EVERYDAY TRANSCENDENCE
THE INFLUENCE OF FRANK FISHER
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The tribute event for Frank Fisher at Federation Square, June 2012.
Photo: Jacqui Hillen
Thank you to the many contributors to this book. It has been humbling, moving and enlightening to learn more about each other and our lives in this context. Predictably, Frank had no interest in a hagiography, if this was to be purely a book of uncritical exaltation or reverence. What he enjoyed most in reading the initial manuscript was how each contribution expressed as much about the authors themselves as they did about Frank. To him, this gave the project value.

We also would like to thank the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University of Technology, where Frank is currently Professor of Sustainability. Specifically, thank you to Katelyn Testa, and the generous supervision of Simone Taffe, for their work on the design and layout.

Thank you to Frank’s partner MairiAnne Mackenzie and the Fisher family for their support of this project, and for the contributions from MairiAnne and Frank’s sons, Tim and Sam. Thanks to Sam for reprising his cover design of the 2006 anthology of Frank’s work, ‘Response Ability’. Thank you also to cartoonists Simon Kneebone and Michael Leunig, photographers Rodney Dekker and Jacqui Hillen, and to colleague Damien Sweeney for his impromptu sketch of the ‘Frank Fisher paradigm shift’ car.

Thank you also to Ian Thomas and Eric Bottomley for their help in conceptualising this project.

And above all, thanks to our friend Frank, for your invaluable presence, guidance and insight. This is for you.
Professor Frank Fisher, Australia’s Inaugural Environmental Educator of the Year in 2007, is committed to social transformation to a more sensitive self-aware world.

He has worked in the area of environmental education for over 35 years, much of that time as Associate Professor in the School of Geography and Environmental Science at Monash University in Melbourne, and more recently as Professor in the National Centre for Sustainability and the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University of Technology.
He uses the insights he has gained to transform his own life which, in addition to striving for sustainable practice, has included learning to live positively with a number of life threatening conditions.

Frank is a health consumer advocate and a contributing member on some 20 national committees. He was also involved in the development of the innovative Health, Knowledge and Society course for the Monash University medical curriculum.

Frank has published numerous papers on context education and specifically on the social contexts of health, transport and energy. A selection of these has been published as a book by Vista Publications called ‘Response Ability: Environment, Health and Everyday Transcendence’.
INTRODUCTION

This compilation ripples with the respect, love and gratitude felt for Frank. Our intention was to share with Frank a little about how his teachings and example have affected how we live our lives, and to share that publicly. We hope the nature of our appreciation, insights and experience of Frank’s rich legacy of sustainability education in this country offers something of value to others. Something of our efforts to save the ‘wilderness in our own heads,’ to keep believing that things can be other than they are (given they of course are so much more than they appear), to reflect deeply and act practically, and to be courageous in doing what we think is right while working for positive and appropriate change.

These pages carry contributions from family, friends, students and colleagues, both past and present, as well as from a couple of people one step removed from Frank, symbolic of the many lives he has also touched indirectly. Unsurprisingly, knowing Frank, the contributions are full of life’s essence – love, conversation, learning, thinking, ideas, experiments, humour, food, books and bikes.

The gathering of people and ideas that this project has drawn together is having its own ripple effect. There is talk of more gatherings and further publications to try to grace Frank’s ideas and approach appropriately. And if you would like to offer a contribution to future editions of this volume, please be in touch.
He was just our dad. ‘Just,’ as in he was everything dads were. Bowler of cricket balls, pitcher of tents, answerer of all questions, engineer of billy carts.

Our dad was sick and took a lot of pills. Some of them looked like Smarties and some like footballs. And there were things he couldn’t eat. Mostly, he was just our dad. A force unto himself, like all dads. As interested in our interests as any dad, and with as many corny jokes.

Everything else became apparent later, when I finished being a teenager and began crawling out of myself enough to be astonished by just how much he manages to fit into his days. The mountains of media digested while teaching and marking, managing illnesses and being a partner and a friend and a dad who’s there as much as any dad.

Earlier than that, I had a feeling dad’s influence stretched beyond our household. Students and friends and colleagues were also drawn to his benign force, as beloved to us all as the benign anonymity he finds so inspiring.

