

HENRI AND I***A reflection on my life with Henri*****JACKI BORTOFT****The Early Years – Travel, Parties, Sun-Seeking**

It was 1962, I was 21 and had been in England less than a year. I was a student of Biology and Chemistry at Birkbeck College where I also worked as a technician in the zoology prep room. One evening before classes, I was quietly having supper in the refectory on my own, when suddenly in front of me stood a thin pale young man in a lab coat with a shock of red hair and full red beard. He said, "Would you come out with me next Saturday night?" and I think I replied, "Oh my goodness, all this over a bowl of minestrone!" Well he wined and dined me in fine style and I learned later he'd laid his plan carefully, enquiring of a more sophisticated colleague where to take me for a special occasion! This I think became a feature of his person. I have found in his diary lists of interesting places to eat, to drink in London and elsewhere, books, music, films and recipes collected carefully for future reference. He had a great love of life and all it could offer.

Over the next months we discovered we liked many of the same things and particularly laid plans to travel during the holidays. A trip to Ibiza hitch-hiking that summer, and Paris. He was clearly an old hand at this travel method having made the journey to Malta twice already to stay with the family of a girlfriend. He loved the contrast between England and Italy, the Mediterranean, the youth hostels, sleeping on the beach in Nice, and travelling on the ferry, laden with priests and ordinary Neapolitans. I took some time to adjust to our travelling fare which tended to be a tin of sardines, local cheese, bread and often a bottle of wine. But there were great experiences to be had and a thrill from not knowing where your next lift would come from. The remarkable fact that the gloom that could settle after several hours on a hot dusty road would lift instantly when a car slowed and stopped for you. We both lived in North London and I owned a Lambretta which we travelled miles on to musical venues, parties, picnics in the country or the south coast and to visit friends in other parts of the city. In those days you could happily leave it propped by the pavement in Trafalgar Square or anywhere else in the centre and one way systems were unknown.

The following year I persuaded him to accompany me on an overland trip back to my native 'Rhodesia' to visit family and to have a different African experience, which it certainly was, through Egypt by train and the Sudan until the tracks stopped at Wau (where by chance Philip Franses also found himself some years later!). Then by merchant lorry to Juba and buses and lifts down through Kenya, and Tanganyika where the ostrich and giraffe ran alongside the road with the transport. Finally through many miles of msasa scrubland (trees with leaves red in the springtime) in Zambia where by complete chance a friend picked us up and drove us the final 100 miles or so back home. It took nearly six weeks.

In the next few years, other trips followed to southern Spain and Morocco. In Istanbul and the Russian border at Anni following a three day train journey across the country to visit Gurdjieff's birthplace in Kars. Then an adventure-filled return on local buses, taking in Erzerum, Kayseri, Goreme and it's ancient Christian rock churches, Hacibectas where the saint's birthday was being celebrated. Then to Konja, the home of the Mevlevi dervishes, and down to Adana on the coast. There we joined others travelling deck class on a cargo boat for a 4 day coastal cruise back to Istanbul, stopping for unloading and loading at Antalya, Bodrum, Ephesus, where we had ample time to visit historic sites and sample local food.

The Bennett Years – Articulation, Exploration, Research

We attended a lecture in 1963 by JG Bennett at the Conway Hall after his visit to the Shivpuri Baba. He played an interview with the saint on a tape recording but from where we sat it was almost inaudible. He, however, listened in rapt attention and I think was oblivious to the fact that few could hear the words. His own introduction was so interesting and inspiring that soon afterwards we started regularly visiting his teaching centre in Kingston where we enthusiastically became involved in the ideas and projects initiated by this

remarkable man and teacher. We shared an upstairs flat in Putney and enjoyed a rich and varied social life with many friends among the artists, musicians and writers who mostly liked a good party – it was London in the 60s.

In 1964 Henri was given a fellowship at JG Bennett's Institute and was starting some of his research in perception, language and wholeness, working closely with Ken Pledge among a small group of other young scientists who Bennett had attracted to his work as he finished a major four-volume work of history and philosophy called *The Dramatic Universe*. Henri's thesis on the problem of one and two in the understanding of the diffraction pattern produced in the light experiment with a two slit barrier had been completed. I had started work at the Natural History Museum on snail taxonomy relating to the spread of a tropical blood disease.

We were married in 1967 and were, by then, living next door to JG Bennett and his family where he had set up a new organization focussed on education for the future. Henri was general editor of a series of six books for Oxford University Press which were education text books using an experimental assessment system. I was writing one of them on a biological topic. After reading a piece of text, questions were posed to the students and they had to generate answers from 24 concepts presented in the form of a matrix, to which feedback could be given according to the concepts chosen. This was all quite mechanistic and happening just as the first 'small' computers were being developed. In addition, there were still groups locally and in London involved with more psychological investigations, daily exercises in meditation, developing attention, and the faculty of observation and imagination. There were weekly group investigations with 10 or more participants where Bennett suggested a variety of topics for reflection, many quite mundane, which stimulated our creative energy. I enjoyed these as it suited my rather slow ruminative brain function. I particularly remember one called, 'Why do we talk?' I came to see talking and language as the uniquely human sense organ which as a biologist, I could analogically map nicely onto the form and function of the other sense organs. Henri's philosophical work grew, he was fascinated by the question, 'What is a Fact?' and developed the observation that in most cases scientific facts are made by describing one phenomenon in terms of another.



Photo 1: Henri and first baby Laura

The work of Bennett's organisation moved into business consultancy and we had our first two children and moved to the edge of Richmond Park for the next few years. In 1970 Bennett opened his Sherborne Academy in the run down stately home in Gloucestershire mentioned by David Seamon. It was an experimental community which is richly described from her personal perspective by BJ Appelgren in her recent book *Sunny Side Up*. It ran for 5 years until the year after Bennett's death, and we spent winter, spring and summer of 1974 there as students` and Henri taught his courses.

