

**A LOOKING FORWARD**  
**Phil's Final Weeks**

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My tribute to Phil is a looking forward. Initially, I began this article with my personal recollections, looking back at meeting Phil. But Phil's life was dominated by his energy and drive for meaning, for changing history, for changing the story of the human group. So that is where I need to focus: forward.

Phil often spoke of 'changing the story of the human group' as a way of speaking of the little known paradigm-shifting genius, Bernard Lonergan, and his three major contributions—*For a New Political Economy*, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, and *Method in Theology*—each of which offers a radical change to and for the human group. In the final six weeks of his life, Phil's conversations with me had a distinct focus within that overarching theme of 'changing the story of the human group,' and my tribute is an attempt to share that focus with you. Of course, I can't hope to share our conversations, or our separate meanings of them, his and mine, folded as they were within our 33 years<sup>1</sup> of genetic mutual meaning. All I can do is to speak of<sup>2</sup> my startled admiration at the profound significance of his themed thoughts during those concentrated weeks before he went Home.

His thoughts were very much tuned to the practical future question that "perhaps is now yours...to the leap, the invitation of Lonergan: that we should meet in that great opening and openness of the 1833 Overture."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The number of years Jesus lived. Phil would like that connection. I met Phil in 1987, and as is true of so many people, he changed my life. From that time on, he became a dear friend and cherished mentor. I was incredibly fortunate the summer of 1987 to be living in the same neighborhood as Phil, and we spent summer evenings strolling the streets of Halifax immersed in rambling conversation, my introduction to my questing self, to insight, and to *Insight*. Early in 1988, Phil gave me a paperback copy of *Insight* with his inscription on the title page: "For Sandy—A Big Book for more than the next few Centuries—Love Phil April 23, 1988."

<sup>2</sup> I'm thinking here of the dialectic exercise "The Dynamic State of Being in Love," *Journal of Macrodynamical Analysis* 14 (2020): 26–64.

<sup>3</sup> *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History*, 250. The '1833 Overture' refers to page 250 of *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). The

That is, our conversations were nestled in and around the fantasy required for the practical problem of *how* to get functional collaboration, especially dialectic, *moving forward*.

During the year before he died, we met weekly, usually Saturday or Sunday mornings at Tim Horton's (he loved sitting and watching the Eastern European men gather and talk there). Phil always asked about and gained insight into 'the job.' My work with the Ministry of Education is in the area of professional regulation for educators, which like other professions (health care, law, engineering, etc.) sets standards for becoming certified, for maintaining status as a professional, and for upholding professional conduct. Our conversations rambled around in this realm of educational systems and teaching innovations, certification, and professional regulation. Phil had a tremendous vision of a heuristic mapping of education, and his vision and excitement always inspired me.

At this time, one of my key responsibilities was to chair a working group of Canadian colleagues planning the initial steps of regulatory alignment<sup>4</sup> with the goal of implementing a pan-Canadian qualification assessment centre for internationally educated teachers. This work was bubbling around in my molecules and mind and, unawares, mixing and blending with my questions of *how* to move culture toward the 1833 Overture and long-term sustainable human progress.

As I was walking around my neighborhood one evening in May, enjoying the madly blossoming spring that is the best of Vancouver, an idea came to me. The idea connected the world of professional regulation to the problem of how to 'grow' functional collaboration and the 1833 Overture: promote functional collaboration as a recognized, established,

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page contains 33 lines in total, of which the final 18 are key. Phil was adamant that we take this page seriously, couple it with chapter 17 of *Insight*, and work to "make interpretation a science" (quoting from my hand-written notes of Thursday, June 25, 2020). Going further with this idea on Saturday, June 27, 2020, Phil spoke of the "requirement of the push for explanatory understanding + confrontation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> objectification [MIT, p. 250, final 18 lines] + genuineness [underlined 3 times, *Insight* ch15] = attack on the *moi intime*, the [necessary personal] admission [that we are] not understanding explanatorily" (quoting from my hand-written notes). See also the letter Phil wrote to Robert Henman on May 27, 2020 at the beginning of this collection of essays.

<sup>4</sup> Education is provincially regulated and jurisdictional differences that make alignment challenging.

‘regulated’ if you will, profession in the world.<sup>5</sup> Especially, establish clear minimal criteria for ‘entrance’ into the profession.