And surely it is a force. How else to explain the reserves of patience and understanding, the time for everyone, the relentless propulsion out into the world on his bike, broken necks and radiotherapy and endless cramps and toilet stops be damned? No, not damned, of course, for there is a positive and a lesson gleaned from every experience, no matter how dreary.

As I write, I know the word “force” is inadequate at best, misleading at worst. For someone so uniquely able to see and explain the layers of metaphor that construct our society, “force” doesn’t begin to do justice to all he is to all of us. It doesn’t even begin to do justice to how he can continue on with illnesses that render others invalids. Or even, that he was and continues to be in such command of his illness that it had so little impact on the childhoods of my brother and me.

I’m aware of another inadequate word. ‘Command’ can’t describe the thought, will and understanding that keeps him going through his dis–abilities. Thanks to another of dad’s understandings, I have some insight into why the restrictions of language might contribute to making these words inadequate.

Perhaps this is why there are so many comparisons and metaphors in this book. To Ghandi and the long–distance runner, Jung and Morpheus of the Matrix. It may also be why you’ll forgive the occasional halting sentence or overstuffed paragraph. These are the words of those who find more meaning, more to be hopeful about and grateful for, due to Frank’s benevolent force (I guess “benevolent force” will have to do); and that’s not easy to describe. From our language to the way we live, we’re not all able to keep up with Frank, but we sure have something to aspire to. He shows us it can be done, and with humility and a smile at that.

A force unto himself, and just my dad. ‘Just,’ as in everything dads can be.
MEANING IN LIFE

BY:

MAIRIANNE MACKENZIE

MairiAnne Mackenzie is a sheep farmer trying to move to more sustainable farming methods and crops without going out of business. She is seeking a no-physical-growth business plan and others who are happy to sweat now and then to implement it. She has a degree in Zoology and a Masters in Environmental Science. She is Frank’s partner of 24 years.

It’s hard work being Frank. But he never has a day off, unless anaesthetics are involved. Even then, as soon as consciousness returns he reads the paper, with the intention, as usual, of passing on his clippings to others. I think it’s partly because he is so glad to find humans doing good things for each other, often complete strangers, and because he sees the enormous power in the ideas that drive all the rest. Each apparently solid cluster of ideas turns out to be resting in a sea of “prior” ideas, invisible at first – as they were to him once, as an engineer.

Frank picks up ideas out of the dirt, things we usually treat as mundane and uninteresting, and is amazed by them! It is a habit in short supply in a society where it is too normal to expect the world at your doorstep; where “magic” is normal. And things that we might at first think are amazing, Frank disdains as utterly predictable.

But his driven nature is perhaps also because our insecure tenure on life is much more close and tangible to him. Instead, he accepts that there really is no security, no such thing as a perfect job. In a way Frank is grateful for his “suffering” because it has opened up the world to him, and because it is fun to offer this to others. But Frank is now weakened by his treatment and his prospects, and is only really interested in more of his daily grind (50 pills a day, toilet, constant rehydration, interrupted sleep, hospital appointments, oedema, cramps, bruising, bloating, watching cars and air travel proliferate etc.) if he can see and be engaged in change towards a more reflective, circumspect society, demonstrated through publicly engaged people, responsive social institutions and materially much more modest living.

All these aims are a sham if they do not involve hands—on detail, and do not have a big impact on what we think is possible and desirable, how we spend our time, how we move around, and keep ourselves fed, warm and clean. Frank has gradually shed a former self-view in order to live his ideas, against the current. Mainly, I feel very very grateful to Frank and I wish I could make his life nicer.
With the help of Professor Swan and despite the opposition of most Monash staff, I got the Master of Environmental Science course started in 1973. The Chairman of the Board of Studies, who was one of those who opposed the course, sympathetically said I could probably try out my lectures on maybe half a dozen candidates such as bush walkers and bird watchers. When I said, ‘There are over 100 applicants,’ he remarked, ‘Must be students who can’t get into other graduate programs.’ But I said, ‘Some already have PhDs and Masters’. He was astounded. Suddenly I acquired one of the biggest environmental graduate programs in the world, with only a half–time secretary.

I worked most days until midnight, and my wife and I slept in the office and cooked in the lab. I was soon on the edge of a breakdown. Then this quiet skinny bloke turned up with an M.Env.Sc. from Sweden. I figured that anyone who could write an environmental economics essay in Swedish must be something.

