate on the essence of the thing, what was important and of real lasting value. And as ever he displayed this reassuring inner confidence which had the effect of also reassuring those who came into contact with him

9.. Neil was an original, an erudite intellectual yet able to talk and mix with anyone (even Prince Charles!), a deeply spiritual thinker yet with the hands of a builder and carpenter, devoted to his family but always welcoming of strangers; concerned with finding the truth of things yet so easy to laugh with.

And in the end the dearest of friends.

Gary Newman

My tribute to Neil May - a dear friend and colleague

It is my belief that Neil has been the single most influential figure of the UK green building movement. The issues that Neil championed through his ideas, words, deeds and above all utterly authentic leadership, are now starting to permeate into the mainstream.

Neil thought deeply, researched widely and always wrote and spoke with passion, eloquence and humour. Neil demanded a lot from those around him but more from himself. He always led from the front.

Neil seemed to require very little extrinsic validation for his work. Neil was motivated by something purer and deeper. But there is surely no one more deserving of the MBE that Neil received last year.

I first met Neil in the mid 1990s when he came to Holyhead to visit my hemp processing factory. At that time, he was running a small building company. I was intrigued that a builder would come all the way from High Wycombe to visit me - particularly as I wasn't involved in the construction sector at all.

But I was to discover that Neil was no ordinary builder. A trained historian, anthropologist and filmmaker turned artisan craftsman builder. Sadly, Neil and I never discussed the reasons for this change of focus. I can speculate that construction perhaps provided the perfect platform for Neil to explore his belief in the urgent need to re-think the relationship between people and nature for humanity to avoid catastrophic climate change.

I remember our Holyhead meeting very well. Neil reached inside one of my processing machines and pulled out a hand full of natural fibres, fixed me with that intense Neil May look of total conviction and said, "this would make really fantastic insulation". And that was the moment his spell was cast.

Looking back, I can see that my working life has largely been a result of that meeting in Holyhead. Neil didn't so much change the way I viewed the world but somehow drew me into his and inspired me to believe that I could do more. Neil had this amazing ability to attract people to his cause, and I feel extremely privileged to be a small part of the community he was central to creating.

As it happens, I went bust before I could manufacture insulation, but by the early noughties I was supplying imported hemp insulation to Neil's new product development and distribution business - Natural Building Technologies. Neil was my only UK customer and stuck by me through thick and thin. And it was mostly thin. But I think it's fair to say that the joy of

being close to Neil was always so much more about spiritual, rather than financial, enrichment.

By the mid-noughties, Neil had recognised that the holistic and profound change he craved was beyond that which could be delivered by a small product supply company operating in an industry that has little sense of value. Neil had some experience of sector organisations through his early work with the Association of Environmentally Conscious Builders - the AECB. But Neil believed that somehow, he needed to radically raise the aspiration of the housing industry. A chance meeting with John Bootland led to the establishment of the Good Homes Alliance. In my opinion, Jon's strategic and organisational talents were the near perfect complement to Neil's more instinctive and maverick leadership.

But the GHA was only the beginning. By the late noughties, Neil had developed a better understanding of the power of organisations to drive change. Neil was a key motivating force for the establishment of the Alliance for Sustainable Building Products, an organisation that I now chair thanks to Neil's encouragement, as well as The Sustainable Traditional Building Alliance.

Neil also helped Jon set up the Passive House Trust and for a short period Neil even chaired Positive Money, a monetary reform organisation. Most recently Neil was the founder of the UK Centre for Moisture in Building at University College London. It is a testimony to Neil's powers of communication that Neil could make the subject of moisture both fascinating and worthy of considerable industry attention and research funding.

To those not involved in the green building movement, all this incredible productivity may seem random. It was not. There was always a compelling logic to where Neil went next. But it seems to me that University College London was able to provide a more permanent space for Neil's visionary but restless talents - thanks largely to the wisdom and support of Neil's academic colleagues.

Although Neil had super-human powers, he was still made of flesh and blood. His considerable and enduring achievements came at some personal cost. Neil's life was punctuated by short periods of sickness and burnout. During these periods Neil would talk about the need to rationalise his working life, to take on less. But then he would emerge re-energised with new ideas and more things to do.

When I stayed with Neil's family last month, it was of course the same old Neil. A relaxed evening of chat and inspiration with Neil describing his plans to do less whilst at the same time alive with new things that required his attention. I don't think Neil knew any other way of being.

But Neil could not have achieved what he did without the constant and unfailing love and support of Lilli. As a family they had to deal with the tragic loss of their son Benny - one of the toughest challenges that a family can go through. But they worked together to make sense of the tragedy, and typical of Neil and Lilli, they then used their experience to help other bereaved families.

Lilli and her children have lost a loving husband and father. I've lost a dear friend and mentor. The green building movement has lost its beating heart. Our world will never be quite the same, but I'm certain I can speak for all of Neil's colleagues when I say that we will continue Neil's work and strive for the better world that Neil believed is within our collective power to create.