I wrote a long email to Phil and Sally to share this idea with them. His response was enthusiastic and he encouraged me to share the idea more widely in the dialectic exercise I was then working on. It was May 19, 2020, five days before Phil was diagnosed with cancer, exactly 6 weeks before his final day with us in this finite life. The timing or providence of our exchange is startling to me particularly because of the way Phil developed this idea over his last six weeks.

My central question I had for Phil coming out of this idea was about minimal entrance criteria to ‘receive certification,’ so to speak, for people doing this paradigm-shifting work that Lonergan had begun. What would he consider to be reasonable minimum criteria? When we next met over tea, it was clear he had been thinking about the question. His initial answer was “maybe some version of the Childout Principle.”<sup>6</sup> We sparkled and laughed at some of the imagined possibilities for minimum criteria, him teasing me about my idealistic suggestions while kindly keeping my feet on the ground. In the midst of our laughter, though, we were serious about the long-term problem. He was utterly serious about it. I could see his mind working away at it and wondered how he would weave this idea into his great vision of our distant human future. Phil continued to pause seriously over this question in the next days and weeks, and all our conversations during this time (and even more frequently once he entered the hospice for his final ten days) revolved around his elegant answer, aimed at helping us and pointing us all forward.

Phil entered the hospice on Monday, June 22, 2020—a brutal day for him, for Sally, for family. I visited with him that evening after work, bicycling the short 15-minute ride in the surreal summer evening sun. I visited again on Tuesday evening, Thursday evening, and Saturday

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<sup>5</sup> To keep this article short, I’m omitting the larger and necessary context of this idea: a three-layered, multi-functioning Global Centre for Sustainable Progress—or Global Association for Sustainable Progress (GASP); Phil enjoyed the acronym of the latter version! This larger context is central to the ideas communicated here. Please feel free to contact me if you are interested in further detail.

<sup>6</sup> “When you’re teaching children geometry, one is teaching children children.” J. Benton et al. *Introducing Critical Thinking*, i. The second ‘children’ is not a mistake and can be replaced with any age group, and ‘geometry’ can be replaced with any subject.

during which times I had some of the most amazing conversations I have ever had with Phil, with me uncharacteristically taking notes. His mind was flying millennia ahead at an unbelievable rate, already halfway Home. On the following Monday and Tuesday (June 29 and 30) during my visits with him, he wasn't well enough for conversation, and on early Wednesday morning, July 1, 2020, with Sally stroking his face, speaking quiet tender words of love, his two sons and myself sitting by the bed, he went Home.

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More, much more than any of us, Phil recognized the need for a strategy of setting expectations, of laying out criteria for 'certification' to guide those of us who are attracted to and humbly doing this paradigm-shifting work of changing the story of the human group. Witness his ever-present references to science and the expectations that exist in the fields of mathematics, physics, chemistry; his anecdotes of teaching physics, where first year students would be floundering should they wander into a second year class; and his love for popular television shows such as *House* or *Britain's Got Talent* etc. that showcased explanatory expertise in medicine and wide-ranging talent in the arts. In recent years, he constantly pointed to the science of engineering as the analogy for our way forward, linking the explanatory strategic expertise and inventiveness of this theoretico-practical science to the humbly-seeded very messy initial efforts needed to lift functional collaboration upward and forward, like the water being pulled upward and forward by the Archimedes screw, the image and idea that Phil so brilliantly captured in his analogy.

Imagine, *then*, these two criteria of Phil's leading our way. If I am serious about working toward a new political economy, about working at generalized empirical method and functional collaboration, then I must possess:

1. A commitment to explanatory understanding, and
2. A commitment to genuineness

Note *commitment*, not attainment. We need first, *then*, to commit to developing the humility to admit that most of us are not moving in the world of explanatory understanding. As rich and deep as is systematic theology, it is not explanatory. The expectation of this first criterion is that those who are serious will commit to some regular effort (a minimum hour

a week?) to confront the fears lurking in our molecules and mess with simple puzzles (for example, one of Phil's favourites: OTTFSS... continue the sequence), or with basic mathematics (for example, the transition from arithmetic to algebra), or with the structure and functioning of the amoeba (another love of Phil's), or other explanatory realms that perhaps grab your interest.

