Teacher and Friend

Reflections on Werner Pelz

Roger Averill

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My first encounter with Werner Pelz took place in the Sociology Department at La Trobe University, towards the end of 1984. I had arranged to meet with him to ask if he would supervise my Free Reading unit the following year. At the time, I was aged 20 and he had just turned 63. If the weather had been warm I imagine Werner would have been wearing a fawn safari top, shorts and sandals; if colder, trousers and a windcheater. Certainly he was by then already quite bald at the front of his head, the wispy hair at the sides regularly escaping from behind his ears; his greying beard neatly cropped. He looked a little like Sigmund Freud, but less stern, his face slightly rounder, his large brown eyes radiating warmth.

My more general memories of our early encounters are infused with that warmth. I remember his calm intensity, the way he gave me his full attention and took my overly ambitious study plans seriously. "Follow your interests", he counselled. "Why study something you're not passionate about? You will work out where your limits lie soon enough." More superficially, for a boy from the outer northern suburbs of Melbourne, Werner was exotic. He came from a wider world I had only read about. To me, back then, he appeared like a cross between a Romantic poet and an Old Testament prophet, but friendlier, with little of the ego and none of the wildness.

Even before I met him I had heard rumours about Werner's personal history. Over the years of our friendship stories of his experiences were woven into the fabric of our conversations. While he was not reluctant to talk about the tragic ways in which his life had intersected with the history of the 20th century, he felt no need to do so unless asked. He was similarly reluctant to tell of his achievements, of his earlier careers in England as a parish priest, theologian, popular broadcaster and newspaper columnist. He recounted his triumphs and travails with the same humble equanimity.

On 25 September 1921 Werner was born to Jewish parents living in Berlin. In the decade of his birth, his father, Ludwig Pelz, having returned from World War I a wounded, decorated veteran, used the small amount of money he'd saved before the war to buy a "flea pit" cinema. Within a few years his prediction that film was a medium of the future had proven correct and, along with two friends, he was the owner of a chain of cinemas throughout Berlin. Werner's early years, then, were spent in luxury. For two of them he lived in a large apartment in Milastrasse and enjoyed the adventures and enchantments offered by an enormous wooded garden.

Ludwig's dream was to retire at 40 and to take his wife and their children, Werner and Jutti, around the world, living for years at a time in France, Italy, North and South America. This dream, however, was shattered when, towards the end of the 1920s, hyperinflation, then the Great Depression, rocked the Weimar Republic, causing the collapse of the entertainment industry. It was from this time that Werner recalled his father using a wheelbarrow to carry the cinemas' takings to the local baker,

only to find that the unmanageable mound of money he was carrying was still insufficient to feed his family.

Having lost his cinema empire, Ludwig reinvented himself as an impresario. This time his enterprise was thwarted by the growing anti-Semitism inspired, and eventually put into legislation, by the Nazi Party. Before the rise of the Nazis the Pelzes had thought of themselves primarily as Berliners, as Germans. Their Jewishness had not figured greatly in their sense of identity. In his wartime memoir, *Distant Strains of Triumph*, Werner writes:

> My parents had a firm but silent belief in a God: vague, far, yet not altogether ineffective. Nevertheless, we needed Hitler to remind us that ours was the Jewish God; and it became desirable to make his acquaintance, however tentatively, if for no other reason than to affirm one's human dignity. So once a week, in the afternoon, Jutti and I went to Tegel for Religious Instruction"
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> (p.26)

In this political climate, despite Ludwig's relentless efforts, the once wealthy Pelz family now tumbled down Berlin's social ladder, grasping at the lower rungs, finally landing in a flat shared with subtenants in Oranienstrasse, one of the poorest parts of town. There were "[n]o more holidays, no more books, no more tickets [to the opera], rarely a Sunday at the body-peppered beach of Wannsee, now hardly enough to put on, hardly enough to eat" (p.33f). The young Werner coped with this long slide from social privilege to isolation, persecution and impoverishment with remarkable composure. Reflecting on the time when Fritz, the leader of his gang of playmates in Wittenau, confronted him and announced that they no longer wanted to play with Jews, the middle-aged memoirist records: "I went home through the withered allotments and buried my childhood under hours of bowing over the bare strings of my violin" (p. 24).