Many months later I got a bit of money for a lecturer position and went looking for this skinny bloke. Found him in hospital attached to a drip after an operation for Crohn’s disease. He looked pretty crook, but I reckoned if he could survive a few years he would save my sanity. Anyway, he could still give lectures attached to a drip! The bugger is still going, working his 80 hour weeks 38 years later.

Although I had the idea for the course which later became a Graduate School and manipulated the politics and PR, it was Frank who put in the hard yards and helped it survive and grow. He also added other dimensions, such as Systems Theory, and baffled students with Entropy Theory. I, of course, could never have passed the course myself by the time Frank had polished it up.

By helping the program survive and grow, Frank can take a lot of the credit for the many graduates who can be found throughout society.
Alan arrived at the Monash Physics Department in 1965, and found in later years that Frank, the bulwark (later the formal head) of the Graduate School of Environmental Science, shared his interest in the social connections and conditioning of science. On Frank’s initiative Alan inaugurated a course called ‘Science and Systems Theory’, the course Frank later took over and ultimately made, according to Alan, ‘both unrecognisable and vastly improved’.

‘Frank Fisher’ is not an easy topic to write on. It would be ridiculous to attempt a rounded biography, even in summary form. Instead, we could look at two notable decisions Frank has made in his lifetime – and a resulting challenge.

At one stage Frank faced the possibility that his life would depend continuously on a sustained drip. This prospect arose because a further operation, removing more intestinal tissue as it became affected by his (chronic) Crohn’s disease, would leave him with too little tissue to process the food input needed to maintain life.

He also knew quite well, however, that road transport emits a significant part of the greenhouse gases that threaten societies everywhere through the climate changes they produce. So, rather than plan to live in a way that relied on the aid of motorised transport, he decided in advance he would use a device that enabled the drip process to be attached to his bicycle.

When Frank took on the ‘Systems’ leg of the Master in Environmental Science course, he interpreted its aims in a way that has become legendary. Instead of giving some general account of how the ‘System’ concept fits into social analysis, he took his students down to a rare vantage point: a handful of kerb in the very heart of the traffic, cars roaring close to them and in every direction. Of course, compared to what a participating driver sees, the stunned spectators hear and experience Monash’s Wellington Road very differently from such a position, as the streams of cars and trucks attack their ears and noses with their roar and their exhausts.

Some people might have felt that the ‘lecture’ lasted too long. But most probably saw a point in coming to realise so sharply what a ‘system’ can mean to the human cogs that form it.

The challenge? Well, think of the environmentalists you know, including you and me. How many do you think would have made that first decision, on rigging up a drip process to a bicycle? You could also review the academics you know and ask: how many would dare to start students so unconventionally, by making sure they appreciated a system from the inside and at such a disconcerting angle?

Frank has made it look obvious and simple: just live by your principles and never lack the courage to push for what you think is right. He must have made lots of people wonder if they can be like that – and even get part of the way, at least.
Everyday Transcendence: The Influence of Frank Fisher

Frank,

I have been inspired by your approach and your capacity to draw on everyday behaviours and designs to challenge embedded institutionalisations and thereby facilitate steps towards transformations of consciousness and society. You have challenged traditional thinking and through your teaching and writing have planted many seeds which will ensure those ideas live on.

There are numerous, seemingly endless, examples that you have explored over the years; for instance, designs that take walking hospital patients to the stairs instead of the lift when many would benefit from the exercise, and your recent use of the lower case ‘i’ for the personal pronoun usually spelled ‘I’.

The first example which has stayed in my mind is that of road safety involving Volvo cars. Volvo was leading in improving road safety through making cars safer for drivers and occupants, but you pointed out the contradictions in this approach and the potential unintentional consequences for road safety of other more vulnerable road users. I remember your words to the effect that when you are in a tank you feel invincible, need to care less about the other and can be less conscious of yourself in the world.

You turned ideas of safety, health and one’s place in the world on their head. When I hear your ideas, I say, ‘Of course, why didn’t /couldn’t I see that?’

The clarity of your deconstructions sharpens seeing differently and facilitates creative responses for reconstruction – hopefully leaving us, as you say, a little less predictable, even wild. This clarity enables empowerment and encourages engagement. We all, if unequally, can only make a small difference. Your way of thinking and working has enabled us to make our contribution and continually remake it. This not only inspires, it also generates gratitude – a spirit sorely needed to counterbalance the depression that tends to follow from facing overwhelming threats when we begin to focus on the big picture, without seeing that there are ‘small’ steps to it.

