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Christof as friend

*Murray Hofmeyr**

What are your five favourite songs? I asked my friend just before his 60th birthday, the man who could not have lived without music, and also not without paddling his surf ski. His advice to children was always that they should learn to play the guitar and surf – the rest will follow.

No 5: Hotel California

You can check-out any time you like,
But you can never leave!

I have known him since birth. His father was Dutch Reformed Minister of Ysterplaat and mine of Langa when we were born in the late 1950s. Ysterplaat was a working-class suburb of Cape Town and Langa a Black township. Our parents were friends. Our fathers were members of the remarkable class of 1952 at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. We left Cape Town before we could register memories and only reconnected in the Philosophy class at university – where aspirant lawyers and pastors often meet.

At his memorial service I read from Mark 1 verses 9 to 12:

From the opened heavens a voice was heard saying this is my beloved son
with whom I am well pleased.

Christof was not a regular churchgoer. When he occasionally ventured church-ward, usually on Christmas morning, it was, as he put it, ‘to hear the old-old story.’ At least once a year he wanted to sing ‘Focal point of our desires’ with the Christmas congregation. He lived like someone who appropriated the blessing of being a beloved son. And he believed that this was true of all people – beloved sons and daughters with whom God was well pleased.

Infused with love and ever hopeful he had a deep understanding of what we have in common. His approach was to invite and entice, not to alienate and judge. Not that he was without strong opinions that could lead to intense differences. He always said, we must not be so open minded that our brains fall out.

No 4: Molberge (Mole Mountains)

His grandfather was a railway worker. That was his connection with Koos du Plessis. Mole Mountains: the disposition of people who are secure, even though they know that hereabouts the world is halfway hollow.¹

Christof had a strong sense of the authenticity of situatedness and of how our specific circumstances and traditions make us real even if they also limit us. Struggling with limitation and then accepting the inevitability of being thrown into a specific time in history, and a particular culture with its language, traditions, life-affirming but also life-destroying qualities and challenges – working with what you have, making the most of it, in service of a universal idea, or an idea worthy for universality, transforming as you go along.

The right to life. An idea worthy of universality. An idea worthy of struggle, of intense focus, organisation and energy.

No 3: Stairway to Heaven

And it's whispered that soon, if we all call the tune
 Then the piper will lead us to reason
 And a new day will dawn for those who stand long
 And the forests will echo with laughter
 Remember laughter?

Christof discovered the struggle theory of human rights when working on his doctoral dissertation on civil disobedience. It takes as its point of orientation the difference between scientific truth and moral truth. Karl Jaspers illustrated this difference in reference to Galilei and Bruno. Galilei could recant – OK, the earth is flat, if you insist. He did not have to die for that fact. It would soon reveal itself, once more people could be afforded better instruments of observation and measurement. Bruno had to die on the stake. He died for the right to freedom of speech. Without his sacrifice, his struggle, this right, and most other rights, just do not exist.

This explains the intensity of Christof's devotion to the idea of human rights. His father chose the church as the institution through which to make his contribution. Christof chose human rights and all available institutions, existing ones, those to be transformed and others still to be invented.

Christof's devotion to the right to life, and his awareness of the contingency, with all its limitations and opportunities, of having been born in Africa, sparked the idea of Future Africa. He just loved walking. He got special permission to enter the University's experiential farm through a gate close to his house and would go walking almost every day. I accompanied him one morning when he pointed to Lynnwood

Koppie and said – how about a state-of-the-art green building facing North, housing cutting edge interdisciplinary-minded scholars devoting their brilliance to promoting the right to life, and therefore the conditions enabling abundant life, on the African continent and beyond? Vintage Christof. As Nick Grové wrote when Christof celebrated his 60th birthday: he reminded one of Alice in Wonderland. To have six impossible ideas before breakfast ... Some of these were more mundane: the Follow-My-Leader bicycle add on, the ‘Braai-In-The-Sky’, the pulley system for lifting drinks to the roof at sunset. But today Future Africa is looking Northwards, and bright young minds are enticed to not just making contributions but to being contributions.