Father Brian: Neil and Quarr Abbey

Neil first visited Quarr in 1981 as a young 19 year old. Having completed his A levels in the Classics, in Greek and Latin, monastic life had a deep appeal for him. However he went to Oxford and read modern history, then to India as a Commonwealth Scholar and studied Anthropology. In India he spent time at the Ashram of the former Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths. He also became absorbed in Hindu thought, a religion which is always about God, man and nature. Although a Christian, Neil remained inspired by Hindu thought for the remainder of his life. For him “Nature and the world are not lifeless resources just for human consumption, but contain the knowledge as well as the beauty and the joy and the sorrow that we need to understand ourselves and grow as individuals and as a people, in fulfilment of our destiny here in this world”. This is why Neil was so fascinated with natural materials.

After returning from India, he worked as a building labourer for 4 years, before setting up his own company - Neil May Builders - and later his company Natural Building Technologies. As a labourer, working mainly with his hands, Neil discovered he had a body of knowledge which he hadn't learnt through reason or reading, but by doing. In running NBT he gained an enormous amount of knowledge on buildings in general, both from scientific and philosophical perspectives, and their impact on the environment. He continued to develop his understanding in particular of buildings, people and the environment. He was not at all against modern science - he and I once took the time to study Richard Feynman's little work on QED (quantum electrodynamics), and this connected with thoughts gleaned from the Catholic medieval Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart (medieval mysticism was another passion in his life - he was a member of the Eckhart Society) - but he felt strongly that there should be a “more holistic and reciprocal understanding of the world and of nature.” He opposed strongly any hint of an objectifying and utilitarian treatment of nature (along the lines of, eg Sir Francis Bacon) because, as he said, “once we start treating nature like that, then we start looking at other people also as resources to be controlled, manipulated, exploited for our human ends.”

In 2002, Neil began coming again regularly to Quarr Abbey. This was when I first met him. Filled with his interests in spirituality, theology, philosophy, science, the arts, music, buildings, nature, horticulture, woodland management, anthropology, monasticism, aesthetics, business and finance matters ... this list could be much added to ... Neil brought with him a tremendous force of enthusiasm and energy which is extremely rare in any individual. And of course he found in Quarr a ground well suited for his inspirational ideas. In fact, being a monastery, we were already living a kind of life style much attuned to his outlook. One of his constant refrains was for the need to “do things in a Benedictine manner.” He began by giving our community some talks, generally centred on nature and the environment. At

the time we were endeavouring to develop our “Heritage Project” - which we called “The Two Abbeys Project” - developing our site consisting of our monastic buildings and a ‘Scheduled Ancient Monument’ - the ruins of an old Cistercian Abbey dated to 1132 - and 200 acres of land some of which is woodland stretching to the north coast of the IOW. Serving on various committees - the Quarr Heritage Committee, Buildings Committee (including energy considerations) our Finance Committee and being very instrumental in starting the Friends of Quarr, the work culminated in the award of an HLF grant for £2.2million. Neil was keenly aware of the importance of learning from the past (as evidenced in his 2017 STBA paper “The Future of the Past”), maintaining values which today are being eroded - beauty, silence, important relationships between people, buildings and the environment, learning from nature, spirituality, hospitality, culture and the arts - and of course these are all proper to the values of a Benedictine monastery which we were eager to maintain and have flourish in our heritage plans. Throughout all this work, and indeed up until the time of his death, Neil has been like an ever present ‘father’ to inspire and support with his burning enthusiasm and insights, but never to dominate or control.

Neil will certainly be greatly missed at Quarr by all of us - monks, employees, volunteers, friends, guests, visitors - all who knew him, knew him above all else as a friend. At each of his visits, it was very clear that his time was for others, including especially his time for the Lord in prayer. His presence always fostered a unity among us. He would engage with us monks on theological, philosophical and scientific matters - Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Heidegger, and Ibn ‘Arabi were his favourites - as well as on personal and family matters But he would also make sure to engage personally with our employees. They knew he had a brilliant mind, saw him as hard working and compassionate, making everyone feel important, right down to the person pushing the broom! (Comment from our employees)

Sometimes Neil and indeed Lilli too as well as many others of us felt that no-one else could do the things he did. Do any of us know anyone else like Neil? He knew that what he wanted to do was too much for one person. Although Neil’s physical presence is no longer with us, his inspiration will continue to give new light and life. May his mission continue in all its different aspects with Neil’s light still shining among and within us.

Joe, Eddie, Anna and Jacob

Growing up with Mum and Dad as our parents, we feel lucky that we never had to question whether we were loved. Ever since we can remember, they have always been there, fully committed to raising us as best they could. Even though Dad has died, we know his love continues and everything he was will stay with us.

