

John Newfong – A personal reflection by Lillian Holt.

“a nomadic writer who spans many cultures, yet feels

equally at home in them all”.

(description of Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clezio, Nobel Literature Prize Winner, 2008)

The above words come closest to describe my friend, John Newfong. A truly universal spirit, if ever there was one who traversed the terrain of humanity.

Our connection began in the early 1960's as follows:

As the first Aboriginal person, in 1962, to work for the ABC, (Australian Broadcasting Commission) in Queensland my employment came with a flurry of fanfare and publicity given that Aborigines were such a rarity in public places, those days. However, the journey of being “the first” or the “only one” is invariably a lonely one (well it was for me!).

Fortunately, within a year or two, it all changed, when I saw this young blackfella walking the corridor of the ABC TV studios at Toowong, We both acknowledged one another, as you did in those days, as fellow Aborigines. He said his name was John Newfong. I was so relieved to see another black face, more so a “cosmetically apparent” Aboriginal face, such as John's in a sea of “white sliced bread-land” Anglo looks which the early 60's represented.

Therein began a friendship which was to last some thirty years or so.

John was one year older than me – but I perceived him as much older as he conversed with different people, in different positions, within the ABC. Especially a couple of older women who represented the epitome of sophistication and elegance – like in 40's movie stars - what with their deep red matte lips and classy clothes. Oh how I wanted to be like them as I grew older. They were the equivalent of the Bette Davis's and Katherine Hepburns of the 40's and 50's. In retrospect, I would describe them as divas, who basically ignored me but were fascinated by John with whom they openly conversed, in front of me. Older women of that class and mould seemed to be impressed by John and wanted to know more. (This would extend into the 90's when an older friend of mine, one of the first QANTAS air hostesses of the 40's – another diva! - remarked to me on meeting John, words to the effect that he had “the stature of an international statesman”.)

Back at the ABC, I worked in the Finance Department. He in the mailroom. He lived at Wynnum which was some way from Toowong, in those days and rode a scooter to work - often giving me a lift home. I met his family on more than one occasion, his mother Edna, (whom I adored) his father Archie, (who was an ex boxing champion) his sisters, Judy and Beckie plus brother Neville.

In the early to mid-sixties I was Secretary of the OPAL Younger Set. OPAL which stood for One People of Australia League was founded in the late fifties – early sixties.

A group of us young blackfellas such as Wayne King, (Ipswich) Joe Mallie, (Cairns) Diat and Tommy Callope, (Thursday Island) Sandy and Pandy Simpson (Inala) and Joyce Blair (Cherbourg) – to name just a few - clubbed together to organise a family dance once a month in Brisbane. In order to raise funds we went out to places like Doomben race-track on a Saturday to rattle our donation tin, for which we often got abused. You know, the usual, “lazy, dirty Abos, etc” but we also picked up enough to pay blackfellas such as Darcy Cummins and his band or Ronnie Hurley when we hired them.

It was always a wonderful occasions those dances: alcohol-free and much old fashioned family fun.

Out of that came the occasion of the crowning of Miss Opal, Judy Newfong, in 1966. She was the first of a couple and I cringe today to think that we were aping whitefella standards, as usual (that is, judging on appearance). Not that there was anything wrong with the young women, chosen.

John was attired in black suit and black bow tie, white shirt as I recall and his family were equally elegantly arrayed. Whilst he was not a conventionally good looking man, by Anglo standards (both of us were a bit too “boongy” to be acceptable in the beauty stakes of the surfie era of the sixties). However, he had something not many people have. It is something you detect rather than define. And that is called presence. He was abundantly blessed with it thus his entry into a space could not be ignored nor dismissed

His interests and tastes were eclectic which never failed to amaze me. (For instance, he enrolled in a course on fashion at East Sydney Technical College in the late sixties and introduced me to a couple of creative, unconventional classmates, whom I thought were trendy, empty, arty farty types but was to be proved wrong later).

More substantially, from the very early days of knowing him, John never shrank from any occasion to counter racism. For example, in the late sixties when I was refused service at a local pub (stone cold sober and cleanly dressed after leaving work to meet up with a friend) he wanted to engage the union in putting a ban on that pub. (Apparently I was not the only Aboriginal woman to be refused service.)