His appointment as professor at Future Africa was for Christof one of the best things that could have happened to him. At his 60th he asked for ten more years. Two years later, when he learned about his appointment, he said he needed ten more years. Fearika reminded him that he only had eight. He said he needed ten! He was given one last month at STIAS.

No 2: Famous Blue Raincoat

It was a beautiful month. He spent his primary school years in Stellenbosch and in recent times rediscovered an affinity with this town and its mountains. As STIAS fellow he could from time to time spend a month working there. The last month was used to work on a seminal study of the impact of the UN treaties. Many people visited. He and Adam went to a beach to watch the wind foilers. Christof said, leave everything and learn to do this! Renée spent her birthday there and they went for lunch on a wine farm. There is a family photo taken on that day with everyone waiting for Christof who can be seen working on his laptop in the background. Vintage Christof. Willemien took little Isak along so the grandfather since January 2020 could carry his grandson along on daily walks in the mountains. That is probably my most beautiful memory of my beautiful friend – the pure joy he radiated in his encounter with the mystery of life embodied in this little beginner.

I guess that I miss you, I guess I forgive you
I'm glad you stood in my way

No 1: Let It Be

Even when the night is cloudy there is still a light that shines on him

We shared many adventures, and stories of adventures. He did not come along on our epic motorcycle tour at the end of 1980. But before

we left he gave me a cassette with favourites, including Mike Batt's Ride to Agadir. It became our family's holiday song. We rode in the morning. In 1988 he gave me a cassette of a new Afrikaans singer who sang about a Boer in concrete. And in 1996 he played a song over the phone of a Mystic Boer:²

there were ravines in the distance
and the sun was still young
and grey birds watched us
as we nodded to each other under the morning...

From Germany I in 1994 received a CD by mail with Leonard Cohen's verse that speaks of democracy entering through a crack in the wall. The note read something akin to:

It is four o' clock in the morning, the end of December, Heidelberg is cold,
but we like where we are living, there is always the music ...

There was also a track on the CD, sung by a guy with a very deep voice, comparing Tarzan and Superman. Clark Kent, a true gentleman, must have been tempted to join Tarzan in the forest, exhausted from changing clothes in dirty old phone booths when there was a crime to be stopped somewhere. But he persevered.

Before they left for Germany, where he was taking up a Von Humboldt Fellowship, the Heyns family visited us in Venda. It is remarkable when friends care so much that they travel to the corners of the country to spend time with you. Through the Thate Vondo Pass, in thick fog. There, in the forest, we sang German translations of Bob Dylan songs – and laughed a lot. Wie ein rollender Stein ...

Fearika made a book for Christof when he turned 60. Friends were asked to contribute a paragraph or two. The golden thread is the fun, the laughter, the loyalty. As Johan Badenhorst put it: some flair, some nostalgia, always time for a joke. Life is serious, but never that serious. Others spoke of the sense of adventure, the enjoyment of the good things that life offers. The people whose paths crossed his experienced acknowledgement that they matter, that there are things that matter, things that we must make matter.

In 2018 Christof sent us an essay from Geneva, entitled 'In defence of a partial faith.' He referred to the Dunning-Kruger effect. Intelligence is often measured in relation to our ability to know our limitations. Those who lack in this regard might be tempted to be too confident in their world-changing projects and those who know that they don't know are oftentimes not courageous enough and that's why the world is what it is (we loved the T-shirt with the words 'The unlivable life is not worth examining'). The wise realise that even the most intelligent amongst us can only reach a certain level of knowledge. In the words of John Lennon, another favourite, 'above us only sky.' Why something

and not nothing, why this and not that, why anything at all? ... At that level we are all at a loss.

He referred to religions as reservoirs of answers developed through millennia. Myths that gained dominance are sometimes captured in holy writ. But religion is vulnerable – suffering does not stop and meaning cannot be coined. And science is relentless. The historical claims of religious stories do not stand the scrutiny of the search for verifiable and demonstrable knowledge. The rest of the message then becomes questionable.

