

## **In memory of Herb Feith**

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At a time with fearful parallels to our own, W. H. Auden spoke of his sorrow at the death of another Austrian Jew, Sigmund Freud. Auden began by talking about the difficulty of speaking about the death of just one person, amidst so much almost universal grief and anguish.

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,  
When grief has been made so public, and exposed  
To the critique of a whole epoch  
The frailty of our conscience and anguish,

Of whom shall we speak? For every day they die  
Among us, those who were doing some good,  
Who knew it was never enough but  
Hoped to improve a little by living.  
Such was this doctor: ...

Indeed, once again, such was this doctor. Many people are speaking about Herb just now, memories and griefs rushing out, trying to find the words to express their feelings. I am left not just with a unfathomable sense of loss, but with a many stranded and important conversation of the years suddenly stopped.

Of the many sides of Herb that have been coming to my mind in the last five days it has been his work on peace that has somehow been uppermost, demanding my attention, pulling at my sleeve. By his work on peace I mean his writing, and his teaching, but perhaps most of all, for me, his conversation. In speaking of his work on peace some of you might think that I mean to separate this from the gifted analytical work on Indonesian politics that earned him such an extraordinary reputation so early in his life. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

When I think about this work, this conversation, those conversations with hundreds of others in so many places, a few words that Rilke wrote in his poem about the unicorn keep intruding themselves into my mind. Rilke reminds us of those medieval European tapestries of unicorns. In the centre of the tapestry is the fabulous sinewy white creature, with its beautiful horn swirling improbably from its forehead. The unicorn is rearing up on its hind legs, frustrated by the little wooden fence surrounding it. The unicorn is fabulous in both senses of the word - so wonderful, so sublimely beautiful, a paragon of what should be, a momentarily held vision of the power of the good; and on the other hand, it is mythical, spoken of only in fables, an impossibility - except that here it is.

In Rilke's version, the villagers have captured the unicorn, enclosed it within the fence. Now, like the rest of us in those rare moments when we have witnessed something extraordinary, they are wondering what to do with it, what to do for it. And Rilke says,

they fed it, not with corn  
but with the possibility of being.

In very real ways, both moral and intellectual, that was what Herb was doing for so many of us. He was building a vision, if you will, of peace, by feeding the once glimpsed unicorn with the possibility of being. Sometimes overtly, in speaking of paths to peace in particular horrors of this world, more often indirectly, by demanding both attention and intellectual honesty to the problem at hand. Always by listening and making space for the other to speak.

"Brilliant" is a word you hear a lot said of certain intellectuals, especially in the academy. And when you think about it, it's not an altogether glowing recommendation. There's something of the dazzling about it, the star rather coldly shining his light upon the rest of us. Herb was indeed analytically brilliant, in the conventional sense of the word, as well as an astonishingly astute observer of Indonesia. Listening to him after he got back from time in Indonesia was to be reminded time and again by the delicacy and precision of his observation, his listening to what was not said, as well as what was.

But what was really striking about Herb's thinking was its extraordinary compassion for and deep knowledge of the people he was talking about and with, together with a deeply held belief in the responsibility of intellectuals - in the broadest sense of that word - for the honesty and accuracy of what they said.

I remember once asking Herb during a long walk along the creek in Glen Iris at a more than usually bleak time in Indonesian politics how it was he had never returned to the themes of his great work on *The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia* to write on a comparable scale about what then seemed to be the unending New Order. It was clear that there were in fact all sorts of reasons, but his answer then was "I suppose I didn't think I could bring myself to be fair to the army". I have to confess that it is a measure in the great difference in the quality of scholarship between us that my own small work suffered from no such qualms. It was also a remarkably honest and decent self-assessment, which is salutary to remember in these days when self-aggrandizement and the suspension of humility is an unwritten requirement of most academic job descriptions.

One of the most attractive things about Herb's thinking - and there were a lot of other bits that drove me crazy on occasion - was a kind of final ruthlessness in assessment of people and political situations. This might seem like an odd quality to admire in a friend and teacher, but it was deeply re-assuring. It enforced an unusual and much-needed degree of intellectual honesty. Applied to myself it was sometimes uncomfortable or worse, but rarely inappropriate. But it was also deeply re-assuring. It gave me the sense that the

possibilities of being within our too real reality that Herb glimpsed and succored were founded in a careful and on occasion steely understanding of the frailties of action.

Herb was one of the people to whom I owe a life debt, and he has been taken. We - in Indonesia and Australia and so many other places - are the poorer.