

DAVID FLEMING

2 January 1941 – 29 November 2010

A personal perspective  
from Gillian Paschkes-Bell

I met David in the late 1980s at an evangelical church in Hampstead – St John's, Downshire Hill. David was not the kind of man I would normally associate with the evangelical movement. To be sure, he was a man of faith – he liked it through the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Yet he, like a wide variety of others in the locality, had been attracted to St John's by the sheer quality of person of its parson, Canon Bob Smith (known posthumously as 'St Bob' to his former congregation). David knew quality when he encountered it, and the depth of honesty, combined with the depth of heart, in St Bob, was quality. And so David mixed with an assemblage of widely assorted individuals at St John's, many of whom had somehow met Bob on the street or somewhere. As well as worshipping with us regularly, David offered his voice as a rich and competent choral addition to the Christmas carol service – and his special brew of hot mulled wine afterwards.

In those days, I used to go to work by bus. The number 24 from South End Green, Hampstead, used to take Michael Foot to Parliament, me to work at RNIB – in those days in Great Portland Street – and David to pursue his doctorate in economics at Birkbeck. So every now and again the two of us would encounter each other, and a good conversation was always had – usually on a front seat at the top, if we could get it. After my husband, Stan Bell, died in 1990, I got to know David better.

By then, he was not so often seen on the number 24. He must have completed the doctorate. But I still saw him on my way to work, because I had inherited Stan's former guide dog, Folly, and my route to the bus was extended by a quick gallop across a corner of Hampstead Heath each morning. On these occasions, David was often to be seen returning from his morning run. It was his habit to set out from his eyrie at the top of a tall house overlooking the Hampstead ponds, and walk to the viaduct in the middle of the Heath, savouring the morning. Then he would turn round and run back again, a tall, thin figure clad in jeans, an old sweater and trainers.

After Stan died, David and I would occasionally meet for dinner, and it was in those days that I gradually learnt to understand a little more of this complex man. Passionate about beauty, truth and goodness, I came to see David as a latter-day prophet, looking at the Big Picture and warning the world of the consequences of its blinkered vision. So important was this prophetic work that he had limited time for personal relationship. He valued it. But he would not let it interfere, and so, despite his keen regret at his childless state, he took no steps to alter it. (It was a delight to see him for a few short years after the turn of the millennium with a partner who really suited him. They kept separate households, and he would go to hers for supper on Sundays, after evensong, having putting in a full day's work saving the planet beforehand.) She persuaded him to the occasional holiday. And then she died, outrageously, in an arson attack on the home of her mother who she had been visiting for the weekend in Macclesfield, leaving David to his work and his friends, as before.

By that time, I had left London for the Findhorn community in the north of Scotland.<sup>1</sup> When I was visiting my former home I would sometimes stay with David for two or three days, climbing up the loft ladder to sleep in his attic. I would lie on a mattress gazing at the underside of the roof, decorated with floral French wallpaper, or turning to look through the Velux window at the Heath. Down the ladder, his living room was a delight. Book-lined, of course, he had a huge picture window from which could be seen a soft view of water, surrounded by trees, fading into heathland, beyond which, a block of Victorian flats, a spire... Escaped parakeets flashed vividly and greenly in the treetops as I sat at his table over breakfast.

The room was furnished with very good, really old wooden pieces, dark with polish and time. These included an old pew, which he used as a repository of papers. But the room was also comfortable, with a massive cream-coloured sofa (new!), quite big enough to stretch out on full length, and low, comfy armchairs (old), arranged around a low chest protected from a hot teapot by two really old Dutch tiles. Of an evening, soft side lamps suffused the whole with a warm glow that allowed the darkness to gather mysteriously in corners. There was a secretaire with his packing list permanently pinned to the wall. Very short; practical for the overnight stay to lecture.

On the other side of the flat was his study and bedroom: two desks and a double bed (neatly made with a beautiful cream coloured counterpane) crammed in under more books. More of the French floral wallpaper made the room dark, like a bower. There was a galley kitchen with exposed structural timbers, and another of those fine, low armchairs at the end, which you could sit on while he cooked something nutritious, plain, and slightly eccentric, to be enjoyed with a bottle of good wine. And down the steps, past the Matisse print of the blue woman, another galley for the bathroom, complete with sixties' blue bathroom furniture, and no shower.

