

In Memory of Stephen Read

25/7/1957 – 17/7/2022

On 26 April this year I received an email from Stephen: “I’m in hospital at the moment (again). Been having problems breathing and went to King’s for a regular chest x-ray only to be marched to A & E by the radiologist and then admitted.” He sent that message at 9 o’clock. Three hours later, he emailed me again:

“I’ve just seen the consultant and it looks like I’ll be here for some time. It’s Fabry’s catching up with me, finally. It seems... that a heart transplant is now my only option but [I] am right on the edge of acceptability due to my age and previous kidney transplant, [and] that [I] probably wouldn’t survive the trauma. I’ll most likely be rejected according to the heart consultant but you never know; there may be one more roll of the dice left.”

You can’t receive a message like that from someone you love and not be upset. I felt so sorry for Edori and Jacob, and for Raymond, Christopher, Alison and Charles. I also felt that terrible sense of impending loss – worse than a shock – that feeling of witnessing a tragedy unfolding exactly as you have already seen it unfold once before, yet still being unable to do anything to stop it.

In the days that followed, as I thought more and more about Stephen, I started to notice things that I had never previously realised. It struck me how none of my generation could have remembered when we first met him because, of course, he was the eldest of us. He was always there. Whatever Charles or I did, he was ten years ahead of us, leading the way. I remembered him calling by to see my parents when he would have been about eighteen and my dad shaking his hand and offering him a beer – all of which seemed very grown up to me at the time. Looking back and seeing Stephen and my father together in my memory’s eye, I also noticed how they had something in common: creativity. At the age of eight I had been too young to realise that family members can have other sorts of bonds too, which may have little to do with them being related. But thinking about them, and that casual visit forty-six years ago, it was obvious.

At the family party on the day he died, I described Stephen as a ‘trailblazer’ because he led the way. That is not the right word: he was not a trail *blazer* because he was far too reserved and modest. But he showed us how it was okay to be different. It was okay to be an artist and wear a hat at a rakish angle. It was okay to wear an earring or two. It was okay to paint your bedroom before you had made your bed in the morning. It was okay to head off to America. And in realising how he had boldly gone where no Read or Mortimer had gone before, I realised how he had opened doors for all of us. It was okay for us to be ourselves.

When I was about twenty-two and a struggling writer, I realised that I too had the family’s creativity gene, so I asked Stephen if I could see his paintings. At his house in New Cross, I was introduced to a magnificent collection of outrageously colourful kipper ties. His artworks were mostly on top of a wardrobe. The now well-known Flight Path, showing Stephen’s mournful face with a backdrop of several jet planes flying straight into a New York skyscraper – painted in 1987, long before 9/11, I should point out – was unrolled for my consideration. So too was a painting of a family on a beach who were neither swimming-costume-ready nor happy. Painting after painting depicted city angst, social disappointment and family disfunctionality. Wonderfully so – but no one was smiling in any of his paintings. And if someone *had* been smiling, you’d have been really scared. Everyone in Stephen’s art had a backstory, even a child on a rocking horse. It made me think he was painting the ways in which people rub up against each other and are harsh to one another – cruel, even – without even knowing it.



Flight Path, 1987

Ten years or so later, Stephen's artistic focus had shifted to nature and landscapes. The paintings of the south Devon coast stuck in my mind. They always looked as if the wind was too cold for anyone to take off their coat. If there were people, they too had a backstory – and you can bet that the children in the painting were fed up and wanted to go home. Even the seagulls wanted to go home. Instead of painting people being harsh to one another, now he was depicting nature being harsh to them.



Mothecombe Church, 2004

A few years later, I went to his studio when he was painting *The Navigators*. This large canvas shows people carrying crosses across a dirty beach while, at the top, are a number of colossal ships. Eighty percent of the painting is a thickly painted, polluted, muddy beach but what I remembered most from first seeing it were the vast ships in the background and the cross-bearing figures, like pilgrims, in the middle of nowhere. Here was mankind polluting the environment and a small group of people being unable to do anything about it. The so-called 'Navigators' had no idea where they were going.



The Navigators, 2012

After that we saw more and more churned-up fields, muddy desolation, government agents in anonymous protective gear disinfecting – or, perhaps, infecting – nature. In his early career, Stephen had shown people being harsh to one another, then he had painted nature being harsh to them. Now he was completing the triangle: depicting people being harsh to nature. It all added up to a lifelong dystopian vision of the world. But in recognising that, it struck me how people who confront the world's miseries head-on don't do so because they *want* things to be horrific but exactly the opposite. They want to make the world a better place. The reason he painted those colossal ships in the *Navigators* was not because he admired them or thought them beautiful but because they shouldn't have been there at all. Likewise the families grimacing in their uncomfortable poses on miserable holidays: he painted their discomfort because it was unnecessary; they didn't need to make life hell for each other. Stephen had the deepest, most precious compassion for people – and it comes out in his paintings.

Now Stephen is leading us on further, beyond what we know of this world. On one of my walks, I imagined him in a heavenly pub with my dad. I could see them

opening a good few beers and, since no one was driving, perhaps a few more than that. I could imagine Stephen telling Dad about all the paintings he'd been meaning to paint – and dad responding with all the buildings he been intending to put up when Lambeth Borough Council wasn't looking. I imagined them talking about families too, as both of them were dedicated to their nearest and dearest – like all of us in the Read-Mortimer collective. We are a bit like one of those desert shrubs that grows for three thousand years, expanding outwards in a bigger and bigger ring, producing new branches that are still connected deep beneath the ground.

Truth be told, though, Stephen did not believe in heaven. When Sophie and I saw him for the last time, in the hospice, he talked about the prospect of death and said, “people have often suggested I will feel differently at the end: that I will feel I should have been more religious. Well, now I can say, hand on heart, I have faced death and I didn't feel any remorse or guilt. I was quite content with not being a believer in the traditional sense.” And then he added, “I believe in something, I just don't know what’.

Those last words really struck me. If you believe in something, surely you must know what it is – otherwise, how do you know you believe it? But no. Stephen was saying that he believed there was more to life than just the chemistry and biology that make us function as animals. His words resonated with me because from the moment that he told me he was back in hospital and might just have ‘one more roll of the dice’, I had felt closer to him than ever, for that very reason: “I believe in something, I just don't know what”.

In late May, I went for a walk on the moor, to compose a letter to him. Edori had asked us to write to him or phone him in hospital. I believed at the time it would be my last opportunity to communicate. I didn't want my letter to be full of platitudes. I wanted to say the things that I knew bound us together, not just as cousins but as human beings. I won't read it now because it is too long but I described how I sat down on a rock. There I had the most powerful, uplifting feeling of the great force of creativity that drives all life – and has driven all life since the very beginning of life on Earth – running through all of us as individuals, making us try new things, even though they might end in disaster. The purpose of life as I saw it in that moment is to create – in every sense of the word – to experiment, adapt and find new ways of being. It gave me hope in the world. And, as I told him in my letter, that hope came from him. Thinking about him. Caring about him. Wanting to see him and talk to him. And searching at the end for what really matters most to us. There is a very real sense in

which, when you sit down and write such a letter to someone, your familiarity with them forms your ideas. Your conversation with them is ongoing; it doesn't die with them because you carry an awareness of them with you, in your heart. I hope to go back to that stone on the moor before long – and write to him again.



A Field in England, 2018-19