Public School Teaching - Developing the ability to communicate

As a new graduate Henri spent a probationary year teaching physics to students, many from overseas, at Guildford Technical College. At the time it was one route to becoming qualified as a teacher. He had been looking widely for teaching and research posts but nothing had worked out. Then, that summer, our dear friend Hamilton Wood (about whom one of Patrick Henry's poems was written) invited us up to his home in

Norfolk. 'Bones' was a puckish character around whom strange things happened: he was a fine artist, teacher, journalist and father, and he was one of the principal instigators of an informal yearly camp which happened for a month over a number of years among the dunes at Winterton on Sea. For a couple of years previously we had joined this moving feast for itinerant musicians, story tellers, civil servants, architects, and his own and other families.

A particular favourite was a retired army major who lead 'Davenport's swimming party', of mostly children, daily at 3pm into the sea, whatever the weather. Bones knew the headmaster of Greshams School and in 1974 invited us to go with him there for lunch. At one point the headmaster came through the staff dining room saying, "Where can I find a physicist, my teacher is going off next term to stand as a conservative candidate". We all looked at Henri, and after a short interview it was arranged for him to start teaching the autumn term at the school. Before long the headmaster spoke to him saying, "You know you can do this, the boys say they can understand you and enjoy your classes". That was the beginning of nearly 20 years of teaching in the public school system, mostly at Tonbridge School in Kent. It was a very different life style to that we had been having and very hard work, but he adapted to it and brought his own liveliness and humour to unfamiliar situations. He got involved with lighting school plays with the boys, supervising the less sporty boys in seasonal team games, often instituting his own 'rules of play'. He was able to communicate with humour, his enthusiasm for the ideas of physics and enjoyed the close friendship of various members of the common room.

He also had the opportunity to give outside talks occasionally to other groups who were interested in his understanding of Goethean Science which he began to see as a stepping stone to a new approach to knowing the world. This he taught at summer schools in Maine for several years. One of my involvements was producing the 'hidden giraffe', which has proved such a useful tool to some people in demonstrating and understanding the process of perception. Henri was looking for something to go with the duck/rabbit and the reversing cube diagrams. It brought forth various musings about the structure and function of camouflage in the animal kingdom, but whether it was done to order, or was just an enhanced tracing based on a picture in a magazine, a doodle, I can no longer recall. Anyhow it met the requirement. At that time I actually enjoyed doing various temporary office jobs in a variety of settings to fit in with the freedom given by the long holidays offered by Henri's teaching as well as bringing up our three children Laura, Arron and Michael.

I later qualified and worked for a number of years as a massage and aroma therapist visiting sites at a mental health hospital near Maidstone several days a week. In the early 90s physics was not a popular subject and 5 physics teachers in the one school was deemed excessive, and so an invitation was put out for voluntary early retirement. Henri had had some health problems and in the event two teachers left the school in 1994.

Retirement

We moved to Norfolk where we had bought a small property after leaving London and Henri quickly completed and published his book *The Wholeness of Nature* which was in effect a combination of two earlier pieces and an extended commentary. Early on he had an unfortunate accident which saw him with his whole leg in plaster for several months and a slow recovery. But he was better in time for an extended American book tour for *The Wholeness of Nature*. I was spending time in Zimbabwe where my mother's health was starting to decline and for the next few years we both travelled back and forward to Africa, often for a number of months each year until 2002. We enjoyed the beautiful country and its good natured people, learned to play golf badly, and going to some wonderful afro jazz events. Henri continued working on his philosophy, researching and lecturing. As was his way, he once listed most of the venues where he had given presentations over the years and was surprised it numbered over 50. He was all the time clarifying what he wanted to say and finding a way to express it. The last book had a number of false starts but finally, when we were more settled again in Norfolk, he found the way to start the final version of what was to become *Taking Appearance Seriously*. His friendship with Brian Goodwin and other teachers at Schumacher College were important to him in his work and he valued that contact greatly. He was always able, often to my amazement, to compartmentalize his activities, apparently giving full attention to whatever he was doing at any one time and then to switch to something quite different.

He always relished his trips to London: to art galleries, plays, walking by the Thames, watching his son Arron run the Marathon, visiting his daughter Laura and grandchildren, visiting pubs with Michael and attending

meetings. Even in this last year when his health was not good he was thrilled to get there to meet Christopher Moore and later to visit the Science Museum for the exhibition on the Life of Alan Turing. He always enjoyed looking smart and choosing his clothes carefully. He loved meeting people both old and new and for several years in his early 70s he conceived a passion for Tango dancing and would travel to classes and dances in Norwich and other centres once or twice a week. It was not the dramatic mind and back bending nuevo-tango but the more genteel and social Argentinean variety and he always aspired to do it better. It was a sad day when he realized his deteriorating breathing had made it impossible to continue. He could be quite irascible and in his later years became particularly angry at the treatment of women in some societies and tried to support in a small way several charities that furthered humane treatment and misfortunate people.

Over the years he accumulated quite a substantial library covering the many subjects that he found interesting and he kept books by certain authors close-by for continuing reference and reflection, these included Idries Shah, Heidegger and Merleau Ponty. I consider myself very fortunate to have had a richly interesting and varied life with Henri which lasted 50 years. His presence will certainly be missed by me, his children and his grandchildren, but I hope there is now a momentum for the impulse he sought to clarify in his philosophy, to be carried forward.



Jacki and Henri