‘Above us only sky.’ Nice song, wrote Christof, if only it was that easy. The problem is that the space above our ability is not a mere vacuum. Without a frame of reference, a point of departure, as for instance the values carried by religious stories, something even more irrational could fill that void.

Dataism, the religion of technology, makes it possible to calculate everything. Human rights, on the other hand, rests on the idea that every individual person is of immeasurable or eternal worth. The most basic interests of one person cannot be sacrificed in favour of another person, or of ‘progress,’ or any other goal. Christof, who was reading Harari³ at the time, concluded: it is clear that the majority of the workforce will soon become ‘useless people,’ replaced by robots. ‘Do not put your trust in robots,’ was his adaptation of Psalm 146.

The point of departure that every individual life is of eternal value rests on a value judgement. And what informs that judgement? For centuries it was religion and other traditional value systems that with mother’s milk moved us in that direction. Can faith in its traditional form carry that weight?

‘In defence of a partial faith’ makes a stand against the demand for total surrender that most faiths, including the one Christof grew up with, are known for. To have faith like a child ... Not so easy, said Christof. We have eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We live courtesy of science. Yet, we won’t give up the struggle for meaning. If we do, the available answers will be too easy, provided by people with cheap medicine for our wounds.

Where does this leave us? In the uncomfortable position that a famous philosopher called Thrownness – having been thrown into a society with its culture, myths and traditions. At the same time, we can be open for developments, for new designs. The religion we grew up with is full of stories. But they are not ‘just’ stories. They are designs of meaning. They come from the life and death experience of generations of ancestors who had to face the same void. We are the ancestors of tomorrow. The way we test our traditions in terms of our changing experience will leave a legacy.

To engage critically but seriously with one's tradition is a way of seeking. 'Restoring life to its original difficulty,' was a quote we often pondered. Christof called that faith – faith mixed with a good helping of salt. Without salt, in this case critical engagement, everything is without savour. But, said Christof, one cannot live from salt alone ...

Above us only sky? John Lennon was a child of his time, revolting against an uncritical faith. Christof opted against checking only one box. He checked all three: partly agnostic, partly believer, partly unbeliever. And then devoting your life to discerning what fell in which category.

He anticipated that the John of Revelation would not have approved, he who spoke badly of being lukewarm. Let's take John also with a pinch of salt, was his advice. He was a child of his time. A time when the radical message was still new – that we humans could be kind to one another (Christof was a great fan of Bregman's book),⁴ could even manage to make it together. We are also children of our time – with the task of finding the right fit for our experience.

At his 60th birthday I said I hoped that we will have many more adventures, and even new favourite songs. I also acknowledged that Leonard Cohen was dead and that we would more and more have to live from memories. I have a few really good ones. The Elephants River in flood with waves in the middle; snow at the top of Sani Pass, where it was full moon with De Wet at the wheel of the King's Mule; long walks along the Orange River in the Richtersveld; camping on an island in the Vaal near Parys; being manhandled by a wave too big for our surfing skill set at Still Bay. There were also the sad and difficult times – in these parts the earth is half hollow.

On 28 March the plan was that Christof and Fearika would join us at Fairview near Paarl for my daughter Heleen's graduation party. Heleen asked Christof to assist me in draping the red gown around her shoulders. We were in a festive mood and when the message came that they won't be joining us, I sent him a text saying that it was pleasant under the trees and that I hoped we would still see them. It was a lovely party, and I did not allow myself to be overly worried. We were having coffee after the lunch and speeches when I received the dreadful tiding. There is a photograph of him on my bookshelf. He is smiling. That smile that I loved so much – acknowledging the darkness, but grateful for the fire.

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1 *Die gelantenheid van mense wat gerus is/ Maar bewus is/ Hierlangs is die wêreld halfpad hol.*

2 ... daar was klowe in die verte/ en die son was nog jonk/ en grys voëls het ons dopgehou/ toe ons onder die ooggend vir mekaar geknik het ...

3 YN Harari *Homo deus. a brief history of tomorrow* (Vintage 2015).

4 R Bregman *Humankind: a hopeful history* (Bloomsbury 2020).