As an adolescent, Werner found solace and inspiration in his reading of philosophy and literature, particularly the works of Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Marx, as well as Lao-Tse, Gerhart Hauptmann, Goethe, Shakespeare, Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis. Such reading, combined with the injustices he observed and those visited upon him, led him to embrace a form of communism "of the kind which inspired Marx rather than of the variety he in turn inspired" (p.43). Werner was, and remained, someone who decried injustice and inequality, someone who longed for something better. Marx, to him, represented a continuation of the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament: the communist utopia, a Promised Land — something to hope for, to work towards, even if one suspected it to be unreachable.

Despite or perhaps because of their dire circumstances, the Pelz family remained close. Each night, sitting round their now almost bare dining table, they discussed all manner of things, "life and death, poets and philosophers, politics and business" (p.33). Ludwig and his son argued furiously about politics, but their disagreements never descended into acrimony or diminished their affection for each other.

By *Kristallnacht* (9-10 November 1938) Werner and his father were already in the habit of laying out their warmest clothes on the ends of their beds before they went to sleep, in readiness for an unwanted late-night knock at the door. By Werner's account, the vast majority of Berliners were not active participants in the looting of Jewish-owned shops and the burning of synagogues — that was orchestrated by the Storm Troopers and their hangers-on — but nor were there any reports of people protesting against the actions of the Brown Shirts (p.40).

Werner never understood why his father did not concentrate his considerable energies and enterprise on the task of migration. Certainly the fact that he had already lost his fortune counted against finding a willing host country, but Werner suspected the real reasons lay deeper in his father's psyche. Perhaps, he conjectured, Ludwig felt he was too German to adapt to another culture; that to be cut adrift from the language and literature he loved would be

worse than death. What, though, of the man who dreamt of his family experiencing life in other countries? Maybe, having transformed himself once from the son of a baker's widow into a wealthy businessman, and finding himself again destitute, he now lacked the strength, the faith, to embark upon another, even more extreme form of migration.

Whatever the reasons for his father's inaction, it was decided that Werner would apply to become a farm labourer in England and, once there, would secure a guest worker permit for his sister. After being tutored in the art of hay-stacking on a training farm, in July 1939, now seventeen, Werner returned to Berlin to farewell his family.

> On the day before my departure I had double fare: baked pigeon and macaroni with ham and cheese. While my mother looked at me unfalteringly, watching me eat her love, I had to pretend to enjoy every bite though I felt it turn into acid inside me. After the meal my parents stretched out on the bed and my father read me the letter he had sent to Mr. Bernstein to persuade him to let me come home for a few days.
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> My father liked to read out his letters to us and my mother would watch him with resigned pride. They were always a model of precision, full of concise demands, sardonic wit, politest innuendoes, as the occasion demanded. This time it was a masterful balance of argument and expostulation, supplication and threats. He had just read over the sentence — even relishing it a little — "I cannot understand how you can find the heart to withhold from us the joy of a togetherness which may well be our last", when my mother contracted in a spasm of loud, irrepressible crying. I had never seen her cry like that. Usually her eyes filled quietly and ran over quietly. For a moment we were taken aback. We could not connect. Then first my father who had written the guilty sentence, and then I who had listened to it as to a rhetorical flourish, understood. The pigeon and the macaroni turned into bile in a cramp of pain as my umbilical cord which had never been properly detached was torn.
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> "Which may well be our last." No, we had not yet quite comprehended. The gas ovens, although we knew about the brown paper parcels, would still have seemed fantastic. The future still seemed, up to a point, malleable. Suddenly a neat phrase had gashed into a prophecy of doom. "Our last." Yes, indeed, "it may well be." My journey was irreversible, like death. We could hope to join only in the beyond, called, almost arbitrarily, England. My mother had known all along. She had not the protection of male reasoning which knows how to weigh abstract hopes against real despair.
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> (p.51f)

Terribly shy in the face of officialdom, distracted and disoriented by the lights of London, Werner was not as diligent as he might have been in agitating for Jutti's guest worker permit. Soon after arriving in England, he diffidently enquired at Bloomsbury House about his sister's prospects and received a prompt, negative reply. Then, assigned as a labourer to a farm in Sutton Bank, North Yorkshire, where, for the duration of the harvest, he was forced to work from 6 am to 10 pm, he failed to make a follow-up enquiry. Three weeks later he approached the authorities again and an official promised to look into the case, to process the application. It was, however, too late. Days later the "phoney peace" ended. When Britain declared war on Germany, the fate of Werner's family was left in the hands of the Nazis. It would be five years before he learnt that his parents had been killed in the Holocaust, though he never discovered the details of their murders, and that Jutti had endured four years of imprisonment in Auschwitz. The lack of urgency with which he pursued a work permit for his sister remained one of the great regrets of Werner's life.