We have explored and constructively debated many other examples regarding ‘nature versus nurture’ equivalents. Odd, maybe, given I was a sociologist and you were an engineer, that we approached this from opposite starting points. Nevertheless I believe we are in full agreement that the rest of nature isn’t the problem, it is us – how we look at the world and act in it, and that Gaia’s apparent vulnerability masks a power to destroy us if we don’t reconstruct our being and becoming within the earth’s bounds.
Right now, Frank, 1979 doesn’t seem long ago, when you decided to participate in my unit, Small Group Dynamics. In the following year you and Tim invited me to join GSES one day a week, working with the students on their team management. Then 20 wonderful years followed with a rich and dedicated student body that we grew and which deepened GSES. Among other initiatives we developed and were teaching together was Conserver Society, which was at the time quite controversial and unique. Then followed our difficult merger with the Geography Department.

What also inspires me is your:

• True grit. For example, when I asked you if you wanted to change how you lived and worked, given you had been issued with a death notice, without hesitation you said, ‘No’.

• Independence of thought and action. No one ever bought you off or stopped you challenging those in authority and their experts. You must have surprised a few with your apparent soft vulnerability masking a steely resolve.

• Capacity to use anything, especially your suffering, to learn from and teach with. That hasn’t been easy for you, makes team-playing difficult and does not discount your pain, frustration and sadness with what is our lot and what we bring down on ourselves.

• Compassion for the other through your ability to work at understanding how they are seeing the world.

• The compassion you call forth. At your latest Q&A session at Swinburne in May, your mind was as clear as a bell – with your body wasting away in tatters, your voice box blocking your speech and still a determination to persist with your mission to wake us up!

• Acceptance and support of me given my limitations and our differences. Much appreciated.

I don’t know how to conclude this affirmation of you and your contribution – maybe because I don’t want to say goodbye, Frank. It’s strange that you, who always seemed a minute away from death, have been able to persist so long with life’s calling. It isn’t just your ideas, it is how you live as a gentle warrior that makes you an inspiration.

Thanks for the journey.
NEVER ONE TO WASTE ANYTHING

BY: IAN THOMAS

Associate Professor
Ian Thomas teaches
in undergraduate and
postgraduate environmental
policy programs, and
has written books on
environmental impact
assessment, environmental
management and
environmental policy. In his
research Ian has investigated
the issues of embedding
environmental education and
sustainability education in
the curricula of universities,
examined the status of
tertiary environmental
programs, and investigated
employment of graduates
from these programs.

Fortunately, Frank is not perfect.
If he had been he would not have
had many good things to say about
himself. Pretentiousness is not a
characteristic that Frank has much
time for.

While he has a clear set of
characteristics and related
personality, much seems to have
come from his Crohn’s disease.
Over the 30 years that I have known
Frank and his family, much of the
context for his behaviour and his
conversation has been shaped by
his daily experiences of managing
his health, managing the health
professionals and system trying
to manage his health, and working
to change the many elements of
society that make it difficult for
people with chronic diseases.

Before meeting Frank I probably had
not met a thinker or an intellectual
who was considering more than
the day-to-day of life. With Frank
it is difficult to have a conversation
about the weather or similar for
more than a few minutes before
the discussion has moved to what
needs to be done to remove the
injustices of the world. But Frank
has not stopped at ‘what needs
to be done’. A notorious letter
writer and harasser of editors and
journalists, he is ever-ready to
make practical proposals about how
simple and challenging changes
can be made.

I have learned a lot from Frank,
but two points stand out. First, as
a teacher, he has a great ability
to use straightforward examples
to translate theoretical concepts
into understandable concepts.
Second, as a thinker and an
environmentalist, he has been
instrumental in helping many
people, not just students and
myself, to understand systemic
thinking. This way of looking at the
world is fundamental to Frank’s way
of being – when I think of Frank it
is often because some system is
being discussed. Most particularly,
it is usually when the social context
is being discussed.