This was the setting for rich conversation. I talked theology, and sometimes literature. David taught me to see the big picture of what we are doing to our world in more detail. (My mother had done a fine job to start me off.) And at some point, often as a grace for meals, he would read the collect for the day.

Of course, I got to know about his huge unfinished book, *The Lean Economy*, the essence of which is distilled into his other unpublished book, *Lean Logic*. He was writing *The Lean Economy* for years, each chapter about a different aspect of culture, weaving a complex whole. His work associates were on at him, at the turn of the century, to publish – the world needs this message now! But David could never complete the book to his satisfaction. Instead, its message spilled out in lectures, articles, and shorter works.

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<sup>1</sup> I remember an occasion, driving north, when I missed my way, and discovered that I had left my handbag, containing purse, cards, address book etc, at the home of a friend who had gone away for the weekend. Conducted by a sympathetic local to a Yorkshire constabulary, I discovered that if you get someone to deposit cash in a police station anywhere in the land, you can collect the equivalent from any other police station. Standing before the officer trying to think who lived near a police station and had a phone number I could remember, it was David who came to mind – and to my rescue – going to the station on Rosslyn Hill with £100 to see me through until my friend might send my bag on. (Not that he acted at once, to be sure. There was an important bit of work to be done first.)

David regarded himself as a failure in many ways. A mutual friend told me he'd described himself to her as someone who crawled around the floor on hands and knees endlessly looking for the electric socket. Unmarried, unpublished (in terms of his books), and inadequately waged for his enormous effort, in latter years the prophet of peak oil doom was kept afloat and active thanks to the judicious purchase of 'futures'<sup>2</sup> in oil that he had foreseen, many years before, would soar in value. I am glad that he had the sense to turn his visionary zeal to that practical advantage, for the world is not good at looking after its prophets.

David was courteous, courageous, brilliant and utterly himself. He served the world with enormous generosity and with the best of himself. The last time I saw him, I borrowed a book from his shelves (Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy*). He lent it reluctantly, not trusting that lent books return. Well, I tried. But when I phoned, book at the ready, on a visit to London, I was greeted with:

- No, I'm too busy. I'm seeing no-one. No-one at all!
- I'll just hand it over on the doorstep...

He was too busy, even for that, and I shall keep the copy in his memory. My last Christmas card from him (2009)<sup>3</sup> expressed the hope that, after he had emerged from his busyness, he would still have some friends left. So it was some time since I had spoken to him when I rang, just a few weeks before his death, to say that there had been a flood in my small studio flat in Hampstead. My tenant was temporarily homeless, and did he know of anyone nearby who might have a room.

Generously, David offered his attic. I agreed with him when, on brief reflection, he opined that this would probably suit my tenant as little as himself. His parting words were an invitation to meet when I was next down. And I was looking forward to that when, one afternoon, a housemate called downstairs, "Did you know your friend David Fleming has died." He had seen it, in a stray search on the web. The angels had made sure that I knew.

I shall finish with a poem inspired by my gratitude for the depth of communication I was accustomed to with David.

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<sup>2</sup> I'm told this means that his speculation was directly on the likely rise in the perceived value of oil; he was not investing in oil companies.

<sup>3</sup> David's Christmas cards were self-published, often with an engraving or text.

## After the Garden Party

(23<sup>rd</sup> July 2006)

Rapid chatter in the garden.  
Interruption. Dislocation.  
An awkward kind of dance.

Did he give me the brush off?  
Do I care?  
It stings a bit,  
but I don't want to stay long in that space.

We wanted different things  
and so I did not get what I desired  
– to make my point.  
Did he get what he wanted?  
To name-swap, reminisce  
about a world I do not share.

A detail.  
Let it go.  
I choose to move on.

And in the later evening,  
having moved,  
over the slower talk of dinner  
with just David,  
the space opened  
and my point dropped into it.

It was David and not Stephen  
who heard what I had thought.  
It was David and not Stephen  
who received what I had brought.