Rendered an enemy alien by the war, he continued to work as a farmhand in North Yorkshire. Eventually, like thousands of other Jewish refugees in Britain, he was deemed a threat to national security and was interned, first in Beverley, then Huyton.

Time in the interment camps dragged and while "we did not actually starve on the indifferent fluid that covered the uneven bottom of our tin plates three times a day, [we] ... felt hungry enough to talk, think and dream with intensity of meals long since incorporated into our cell tissue" (p.74).

Despite the fact that the *Arandorra Star* had been sunk a few days earlier and hundreds of his fellow-internees had drowned, Werner volunteered to be sent on the next ship to brave the journey to Australia. Still a youth, death was to him an impossible abstraction, all danger remote. Besides, he was desperate to do something, to contribute somehow to the war effort, and he couldn't believe the authorities would ship him to the other side of the world only to lock him up in another camp.

Later in life, Werner was adamant that he had witnessed none of the brutality on HMT *Dunera* reported by other internees. Yes, he recalled, conditions in the bowels of the ship to which they were confined were cramped and stifling; yes, the guards treated them threateningly, and permanently confiscated their belongings when they boarded; but no, he did not see any beatings or other forms of gratuitous abuse. This difference in memory, in perception, can, I think, be explained by Werner's age compared to that of many of his fellow "Dunera boys". I imagine that what appeared to the 18-year-old Werner as the ordinary privations of an extraordinary, ongoing odyssey would, to a middle-aged, once respectable professional, have seemed considerably more abusive and would later be recalled with horror.

For Werner, the next two years were divided between internment camps in Hay and Tatura (in conditions rather better, he would later note, than those provided for refugees in twenty-first century Australia). After slowly reconciling himself to the logic of the Allied military, which had placed him and hundreds of other exiles from Nazi Germany — many of them able-bodied men eager to serve the Allied cause — behind barbed-wire fences in outback Australia, Werner began, in a strange way, to enjoy the experience. He met a number of like-minded young men, passionate about art, politics and ideas, one of whom was to remain a life-long friend. Many of the internees were eminent scholars across a wide range of disciplines. Werner took the opportunity to continue the education the Nazis had cut short by participating in the camps' "universities". He took courses in philosophy, theology, economics, art, psychiatry, music and German literature.

The internment camps were alive with ideas, but this was not the only thing firing Werner's imagination. Beyond and within the camps' fences was what Werner termed the desert, the barren landscape of Australia's pastoral regions. Ironically, this sparse landscape was fertile ground for his existential ruminations. He spent long periods of each day and night walking the barbed-wire boundaries. The desert, the isolation and the sense of community affected him deeply. What follows is a condensation of a long passage he later wrote reflecting on the influence of the desert.

> The desert is the mother of all great illusions, the cradle of every civilisation. ... In the desert we are troubled by the illusion that we matter enormously: we, the only living among so much death. Everything is up to us. The very stones wait. In the desert we fear that we do not matter at all; that we are a disturbance among so much serenity of dust. ... The desert certainly strengthened my "communist tendencies". Here all men are equal, not because they are alike but because they are unique. I still believed implicitly in every man's uniqueness, because I was sure of my own. I did not reckon myself wiser, better or more gifted than others. I simply knew that I was I and that every man was that. ... The question became more pressing: What is real? The vision or the factual? The dream or the nightmare? … While I circled the camp and peopled the desert with a race of kings, men, women and children were burned to death in London, Moscow and Cologne; were worked to death at Krupps'; were tortured to death in concentration camps. In Burma men died of tropical diseases and Japanese brutalities. They died of exposure in the Arctic

> Sea. All this to save one actuality from another. What was the use of dreams, dreamed at the outermost fringe of the world?
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> (pp. 99-102)

Freed from internment in 1942, Werner returned to England and sought enlistment. Since he was still considered a security risk, his application was refused and he was detailed for farm work. During this time he met Lotte Hensl, a fellow Jewish refugee, from Vienna, whose family had all been murdered by the Nazis. Lotte and Werner shared the same love of literature, music, art and ideas, the same tragic recent past. They decided to face their uncertain futures together and, soon after the war, they married.

