

Richard Neville - An Appreciation

Like many others I was aware of Richard Neville's role in the 1960s and 70s counterculture. Although living overseas at the time I knew about the 1971 obscenity trial in London and was pleased to hear of the subsequent acquittal. While I'd not participated in the drugs scene or had any real interest in Leary's mantra ('tune in, turn on and drop out') I liked the way that Richard and his collaborators were willing to challenge what I then saw as the stifling conventionalism of British post-war existence. With parents who'd experienced the war full on I appreciated that the subsequent peace had indeed been hard-won. Yet, like many other youngsters, I was also anxious to move on. So over the years I acquired my own small collection of Oz magazines. They offered a 'breath of fresh air,' a sense that there was so much more to life than the stereotypical preoccupations of the rather dull, class-bound country I grew up in. I admired the way that Oz challenged or undermined so many prevailing stereotypes and received opinions. I needed the broader psychic space that they provided - and still do.

After moving to Australia in the late 1980s Richard's name occasionally appeared in the media but, of course, I had no idea that we'd meet one day and even work together. Fast forward, then, to the new millennium. I'd been invited to set up the Australian Foresight Institute at Swinburne University in Melbourne. Sydney-based Richard Neville had formed a successful working relationship with Oliver Freeman and his Australian Business Network (ABN). What specifically brought us together from time to time were the scenario learning workshops run by Oliver out of the ABN. Richard was one of the most entertaining and effective 'outsiders' brought in to add spice, life and external stimulation to the hothouse of serious scenario building. In homage to de Bono's 'tall poppies' concept, Richard and I were among a couple of dozen people wittily described by Oliver as 'lateral poppies.'

During 'down time,' dinners and the like we found that we had a surprising amount in common. For some time Richard had been moving from away from his role of provocateur and 'cultural critic' (though he never gave those up) toward deeply felt concerns for the nascent futures that by then were coming into view. In fact he was passionate about many of the very same issues and concerns that I'd been tracking and writing about for some time. We both felt outraged by the wholesale destruction of nature; we agreed that the commercial assault on humanity was a disaster; and we were both committed to the search for constructive responses and strategies. We also regarded looming Dystopian outcomes as positive drivers to be acknowledged and turned to good use. Thus from being over-identified with the 1960s and 70s counterculture he was emerging as a respected, fully-fledged Futurist. Indeed, his keen intelligence and exemplary communication skills were making him a prominent member of that community. A quite natural and mutually satisfying exchange steadily emerged. Just as I'd found inspiration in Richard's earlier work, he was now finding something similar in my own.

In 1999 he graciously agreed to write the Preface for a book I edited for Oliver Freeman called *Gone Today, Here Tomorrow: Millennium Previews*. A few lines from the Preface display his insight and wit:

* The question at the core of these essays is a variation of the famous futurist mantra that life is getting better and better, worse and worse, faster and faster.

* On the whole, Australians feel trapped in a paradox: wanting less, and acquiring more; seeking simplicity and finding complexity; owning shares

and out of a job. The myth of endless material progress has run into a brick wall. What will be the guiding myth for the new millennium?

* A ... guiding story is how to live in an age of paradox, where time, distance, logic and borders are vanishing, where editorials are ads, wholesale is retail, the artificial is real, children are adults, work is home and we're all going quietly crazy, or is it sane -- or doesn't it matter? Only the future will tell.¹

Apart from his media-savvy intelligence and wit Richard had a sense of optimism and generosity that he bestowed on others quite freely. He was, as the saying goes 'one of those people you leave feeling better about everything.' So we had many lively and stimulating conversations, met when we could and even considered projects that we might undertake. He appreciated my own struggle, the long journey toward becoming a professional Futurist, and was not at all shy in giving credit where it was due. One can see this in the inscription he wrote for me in one of his last books *Footprints of the Future*:²

For Richard - many of these (items) are minor variations on themes long championed by you. Thanks for the inspiration. Richard Neville, 2002.

A few of the quips, provocations and aphorisms included in the book reveal the tenor of his thinking, the range of his wit.

- * The future can no longer be taken for granted ... it needs to be rescued.
- * The more connected we are electronically, the more disconnected we are in real life.
- * The mystic Meister Eckhart taught us 'we progress by stopping,' the Ministers of Finance tell us 'we progress by shopping.'
- * Virtual reality is the tangible replication of a world that has been with us all our life - in our imagination, in literature and dreams - but it costs a bomb.
- * What the industrial world calls growth is usually plunder from nature and the poor.

It took me years growing up in Britain to realise that there's something a bit repressed in the English character. Compare and contrast any random group of Englishmen with a similar French or, even more obviously, Italian group, and the differences are striking. Few of the former can muster those flashes of passion and energy in any but the most pressing circumstances. Yet it's one of the things I most enjoyed about Richard Neville. He had those qualities in spades. It was there in conversations - real conversations that ebbed, flowed and often took off in surprising directions. It was certainly there when he was speaking or performing. It was there when he was in the spotlight of publicity.

It's there in his writing and the YouTube videos that, thankfully, will remain with us over the long haul.

Richard Slaughter, September 2016

Guardian obituary: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/sep/04/richard-neville-obituary>

Welcome to the Future: Climate vs. the Rich: https://youtu.be/8_MovAWNxMc

¹ Neville, R. Preface in Slaughter, R. (Ed.) *Gone Tomorrow, Here today: Millennium Previews*, Prospect Media, Sydney, 2000, pp. vii - ix.

² Neville, R. *Footprints of the Future*, Richmond, Sydney, 2002.