With his science and engineering
background, Frank has brought
a logical and analytical approach
to discussing our social and
environmental challenges/problems.
It seems that his abilities with
languages and an insatiable interest
in reading have facilitated his
ability to look for the ways in which
we humans construct our worlds.
Social construction, as the basis
of understanding, is a foundation
for much of Frank’s thinking, writing
and teaching. These are all insights
which he has passed on to me
and which have made me more
understanding and a better guide
for my students.

Frank takes a ‘big perspective’
view of life but engages with the
details. He is one of the most
generous people and always one
of the first to put time and his
own money into actions to make
positive change – whether it is
distributing bike flags to promote
safe cycling, or the publication of
young people’s stories. Then there
are the committees that Frank has
contributed to over many years,
ranging from his local community
(schools, council and health centre),
wider Melbourne (hospital and
Frank’s disease has given him a keen interest in food. Usually it has been because he has had to be careful to ensure he did not eat something likely to cause him problems. As a consequence he has come to develop a knowledge of cooking and the ability to put together a great meal with what seems to be little effort. We have shared many of his meals, especially at Hillside, Ararat, and I’ve been introduced to his favourite Chinese restaurants, in the city and Fitzroy. As well as being able to direct us to the good dishes, these meals also showed that Frank is much loved by many. At one restaurant he is considered one of the family, to such an extent, I noticed, that a waiter would see Frank locking his bike and go out to help him carry in his bag and equipment.

Coming from Frank’s kitchen has also been his wonderful sourdough bread. Not many know that he won a prize for his bread. Great flavour, texture and resilience have been its hallmark. I remember one day Frank dropped off a loaf to me, apologising that on the way the loaf had fallen off the back of his bike. Before he could get back to collect it, a car ran over it. Never one to waste anything, and since it was wrapped in two plastic bags, he duly delivered it with the observation that only half had been squashed. After half an hour it had recovered almost all its original shape – and it had not lost any of the original’s satisfaction.

I am fortunate to have known Frank, firstly as a colleague and for many years as a friend. Apart from our similar passion for environmental issues, a point of commonality has been bike riding; and who is not aware of Frank’s role in promotion of bike riding? Knowing Frank has been a big advantage on occasions when, on my bike with grey beard, spectacles and parka, I’ve heard people yelling out, ‘Hi, Frank’. Rather than feeling peeved at being mistaken for someone who is clearly well-known, I feel pleased that I should be compared to Frank.
THANKS TO FRANK

BY:
TREVOR BLAKE

Trevor is Chief Environmental Assessment Officer with the Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development. He was a colleague of Frank’s in the Graduate School of Environmental Science from 1984 to 1989.

In recent years I have mostly met Frank at train stations and on trains where he has had his bicycle in tow and has been kitted up for the journey, while I have been weighed down with my work bag full of papers on matters ‘in train’ and other good train reading.

Yes, the train association is overplayed here, but that is how it has been. Trains, like trams, are often spaces for reconnection.

In our case, it’s been the committed cyclist/sustainability thinker/practitioner catching up with the committed bureaucrat/commuter. More to the point, these random encounters have always been a delight, just to be with Frank for a little time and to let the conversation unfold. Thus it has always been, and I suspect many others would have a similar appreciation of their times spent with Frank.

For indeed, Frank is attuned to the encounter; he is always willing to be ‘present’ and be open and engaged. And, moreover, there are also the challenges of body, duty and soul, as well as the joys of life, which weave their way into the conversation.

I first met Frank in 1979 shortly after he had joined Tim Ealey as a core staff member of GSES, providing integrative teaching input to a highly multidisciplinary program spanning most faculties. He had the look of the ‘long distance runner’, in spirit at least, and so he has proved to be.

And why is this so?

In part because Frank has an active conscience; he’s enormously aware of both his and our enmeshment in the ‘systems’ that undergird, structure or impinge on our lives within the society that we inhabit. And so the desire to strip away or deconstruct our surface understandings in order to first confront our complicity in unsustainable ways and then transform both our own life practices and institutional systems has been an abiding concern of Frank’s for many years.

Just where this desire emerged from I don’t know, though I dare say Frank will have reflected on this!

In 1984 I joined Frank and Tim, as well as Peter Cock, Ian Thomas and Andrea Lindsay, as a member of staff at GSES for five years. I had left a job as an environmental planner both to contribute to the teaching program and pursue an academic interest in environmental politics.