Our dad was an honest man, and worked towards the things that he believed were worthwhile. His attitude towards life inspired us, and taught us the importance of trying to do the right thing, even if this was not the easiest thing. He always made an effort and treated people with dignity and respect. He was keen to widen people's perspectives of the world, and was always getting us to think deeper, to challenge our assumptions - though of course it was a different matter when we challenged *his* assumptions. Dad understood the importance of being physically, mentally, and spiritually balanced, and that it was acceptable to have two ice creams in a row. We remember his consistency, and his reliable and dependable nature. These are all fundamental values which remain with us, and will continue to affect us as we grow.

But what we will really remember about Dad is his presence. He taught us practical skills, such as how to ride a bike, play garden cricket, how to build stone bridges over streams and make homemade Christmas trees. He was often busy but always made sure that he spent time with us as his children, in day to day life and on special family occasions. We have so many good memories - playing games together, the holidays we spent in France and on the wet mountains of Wales, Scotland and Yorkshire, his singing and reading to us before we went to bed, his infectious laugh, his love for tradition, his controversial views and his dislike of political correctness, and his ability to sing louder and more tunefully than the rest of our family.

He made our lives good and fun as well as meaningful, and was full of important, helpful advice. He cared for us greatly and we know this. We will miss him being around and we feel lucky that he was our Dad.

Lilli's Ode to Neil

I first met Neil in 1981, at the freshers' disco at our Oxford college, St. Edmund Hall. He always maintained that he first met me at the Christmas disco. But much to my surprise - and intense satisfaction - I heard him telling someone a couple of years ago, that actually he had noticed me even before the freshers' disco, at our first-ever formal college dinner - as one of only two girls worth considering as potential girlfriend material. He tried the other one first, but soon realised his mistake....

We started going out together in the spring of 1982. I remember walking on a sunny April day in Christ Church meadow, with this amazing new boyfriend, doing cartwheels for joy. I fell in love with his unique style of dress - at that time a white tee-shirt, old-man trousers and braces, and virtually skinhead haircut - chosen mostly for financial reasons, as it meant one trip to the barber's for a 'number 2' would last him much longer than a more conventional cut.

I also fell in love with his mighty intellect, and was in awe when he talked of religion and spiritual matters. I had never met anyone like Neil before. In later years, when he talked of this, his favourite subject, after dinner with friends, I would nearly always fall asleep. But in recent years, my respect and understanding of his deep faith and questioning exploration of spiritual matters grew, and I felt privileged to have my very own spiritual guide.

Neil always had the ability to talk to anyone, and made no distinction in the value of a person, whether lorry drivers on our early hitch-hiking adventures, semi-literate co-passengers on long Indian railway journeys (in the third class carriages, of course), university lecturers, or indeed royalty. And almost without exception, everyone he met would recognise that Neil always spoke from the heart.

From the time I first knew Neil I always loved his laugh. From the early days when I visited him at his mum's house in London, right up until the week before he died, I loved being in the same room as him when he was reading 'Private Eye' - it was always much funnier listening to him laughing than it was reading the magazine myself. And when he used to watch 'Tom and Jerry' or 'Laurel and Hardy' videos at Grandad Bill's house - the same 3 or 4 videos every Sunday for what seemed like years - he would laugh louder and harder and longer than anyone else - every time.

We got married in 1989, and thereafter we enjoyed a pretty traditional division of labour. Neil went out to work and earned the money - not much of it in the early days, when he used to cycle over Wheeler End Common to John Cook's workshop, where he worked as a building labourer. Not an obvious career choice for an Oxford history graduate, but he wanted to do something honest, of value, and local.

I did the shopping, cooking, occasional cleaning and laundry. I stayed at home and looked after our growing family. Neil strongly believed that bringing up children was the most important job in the world.

He showed his appreciation in many ways - including a friendly slap on my bum if he was in range when I bent over to get something out of a cupboard. He rarely gave me presents, and never gave me flowers (other than stems of purple sprouting broccoli or reddy-green beetroot tops, fresh from the garden). But he told me

every day that I was beautiful, that he loved me, and that he was so glad that he had married me.

We felt blessed in our life together, especially the last two years, when his life was saved after his catastrophic 'explosion'. Neil had to reduce the number of hours he worked, and we spent more time together than ever before. We used to joke that we were like 'an old married couple' - going for walks, reading books on either side of the open fire, and attending hospital appointments together.

Even after Benny died in 2007, Neil's aortic dissection in October 2016, and me dislocating my shoulder with all its complications last year, we still felt blessed, and that these last two years of 'borrowed time' were a gift.

Sometimes when we were walking in the woods we would see two trees growing together. We felt that we were like that - and the longer we were married, the closer we became, especially over the last two years - but still with two separate crowns. I have faith that my crown will continue to flourish on its own, though lopsided at first - as I know that deep down our roots will forever be entwined.