As the full horrors of Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz and Treblinka were revealed, Werner chose the dream over the grimness of reality, belief over despair. Ironically his experience of studying the Bible in an Australian internment camp full of exiled Jews locked up in the desert was instrumental in his growing interest in the teachings of Jesus. Werner, though, saw this move towards Christianity as consistent rather than contradictory, a continuation rather than a break. For him, the social, political and metaphysical were inseparable. The story of the Old Testament, the covenant between God and the Jews, was ultimately a story about the covenant the Jews had with each other, to treat one another fairly, caringly, justly. According to Werner, the prophetic call to return to Yahweh, to hope, to the Promised Land, *was* Yahweh. The medium was the message, the journey, the destination. The most real thing about our reality was our dreaming. As Nazism had shown, we needed to choose our dreams carefully. For Werner, Jesus was a continuation of the prophetic tradition, another instalment in the ongoing conflict between the royal, priestly tradition and the prophetic one within Judaism. Jesus' dream, though, *his* Yahweh, was even more radical, more dream-like than that of Amos and Elijah, for he called his followers not merely to seek justice, but to forgive. Through forgiveness, Werner believed, we might break the cycles of violence and retribution that encircle us, we might redeem ourselves and each other, and achieve a type of transcendence.

It was this kind of thinking that led to Werner's decision to study theology. While a student he continued working as a farmhand, then a navvy, and Lotte too took low-paid employment as a charwoman and a factory worker. Together they lived in a grim, tiny bed-sit, where they were soon joined by a baby, their son Peter. I remember Werner telling me how he and Lotte could never save money because whenever they had a spare penny they spent it on a book.

Naively believing that the Church of England spoke for the prophets rather than the royals and the priests, Werner was ordained in the Church of England in 1952. For the next twelve years he worked as the curate-in-charge of a small Lancashire parish west of Manchester called Lostock. One can only conjecture what the congregation at Lostock made of their new vicar and his wife. If the stereotype held, how did these conservative, phlegmatic characters respond to Werner and Lotte's passionate, prophetic interpretation of the Bible? By 1955 enough of them were persuaded by Lotte and Werner's concern over the proliferation of nuclear arms to form a peace campaign, which, for a while, spawned anti-nuclear groups, known as 'Lostock Groups', in various cities from Edinburgh to London. As for Werner's response to his parishioners, he found their lives to be full of dignity. There was poignancy in the fact that their region and industry had once been at the centre of the industrial revolution but was now exhausted, redundant, a literal slag-heap.

From the beginning, Werner and Lotte wrote plays for members of the congregation to perform, as a way of reaching out to them, trying to connect, to understand them. Having developed a taste for writing, in 1959 Werner wrote a fictional prose piece drawing on some of the characters in the region. Upon reading it, a friend suggested he send it to the *Manchester*

Guardian. To his surprise they published it. Thus his life as a writer had begun. For most of the next decade Werner was a fairly regular contributor of stories and opinion pieces to the *Guardian*. Also in 1959, Werner published his first so-called "attack" on conventional, comfortable Christianity. More accurately, *Irreligious Reflections on the Christian Church* was his first book-length attempt to articulate his vision of a prophetic church. *God Is No More*, co-written with Lotte, was published in 1963. In keeping with its iconoclastic title, this book took the irreligious reflections further. The authors attempted to liberate the words of Jesus from their ecclesiastical strictures, to reassert their disturbing radicalism. They write:

> We have surrounded the words themselves with so much religious and metaphysical glory, that we now feel absolutely safe in listening to them. Yet we have misunderstood something of crucial importance, if we fail to realise that the words cannot call us into true responsibility, unless they come to us — as to the original disciples — with no other authority save that of their inherent persuasiveness. They lure us into a life the truth of which we cannot discover except in the living; a life we cannot justify, because we can only hope that in living it we shall feel justified. They frighten us because they seem to goad us into complete insecurity, all the more so, because they reveal the insecurity of our securities, the meaninglessness of our meanings.
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> (p.30)

This book, published in the same year as Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God*, was part of the Z*eitgeist*. Swept up in the broader debate about popular perceptions of God and a general spirit of theological and ecclesiastical reform, it was both popular and influential. Its positive reception led to the publication of three more books: the already-mentioned autobiography of Werner's early years, *Distant Strains of Triumph*, and two more co-authored works, *True Deceivers* (a follow-up to *God Is No More*), and a novelistic attempt to enter the mind of a monster, all too human, *I Am Adolf Hitler*.