The 1980s, like the 1960s and the 1970s, were a time of societal and ideological ferment, and the intellectual critiques of industrialism, consumerism and democratic–capitalism were gaining in clarity and influence.

At that time many (including myself) were seeking to contribute to those critiques, to frame a transformative worldview and practice, while also managing to function in mainstream society. A necessary contradiction, perhaps. Not that this was something that fazed Frank. He did and has continued to engage with these contradictions with a passion that is both evangelical and disarming, as a teacher, provocateur and ordinary Joe making a life.

In my time at Monash a particularly stimulating initiative that Frank was responsible for was the 1984 Environment, Ethics and Ecology Conference that he convened with some of his students. This event was attended by many luminaries as speakers, including – as I recall – Bill Devall, Arne Naess, Ariel Kay Salleh, Werner Pelz, Chris Ryan, Bill Mollison and Martin O’Connor. These were exciting contributors to the green intellectual critique, and Frank’s assembling of these diverse thinkers and activists, I am sure,
helped all participants to better navigate a new and complex terrain of environmental understanding and ethics. For my own part, Ariel Salleh’s eco–feminist critique of epistemology and Martin O’Connor’s deconstruction of contemporary economic thinking brought the cultural challenge into sharp relief.

Frank has been a highly committed teacher, mostly at a postgraduate level. His core subject offering in the Master of Environmental Science program at Monash in the 1980s was Science and Systems Theory, a two–part backbone to the integrative component of the program. These units enabled all students to deepen their understanding of the interdependent structures, including modes of understanding, which underpin the interplay of environmental and social systems. Some of these students, I know, were on a quest to develop a more robust critical understanding of contemporary society and its environmental consequences, as well as of the modes of thought and practice necessary for a more sustainable existence. The majority of students, appropriately, were focused on strengthening their professional knowledge and skill sets. For both interests, Frank’s teaching offered a means to improve the rigour of students’ thinking, strip away conventional assumptions and test the sustainability implications of institutions, social constructs and practices.

Frank’s ongoing struggle with Crohn’s disease seems to have strengthened his resolve on various fronts. It has also been a stimulus to confront the rigidities of both medical paradigms and the ‘health system’. This interest in reform has encompassed both policy and operational issues, including community access. For many years Frank was involved at a grassroots level with the Collingwood Community Health Centre, working as a board member to forge an engaged model of community health practice.

I know there have been many other involvements in which Frank has fused the personal with the political, drawing on his own deep experience and reflection to inform and galvanise responses to institutional failings and absurdities.

After a long urban professional career, including a dislocating immersion in industrial culture as an electrical engineer for a decade, Frank’s more recent experience of rural life on the farm with MairiAnne at Ararat has perhaps enabled Frank to recover something of his boyhood connection with the bush, since he grew up on a dairy farm in South Gippsland. Indeed, recent life on the farm has brought, so I perceive, a renewed sense of groundedness, rhythm and appreciation, as well as mature companionship.

However, only you, Frank, can know the places and occasions of joy, hope and love in your life. My hope for you at this time is that they emerge anew both in your memories and your experience.

I don’t know where your encounter with the spiritual dimension of life and existence has come to, but I offer you my understanding that while the earth will claim us all in the end, our spirits will rest in the peace of God.

I also offer this reassurance, Frank – we hold you in our hearts now and always.

With much affection.
WALK THE TALK

BY:

SHARRON PFUELLER

Sharron, BSc(Hons), PhD, GradDipEnvSc, is a researcher in blood cell biochemistry, and a Senior Lecturer in the School of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University. She is committed to leading the transition to environmentally sustainable behaviour by example and by working with like–minded community groups and local government.

It was a delight to meet Frank in 1992, someone who shared my views on existing world systems and behaviour change to address the deterioration of our life support systems – the environment.

Frank provides a theoretical base for understanding and analysing society’s structures and processes with a view to identifying how they can be challenged and changed. He also lives the way of life he promotes to others.

After a PhD in biochemistry, then over 20 years spent in medical research, I could see how the medical–industrial complex was growing, feeding off itself and not actually achieving what was most important for the world. How were developing new drugs, sequencing our genome, defining the structure of every cell, protein and biochemical pathway, and finding ways of bringing yet more babies into the world going to solve world problems? All these initiatives lead to changes in the natural world that are threatening humanity’s future.