He was determined to do something about it, as he had a number of union contacts. And whilst I was hurt and indignant, I didn't want to go that far.

I was privy, on more than one occasion, to him standing up, publicly, against racism.

Such an incident occurred on a crowded bus in Sydney, after work. There was standing room only and John said to me “be prepared for some embarrassment, Lillian, as there is a guy at the back making racist remarks about us”. I didn't hear them but one thing I knew was that I was supremely protected by the huge presence of John. Huge, not just in size, but in presence.

Despite his boxing skills, his father taught him, I never knew of one occasion where he got into a fist fight. Arguments. Yes. But never physical aggression. Yet again, I think that his presence was prominent and powerful and aggressors sensed that and thus backed down. John was a big bloke in more ways than one. I remember him turning to this bloke and giving him what I termed a “deadly John Newfong look”. It was a cold stare and a raised eyebrow look. I always said that if “looks could kill, you'd be dead within minutes with John”.

Thankfully, Newfong was more a seeker, a searcher, for truth and justice rather than a fighter with his fists.

I no longer like the term “a fighter for his people” which he of his era was considered to be. His seeking and searching enabled him to traverse the terrain through knowing an enormous array of people – of all colours and classes. This is what fascinated me with John. Often he would knock on my door at the weekends and said he was going to visit so and so and would I like to come. In those days, you just jumped on the bus and turned up. Half the time I hadn't heard of them and didn't know who in the hell they were. But I soon found out and was fascinated by Newfong's social skills at handling different types of people, at all levels. Especially as they were whitefellas!

I met such an interesting array of people, from “posh” people, to people involved in all levels of political activity, Journalists and other professionals. Newfong virtually “held court” with them whilst I sat in silence and listened, enamoured by his ability to converse on such a range of subjects.

I once said to him, “John, most people collect stamps. You collect people”. He just laughed.

His working life reflected this array of people, e.g. working in the mines at Mt. Isa, (?), working at The Australian, editing the first Aboriginal magazine called *Identity* in which he asked me to write an article on whitefellas (as in men) and their attitude towards Aboriginal women. I was whingeing and complaining about being solicited by white men, in Sydney, who would often whisper to me, as I walked past, “how much love”. The assumption that we were “loose” so to speak, really got under my skin, so he asked to write an article which he published in that first ever edition. Not that I was eager to do so, but once John made you an offer, you never refused. I remember him asking me to speak at a rally at the Brisbane town hall, in 1967, for the Referendum. I said no, as I didn't feel “up to it”, to which he retorted that “I was letting my people down”. I terminated that conversation, in tears.

And, oh, the annual FCAATSI conferences, in Canberra, at Easter. Both John and I made it our business to be there but not necessarily together. Yet again I was impressed by his insight into issues which he shared with the many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who came from all over Australia. Yet again, his presence could not be ignored. (It always seemed to be powerful in a positive sense rather than forceful in a negative sense). Indeed, John Newfong was abundantly blessed by a brilliant voice. He was incredibly articulate in any one's language and very easy to listen to. His voice was well modulated and deeply masculine. I once told him that he had a “mellifluous voice”. When he asked me to explain, I said that the word “mellifluous” meant “flowing like honey”.

Yes, John Newfong was easy listen to. And I can honestly say I never found him boring as he roamed and ruminated on a wide range of topics. Anyone who knew him would agree. I watched with pride one night as he debated Asher Joel (?) of the Jewish community in Sydney re land rights. (can't recall exact details but there was a discussion/debate between these two on TV).

Then came the tent embassy in Canberra. On a couple of occasions he came to Sydney at the weekend and looked me up. On one occasion he was with Chicka Dixon – well known in the Redfern community. What I enjoyed about their visits was humour. It wasn't so much about the politics of the embassy but the people. That is what I loved about those days. Yarning

Today, that kind of yarning manner, as I see it, has been virtually lost as we have become more assimilated, educated and westernised, so to speak. Straitjacketed! Today, it seems to me that there is not much humour spontaneously shared in stories which once fed one's soul.