Throughout the 1960s Werner regularly appeared on radio and television, usually, and increasingly uncomfortably, wearing a "dog collar". His talks occasionally appeared in the *Listener* during this period, and he also made documentaries for the BBC, most notably an account of his journey in 1964 from England to Israel. As his public profile as an unorthodox priest increased, Werner felt his position in the church was becoming untenable and some time in the mid-1960s he relinquished his parish. Similarly, as his intellectual collaborations with Lotte found a wider audience, their more intimate collaboration, their marriage, began to unravel. The trauma of the Holocaust, the loss of her family, her dislocation, had taken an enormous psychological toll on Lotte, and in recent years her moods and behaviour had become increasingly erratic. Werner could see no way of healing the hurts, and in 1970 he separated from her. In 1986 Lotte committed suicide. Werner's sense that he had failed her was another of his lasting, deeply felt regrets.

After he stepped out of the Church of England, Werner's profile as a critic of that institution no longer had traction in the media. Besides, he had turned his attention to further study. Enrolling in the Sociology Department at Bristol University, he was awarded a Ph.D. in 1973. His thesis, adapted and published the following year as *The Scope of Understanding in Sociology* (1973), drew on his wealth of reading across an impressive array of disciplines in order to explore the limits of what is knowable, to ask the epistemological questions "What can we know?" and "How?" He writes: "Precisely because of the infinite complexity of interaction between each and all, it surely seems questionable to wish for a method here which would hope to establish certainties, simple propositions, clearly defined factualities, definitive theories …." (p.257). In searching for a method nuanced enough to evoke the complexities of even a single life, let alone the webs of complexity of our social lives, Werner advocated a kind of sociological hermeneutics. Given that in sociology the facts that can be proven are so prosaic as to be assumed, he suggests that

what matters is not argument and proof but engagement, interpretation and conversation. In many ways Werner's sociological explorations were a continuation of his theological ones — old wine in a new wineskin.

It was during the late 1960s that Werner met Mary Zobel. She had grown up in Wales and had always felt herself to be an outsider. In the opening autobiographical section of her unpublished novel *Machreth*, she writes:

> I was like my difficult father, and like him I was broken when I was 13 — my mind, not my body. I had never belonged anywhere. I was a freak, a witch. Not like my Welsh cousins, nor my English ones. I did not understand the world others said was the right one. It was dark, a maze, a series of boxes, where I could not find my way about, though all the others did. I could not learn to handle ordinary objects with any competence. My world had different shapes, colours, a different light; I knew others did not see that light, or they would have talked about it. It was sometimes around people, sometimes it was simply there. I sometimes saw, very vividly, places I had never been. In the hills, the strangeness was even greater. Stone circles, rocks, great earth mounds, ancient ruins, springs of water. … I could not have described what I felt there. The different kind of excitement, the shimmering sense of hidden presences — there are no words for something that exists beyond the range of the sensible world, the world of the five senses. Finally, I could not cope with the ordinary world at all. I could not cope with school, with others my age, with being so different. "Witch! Witch!" said the voices in my head. I came apart completely. I would not leave the house, from terror of the world, and myself: I was not part of the substance of the right world.
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> (p.5)

Mary became a widow in 1963, when her husband, the mathematician Andrew Zobel (another German Jewish refugee), died of cancer. At the time of his death Mary was pregnant with Justin, a brother to Daniel and Imogen, whom Mary and Andrew had earlier adopted. Zobel family legend has it that some time in the mid-1960s, at the height of Werner's media exposure, Mary saw him on television and, much taken by him, announced to a friend that she would one day meet this charismatic man. A year or so later, Werner was the sole respondent to a classified advertisement Mary had placed in the paper offering her cottage in the Welsh hills for rental. It took another few years for their relationship to develop beyond that of landlady and tenant, for them to become friends, then lovers. In 1973 Werner and Mary married and later that year the family moved to Australia, so that Werner could take up a lecturing position in the recently established Sociology Department at La Trobe University in Melbourne. Buying a house in Montmorency, they began the task of adjusting to a new country, or, in Werner's case, an old country revisited.

Now 51, Werner embarked on a new career and discovered what had probably always been his vocation — teaching. At the end of a stay of thirteen years, reflecting on its beginnings in a valedictory piece for the La Trobe *Bulletin* (1 December 1986), he writes:

> Extraordinary luck had brought me to La Trobe. Our department was — is — open, cosmopolitan, tolerant. I was left to find my feet in my own time, to develop my peculiar perspectives in my own way. From the start, I loved lecturing, the sharing of a continuing quest, but tutorials and seminars even more. For 13 years I learned at least as much from the students — many of them mature — as I ever learned from the grand masters of sociology, philosophy, etc.