However, this biochemical background provided me with a profound understanding of human systems at the micro level. So it was natural to apply this understanding to other biological and social systems. Thus arose my insight that natural and physical systems – the ‘environment’ – underpin and link with human society.

Because I believed that it was necessary to ‘walk the talk’, I left my research career in 1986 and became immersed in building what we hoped was a sustainable house in a rural area according to permaculture principles, and working with community environmental groups. Then I commenced employment at Monash University Gippsland, working on the social implications of global warming. It rapidly became obvious that some formal educational qualification in environment would be desirable. So I began my relationship with Frank in GSES.

Frank is dedicated to leading students to think about how they think and thus develop tools to change old ways of thinking about environmental and social issues. These skills equip students to challenge how others think and implement change in the workplace and community. It was fascinating for me to see students struggle with the difficult readings that Frank saw as fundamental to their studies. Struggle and learn they did – although some related better to the omnipresent cartoons from newspapers that Frank used, to great effect, than they did to the journal articles and books. After completing the environmental course, I managed to obtain a vacant position in the School to teach Environmental Assessment. And that led to teaching other subjects and expanding my knowledge on pretty steep learning curves.
As Director of Policy, Frank provided the anchor for the course, inspiring students and gaining their respect and admiration. I also remember more material aspects of his presence – the worm farm in the corridor, the bike in the office, and the occasional bike accidents. Unfortunately, the worm farm only lasted a few years because some staff and students of the larger School of Geography and Environmental Science objected to the vinegar flies which tended to emerge from it. I also got to know Frank better, and there were many late meals together with MairiAnne in restaurants in Glenferrie Road after our respective teaching commitments. We also took mutual pleasure in sharing stories of our children who were about the same age, following their achievements through school and university.

Those were exciting days when Monash was the only university in Melbourne offering a postgraduate environmental course, one which was innovative and inspirational. But the effects of the course on expanding awareness of the environment probably contributed to the very situation which forced it to change, as other universities jumped on the bandwagon to offer competition. They, unfortunately, reduced our student numbers. Such an irony – the course’s success was a factor in its decline. Many changes followed: Frank moved to Swinburne, other staff came and went, new environmental Masters courses developed – I still taught in them until 2010.

Frank aspires, as I do, to live a low–environmental–impact life. Although I have not espoused a bike because of issues with joints, I now devote myself to environmental organisations, practical environmentalism in the construction of another energy and water–efficient house, developing a new permaculture garden and fostering behaviour change.
FRANK THE FISHER, 
A REFLECTION

BY:
ERIC BOTTOMLEY

Eric Bottomley taught geography, economics and environmental science in schools for 20 years, and was then coordinator of CERES Education and Team Leader at CERES for the following 20 years. He was concurrently a sessional lecturer and tutor at the Graduate School of Environmental Science, Monash, and at the University of PNG. Formal qualifications include M.Env. Sc., B.A, Environmental Auditing Training Certificate, Teacher Training Certificate.

Frank Fisher’s name has sometimes been understood as ambiguously as his early lectures on the epistemology of postmodern environmentalism. Some have spelled it Fischer, unconsciously returning to Frank’s ancestry. Some have recognised Frank as a Fisher of men (and women) according to the great biblical traditions of the teacher and disciples; some have seen him as Fissure, which probably reflects his movement across the divide from conventional environmentalism to social constructivist and systems interpretations of environmentalism. At CERES (Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies in Brunswick) we have known him as Frank and even had him as a newsletter columnist under the heading ‘Frankly Speaking’.

So what’s in a name? Well, quite a few essays in the case of this man!

I have known Frank since 1984, my first year of study at GSES. During the five years’ part-time Masters course I was drawn into a reframing of my mind in Science and Systems Theory 1 and 2 with the explorative Frank and mercurial Alan Roberts. During that time I was actually forced to think about my thoughts and search for the observer within the observations.

Like many others, we who were students in those classes thought we had suddenly become wise, but in conversations with Frank one could espy him wincing over our attempts to analyse and explain. All of us, from many disciplinary backgrounds, had joined together in transdisciplinary reflection and collaboration, and it was not always easy to find the right words and ideas in discussion with Frank. He could expose our profound thoughts as superficialities with a furrowed brow.