More intellect and ego rather than intuition and humour. Gary Foley once said in an interview which I did with him on Aboriginal humour that it was "de rigeur" for Aboriginal leaders of those days to have a good sense of humour in order to survive. I agree 100 percent.

In the early seventies, we three blackfellas from Queensland, namely John, myself and Wayne King, who shared a flat for a short time in Sydney, went our different ways. Wayne to work in the UN, in New York and myself to work in Adelaide in Aboriginal adult education.

However, I did return to Brisbane in 1974, after my Dad died while I was overseas, to re-enrol in Uni., after dropping out in the sixties. In this way I re-connected with John and remember inviting him to come and have dinner with me on a Sunday night at my flat.

The topic of relationships came up and I can say that I never knew a time when John was not openly "Gay". This was another strength of his as far as I was concerned. He didn't have to "come out of the closet" for he was never in it. He considered me a "fag-hag" as did my other openly gay Aboriginal male. Both confided in me, from time to time.

On this Sunday night, in Brisbane, John spoke of his openly gay friendship with his boyfriend, over the years, and particularly at the tent embassy. I won't mention his boyfriend's full name for the sake of privacy save to say that John asked me what I thought of him (his boyfriend).

I somewhat flippantly said words to the effect that I thought that he was "delicious" and I wouldn't mind a slice of him myself. For some reason this infuriated John and he got up and left in a huff. I didn't know then how I had offended him and to this day still don't know. However, it was part and parcel of the many splits and spats we had over the three decades of knowing John. (I would like to think that it was testimony to the strength of our friendship that we would eventually "kiss and make up" so to speak and move on – even if it was to the next spat! Shame!) But move on we did.

A year later when I was appointed the first Aboriginal Executive Officer for the NAEC (National Aboriginal Education Committee) John was also elected to the NAC (National Aboriginal Conference?) and he came and stayed at my place, when they met in Canberra. He was invariably a nocturnal creature which suited me and we ended up at such places as the Journalists' Club where, yet again, many seemed to know him.

The eighties would stretch the limits, at times, though as I caught up with him in Canberra, where I worked for a year in 1987, at the ADC (Aboriginal Development Corporation).

If John had one major defect of character, it was his lack of punctuality. I remember running into him at Melbourne airport when he had gone for an interview for the job. He laughed as he related that Charlie Perkins had said to him as he left the interview "oh, by the way, John, we do work in the daytime, here".

As we worked together, I offered to pick him up on the way to work which he appreciated. However, after some time I got "the shits" with him as he was never ready.

Not even remotely on most occasions. (Charlie's words didn't seem to have an affect, whatever). So I stormed off and told him to find his own way to work. This time, I was determined not to give in.

As usual, we came together, after some time. For me, John exerted much charm when patching up fractured relationships. I remember on one occasion in Sydney when he left after a disagreement and I hadn't seen him for ages.

One day, there was knock on my front door and as I opened it, I was surprised to see him to the point of exclaiming "Jonathon"! To which he held my hand and kissed it and said "Lillathon"! We were mates again. Wow. That was another thing that I loved about him. He was not a surly, sulky, smouldering type of person who held a resentment for long.

Oh how I could go on and on about him. But this piece is becoming a bit too long.

Save to say that "yes, he was a genius with a pen". Yes, he was openly gay. And as I was learn in AA that "secrets keep us sick", I always loved his honesty and openness. He even came for a short time to AA with me when we lived in Canberra. Yes, I would agree with Foley's comments about him being "a hero" in the struggle.

But I can surely say that John Newfong would not necessarily agree with such labels or titles because, on looking back, I don't believe he had a huge ego. And in that sense never aspired to leadership or position. It was just thrust upon him. In my opinion, he was much more interested in people, rather than positions and title.

I once asked him in the late sixties what he liked most about me. Without hesitation, he replied "your humanity, Lillian".

I too can honestly say that decades down the track I, like others, was attracted by his humanity.

He was not only humane but also urbane. And when he was called to the occasion his presence could not be ignored.

As such, I can truly say I loved John Newfong as a big brother as well as close friend. Very few people have made an indelible footprint on my heart, as he did, over the years of knowing him.

So thank you for asking me to write something about him. It has been truly a walk down memory lane.