He ends this reflection with "I have never enjoyed my work more than at La Trobe". Certainly this sense of enjoyment, of enthusiasm for the task, was evident in Werner's teaching. While many other lecturers seemed to pass on the insights gained through their scholarship and research reluctantly, almost under sufferance,

Werner did so with a quiet, compelling passion. As a lecturer, he was not of the theatrical type. Consciously or not, he often subverted the role by casually perching on the edge of a table, and then proceeded to talk for an hour, speaking expansively, seamlessly, to a single page of notes. Drawing and expanding on what he had written in *The Scope of Understanding in Sociology*, Werner's lectures demonstrated that scope to be very wide indeed. For him, distinctions between theology, politics, philosophy, literature, social theory and art were all artificial. In his mind, and in his lectures and Honours seminars, all such endeavours were united in the task of trying to understand how we should live together. For despite his relentless questioning of certainties, Werner was less questioning of his belief that as a species we have lost sight of what it means to be human. This was his conviction, his alternative to what he termed the modern gods of the market, militarism, the more of the more, conquistadorialism, and instrumentalist rationality. For Werner, our being human was dependent on our being-with, on our learning that we find ourselves through others, that every "you" is also an "I".

In *God is No More*, he and Lotte had written: "I shall not fully appreciate the mystery of my ability to say 'I', until I have been awed by the realization that this precisely is the mystery of the 'other'. I shall not be able to love myself, until I come to love my neighbour as a 'myself'" (p.69). Then, as an academic trying to communicate the same sentiment to second- and third-year sociology students, he put it this way: "The discovery or revelation of species-being happens in the active establishment of deeper and wider human togetherness. It happens as we become more fully aware of and actively acknowledge our total interdependence." (Notes for the lecture course "Reason and emotion".)

Werner lamented that philosophy had increasingly neglected the question of how we should live together, losing itself in what he termed "tauto-logic". "The whole of logic-oriented philosophy", he wrote in a later, unpublished manuscript, "is based on this ultimate tautology: Proof establishes truth, because the truth which the proof establishes proves the proof to be true." According to Werner, when reason is used to establish certainties rather than to question them it leads us on a path towards abstraction, "to the power of logic and the logic of power". This, he believed, lies at the heart of military thinking and economic rationalism, where formulas and abstractions allow generals to think of civilian deaths as collateral damage and factory owners to see the lives of their employees as figures in the expenditure column of their ledgers, numbers to be added or subtracted at will. In this way, he claimed that our very way of thinking, rather than empowering us to think about how we should live, had come to have power *over* us; we now served it, rather than it serving us. According to Werner, we need, as a species, to do no less than re-think our way of thinking, to explore what it might mean to abandon our competitive ways of thinking and interacting and attempt, as Heidegger put it, to dwell with each other on earth.

Unlike the critiques of most social theorists, which often hide the ethical motivations of their thinking, it was Werner's romantic vision of what might be that plainly motivated his criticism of what is. So while some of his lectures expounded the critical theories of Marx, Weber and Foucault, others explored the alternative visions of the *Tao Te Ching*, T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and the prophetic tradition in the Bible. In this way, although he was critical of so many aspects of modern life, listening to Werner did not make life seem narrower or smaller; rather one came away feeling it had suddenly expanded, that life was pregnant with possibilities. Werner believed that alternative ways of being, of being together, were pointed to by various mystical traditions and by art and literature and particularly music, which he experienced as transcending itself, as offering "a configuration of what cannot be figured".

For me, the combination of ethical critique and poetic vision in Werner's lectures resonated deeply with my own romantic, misfit view of the world. While his views confirmed many of my own early thoughts about and experiences of the

world, they also challenged and disturbed them.

By the time Werner was teaching me, his fairly short academic career was nearly over. It is hard to say when my relationship with him became a friendship, for many of his strengths as a teacher also bore the qualities of friendship. It occurred gradually, during our supervision sessions, which always began with his making me a cup of coffee and ended ages later, after we had talked of everything from the poetry of Wordsworth and Rilke to the state of my grandmother's health. No topic was too trivial or too important. Unlike most truly erudite people, Werner was as eager to listen as he was to teach. (Perhaps that is what he was teaching.) His capacity to engage with you, to really care about what you were saying, thinking, feeling, made a conversation with him much more than talk. In some ways, though not all, our friendship was merely a continuation of those sessions at La Trobe: a twenty-year conversation.