Second, *then*, we need to commit to entering into the genuineness demanded of scientific interpretation, into developing the humility of "meet[ing] in that great opening and openness of the 1833 Overture."<sup>7</sup> The three objectifications on page 250 of *Method in Theology* invite the humbling task of revealing ourselves to each other, our ideas, our questions, what we do not know or understand.

These two entrance criteria profoundly respect the ground from which Lonergan's major contributions arise: the explanatory, the unapologetically scientific, and the developmental. Though Phil stated them so simply, each of these two criteria is deeply rooted in a far-reaching explanatory understanding. So a commitment to them is also implicitly a commitment to work towards understanding *explanatorily* the deeper ground of each criterion itself.

Phil's outreach to his supporters and colleagues in his last five weeks, before he stopped writing and emailing, outlined the pre-functional, explanatory context of these two criteria. In letters and emails, Phil captured and spelled out the "unique key challenge of the two major works of Lonergan," re-iterating them to all of us in those last weeks through various different means that he thought might resonate with each of us.

My aim in this tribute is to connect these two final pointers from Phil with the two criteria that provoked them. So, in a final letter to Robert Henman, he wrote of the "luminous genetics of progress" pointed to in chapter 15 of *Insight*. This first pointer ties directly to his first suggested criterion above, "commitment to explanatory understanding." Chapter 15 and luminous genetics is the aspirational goal that we, the practicing community of 'foundational professionals,' must reach for so that we might begin to take seriously, to sweat over and be lifted by and into the explicit metaphysics of luminous genetics that grounds the human group's story.

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<sup>7</sup> As in note 3 above.

In his second point from the letter to Henman, he wrote of (as he did for decades) the importance of *Method in Theology* chapter 10 section 5 (in his letter, he abbreviates section 5 as “v5”, suggesting to me the intertwining in his molecules with biblical references, having been a Jesuit priest for half his life, and revealing his context of hope for the human group’s potential future). He spoke here of the “knotting of the guardianship” that that section [v5] calls for, especially in the 3 objectifications of page 250—the 1833 overture. This second point from the Henman letter ties directly to his second suggested criterion above, “commitment to genuineness.” The knotting of the guardianship, that is, the tangle of views and horizons to be ever-so-slowly unknotted over decades and centuries, must have as its guide, as its standard, the ‘rules’ of the 1833 Overture and its 3 objectifications. They form, if you will, a map for how to go forward in and with the dialectic untangling. Further, the 1833 Overture has *its* explanatory context and foundation in chapter 15 of *Insight* and in the law of genuineness. Our commitment to genuineness, *then*, is nestled within this explanatory aspirational context, so that *to speak of* operating humbly, honestly, transparently, and vulnerably with each other is an explanatory understanding toward which we are striving.

I used above the phrase “foundational professionals” as a handy name for those struggling with this paradigm-shifting work. Phil tried out numerous creative options. But regardless of names, we’re still in the in-between world of proto-scientific speculations, like that of alchemy moving slowly toward chemistry. We need to “ferment forward,” as Phil loved to say, for a few centuries before some few minority groups around the globe break through to better reveal the explanatory systematic work of functional collaboration: the implementation of explicit metaphysics.

In my slow climb since Phil’s passing, I understand much better now that changing the story of the human group requires *fantasy*, a word and indeed a way of being that Phil embodied and made fresh. In the last week of his life, in one of our evening conversations, he quietly challenged me with the question, “what if the theoretical is *never* apart from the practical?”

Phil’s question was not new, and yet it *was* radically new. It was radically new when he uttered it to me that evening, to him in his wide world, and to me in my much smaller world. Every day was a climb in meaning for Phil, maybe especially in his last weeks. From my notes of June 25, 2020, six days before he died, Phil said, “Your heuristics is

something you get out of each day by getting into it the day before.”<sup>8</sup> So typically Irish and so typically Phil! My tribute to Phil is to prod all of us, beg all of us, to commit to some measure of that kind of growth, to face the challenge and the personal struggle, genuinely, of maybe not a climb into explanatory understanding, but a step here and there. “Tis a far, far better thing that I do...”

To Phil with Love,  
Sandy

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<sup>8</sup> The final note from this evening’s conversation is also worth sharing: “Search for certainty is a blind alley” (alley is heavily underlined). I can hear him saying it yet. This night’s exchange was the single most profound conversation I have ever experienced with Phil.