Werner retired at the end of 1986. He was sad to be finishing teaching, but also looking forward to the next phase of his life, living with Mary in Healesville. When Shelley and I helped Werner and Mary move house, the bond between Werner and me expanded to include our partners. What had been a dialogue became a four-way conversation. Mary was like no one else I have ever met. The depiction in her novel was right: there was a beautiful strangeness to her soul. Meeting her, you were left with the sense that she was connected to some other reality, was only lightly tethered to this one. She was not, however, someone easily dismissed. Her accounts of her quasi-mystical experiences — so utterly foreign to me — carried great weight because of her intelligence and integrity. Her physical frailty was balanced by the robustness of her mind, which had a remarkable recall for what seemed like every work of English literature ever written.

For the next ten years Shelley and I made regular trips to Healesville. Werner would always cook us a roast for lunch, followed by his legendary fruit salad. Mary would join us but only peck at a bowl of what looked like porridge. At times we talked almost non-stop for eight or nine hours. Typically, the topics discussed included family and friends, books recently read or fondly remembered, films, politics, current affairs, matters of faith and doubt. Mary would disappear and re-emerge as her fatigue allowed, and usually Shelley, Werner and I would combine some part of the conversation with another of Werner's great loves, walking. Typically, we went up Mt. Riddell or, if short of time, around the weir.

Apart from the conversation and food, another wonderful aspect of visiting Werner and Mary was witnessing the enduring tenderness between them. Though their views of the world and what may or may not lie beyond it were quite different, they were unfailingly gentle with each other in their disagreements. As the terrors of her adolescence returned, Mary became increasingly dependent on Werner, not only for her practical needs, but also her sense of well-being. While this limited the scope of his activities, he never complained, but devoted himself to her care. It was during this time that, apart from running a study/discussion group, Werner wrote a large unpublished work that expanded the thoughts he had wrestled with both as a theologian and as a sociologist. Having completed this, he then revisited many of these themes, but recast them in haikus, the discipline of the form providing its own challenges and pleasures.

For ten years, until Mary's death in 1996, Werner and Mary's house on Mt. Riddell Road offered Shelley and me asylum from the mad busyness of modern life. Although when there we often talked of our confusion, our unknowing, even our despair, we always left feeling somehow expanded, as though the horizon was a little wider. This was for us a Healesville Sanctuary indeed.

We were living in Canberra when Werner's relationship with Loreen Price began. I know that for him this was an unexpected late-in-life delight. For me, it was reassuring to know he had companionship, and wonderful to hear of how his own horizon had again expanded to take in travel, visits to the opera, holidays at the beach. As

for the number of groups he was then involved with, which included one for film appreciation and two U3A classes, as well as his long-standing "Tuesday Group", I could only marvel at his level of energy and envy those who participated in them.

In this period Werner wrote his last published work, his translation of *The Wanderer* (2001), a book of epigrams by the 17th century German mystic, Johann Scheffler, better known as Angelus Silesius. In reviving this largely forgotten text, providing the first full translation of it into English, Werner returned to some of the enduring themes of his lifetime of thinking about the mysteries of life. In a preface to the poems, he writes:

> There is no doubt that for the author of *The Wanderer* "God" represents the unknowable ultimate, Meister Eckhart's "isness", that which gives being to any-thing and every-thing, which is the true being of everything. But what God *is*, what that *isness* is which gives substance to us all, our body and soul, our flesh and mind, we cannot know. It is that which enables us to know, *that which gives us both being and the ability to think, to understand, to know, including the ability to think we know when we do not.*
>
> Let me put the same affirmation in other words. What God is, what we truly are or could become, are not at all metaphysical, theological, or theoretical questions. *They are most practical and ethical ones. We can know God and then ourselves only to the extent to which we become or at least try to become, what we would like our 'God' to be.*
>
> (p. xvii)

When Shelley and I returned to Melbourne in 2000, we brought with us our first daughter, Grace, and in 2001, in which Loreen suddenly died, we had Lily. It was harder now for Shelley and me to talk at such leisure, for we brought our busyness with us, but Werner loved the girls, who loved him in return and were always fascinated by his collection of shells and stones. Sometimes we would go to the other Healesville Sanctuary or walk into town, and Werner would insist on buying us lunch now that he no longer had the strength to cook it.

Our conversations now circled round well-rehearsed topics, though Werner was ever interested in new ideas and made periodic trips to the library at La Trobe, where he would borrow the latest books on a vast array of disparate topics. His curiosity about our lives, what we were thinking and feeling about life, never diminished. Unfortunately though, by the time Werner reached old age, his hope, which animated both his criticism and his vision, had taken a battering. Devastated by Loreen's unexpected death, and no longer able to effect much change, Werner felt he had failed to make a difference, to have a positive impact on the world. He remained steadfastly unconvinced by my repeated attempts to reassure him that he had been an important influence on so many lives, the impact of which was untold. Observing current affairs, he was appalled as the US government spent 200 million dollars a day on its occupation of Iraq; the Howard Government treated refugees more punitively, with less compassion, than he had been treated 65 years earlier; Australian workers were made more vulnerable; the Federal Government signed a contract to sell 10,000 tonnes of uranium to China each year; and university administrators discouraged their staff from engaging in "curiosity-based research", forcing them instead to think about how best to position their department's brand in the education market. My desire to persuade Werner that he would leave the world a better place was seemingly doomed. In truth, it was hard for us both not to despair.

In recent years it became something of a joke between us that in response to his question "And how are you and Shelley and the girls?" I would recite a litany of our most recent minor ailments, and then, when I asked after Werner's health, he would invariably reply "I am fine", almost embarrassed by his good fortune. This of course was not always entirely true, but it was true enough for me to be shocked when, in March last year, his stepson Justin rang to tell me of Werner's serious illness. Though for so many years we had talked with each

other about matters of life and death, I had somehow tricked myself into believing that Werner would live on. During this time, distressed as I witnessed my friend's demise, I found some consolation in reading his haikus. At heart Werner was a poet, and he sometimes told me that if he'd remained in Germany and continued to write in his mother tongue, this might have been his vocation. One haiku entitled "73 +", reads:

> Nearer to you, Death,
> Each hour. Now or never I
> Must learn how to live.
>
> Grief – more than life –
> is encounter with the whole
> majesty of life.
>
> Brighter than light sky
> and I. – Wing-beat of shadow
> past closed eyes: My life.

In his final illness, as he faced his death, Werner retained the calmness and dignity that he possessed in life. In Maroondah Hospital, emerging from a three-week-long stupor, he asked "So, what can we learn from this?" A few days before he died, even in his confusion, Werner was still thinking of others. Struggling for words, lapsing into German, he asked, "So how is your *Mutter*?" I guessed he was asking after my mother, and he chuckled a little when I reminded him of my lack of German. Later in that same stilted conversation, I asked Werner what he thought about when he was alone, slumped in the chair in the nursing home. He was silent for a while and I thought he hadn't understood the question or was avoiding answering it, but then he said, "When I am by myself ... I ... I accept my fate. I am not worried, so you must not be worried."

It is perhaps appropriate that when reflecting on my relationship with Werner I find myself turning to a theological concept in order to make sense of it. For me our friendship was an expression of grace, a gift as unexpected as it was undeserved. I never did, and never will, understand why Werner took me so seriously, why he cared for and about me. Now that I am myself middle-aged, our friendship stands as a hopeful reminder to me that new, vital connections can be made with people in the second half of life. But it also reminds me of the need to remain open; that love and friendship can occur in surprising ways if you are open to that possibility. For Werner's part, I imagine he enjoyed the fact that there was no reason for our relationship, that it made no worldly, commercial, instrumentally rational sense — that it was what it was.

So much of Werner's life was spent asking the question "How should we live?" that the asking itself became an answer. His example now stands as testament to the value of a life lived in active reflection, one where knowledge is valued only in its service to understanding, where careful questioning, combined with care for others, creates its own dissent, its own quiet meaning. Werner Pelz was that rarest of rare things, a wise man. To have been taught by him was a privilege; to have been his friend was a kind of blessing.

ROGER AVERILL *studied sociology at La Trobe University in the mid-1980s. At this time – though in a different context – he met his future wife, Shelley Mallett. While he greatly enjoyed his studies, his passion was for writing fiction, and over the next ten years he wrote three unpublished novels. He also worked in a variety of jobs, including those of labour ward attendant at the Royal Women's Hospital and assistant archivist at the University of Melbourne Archives. Over the years he has held teaching positions at La Trobe, Deakin and Melbourne, and has also worked as a relief teacher in various primary schools.*

In 2000, Roger gained his Ph.D. for the thesis "Social Lives: Belief, biography and the sociological imagination". Since then, he has combined caring for two daughters, Grace and Lily, with freelance research, teaching and editing. He has published academic articles on life writing (the study and practice of biography and autobiography) in journals such as Clio: A journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History; a/b: Auto/Biography Studies; *and* New Literatures Review. *A memoir of the time his wife and he spent living on a tiny island in Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea, is being considered for publication.*

Teacher and Friend *is based on the text of a talk Roger gave at a Learningguild Friday-evening meeting on the 15th of September 2006. Werner Pelz had died in that year. Roger and Shelley are members of Learningguild.*