So I was just one of hundreds in GSES who went through this process of self-examination, contextualisation, living with uncertainty, and chanting ‘that we could never understand nature except as it was revealed to us through our methods of investigation’ (Heisenberg).

What became of us all, and how did we go forth and apply Frank’s ideas out in the world?

Hopefully the papers and conversations in this book will map the dispersal of Frank’s ideas—like dandelion seeds—around the globe. For myself I can only know my handful of seeds and assess how they might have spread.

Following graduation, I was privileged to tutor in Science and Systems Theory 1 and 2 and provide sessional lecturing at Monash for several years while still teaching in schools full-time.

The Monash connection included two visits to the University of Papua New Guinea, an exciting period establishing the Environmental Science degree course. Frank’s dandelion seeds travelled in my boots from the barricaded campus in Waigani to the summit of Mt. Wilhelm. The degree course proved popular for an enthusiastic collection of retired...
Raskols, clan hunters, urban youth and new environmental activists from the villages.

Frank had so many contacts through his collaborations in engineering, health, environment and academia, and he guided many of us into these first post-graduation jobs where we could cut our teeth and begin to bite like Frank.

He instilled in us a Gandhian humility and encouraged the idea that 'the rich need to live more simply so that the poor may simply live', using our lives as example. A visit to Frank's humble apartment revealed he and his family had filled a one-litre milk container with rubbish that week leaving him apologising for such extravagance. I never knew if Frank was a Gandhian, but he seemed to personify this spirit and could be imagined dressed in a loin cloth pedalling his bike around Collingwood. At one stage he calculated all the carbon emissions he had saved bicycling through and for his life. These possibly neutralised those of an aluminium smelter! But he never took the (carbon) credit.

The ideas of Frank, simultaneously both simple and complex, influenced my teaching style, blowing a few more dandelion seeds around the Catholic secondary school system. During our course Frank introduced many of us to The Ecologist ('questioning basic assumptions') and cartoons which he used in many lectures, employing humour like a virus to introduce seditious ideas into the genes. I tried to emulate these approaches with my own students. I was struck at a recent reunion at the school where I had taught for 12 years how many ex-students fondly remembered our geography and environmental experiences. Some of the ex-students now took their children to our fieldwork sites and recalled their introduction to ‘le crise plethorique’ (in English of course).

Despite the need to feed a family of five, I then left 20 years of teaching to enter unavoidable rather than voluntary simplicity at CERES. The heady ideas of GSES led me to make a commitment to community change and a life at CERES. Frank had always made major community commitments and gave much time to community health projects and local environmental initiatives. Living in an adjoining suburb, he had already taken a long term interest in CERES and regularly provided generous support with his own time and money, sitting on advisory groups and becoming a Life Member.

So 23 years of work began for me at CERES, then an impecunious but pioneering community-owned environmental project on four hectares of old landfill in Brunswick. On the bare earth of the landfill, another few thousand dandelion seeds landed. Much of the early signage on global warming and waste contained Frank's indirect influence and ideas. Common themes resounded such as 'We should not so much be seeking the technical solution to the problem but its social dissolution.' Murals of humans entrapped in machines raised questions about technology and the loss of self; our solar and wind systems fomented discussion on energy conservation and renewable energy including the misconceptions of abundance; our high voltage transmission line encouraged views like Frank's about electromagnetic radiation; our programs on the conserver society questioned the stranglehold of the technical fix.

We had about six people from GSES working at CERES at different times. A Frank assistant, Fran Macdonald, helped create the ‘Biodegrader’s Bazaar’, about 50 methods and machines for organic waste reduction with changes in behaviour and a consumerist critique given just as much prominence as machines and procedures.
CERES has been a laboratory of social and environmental designs, and the new Education Programs grew from 400 half-day student visits to 60,000 per annum over a 12-year period, while total visits reached about 400,000 per annum. Not that everyone ended up talking like Frank, but many dandelion seeds stuck in their hair.

From the year 2000 we started implementing the Sustainable Schools Program, a professional development program for teachers, so that all schools could become models of environmental infrastructure, designs and behaviours, with an enriched sustainability curriculum and close links with their communities. For 12 years now, we have struggled to implement all of this, and with Victorian Government support we now hope to reach half the schools in Victoria – about 1,300 – in the near future. Our aim was always to create a bit of CERES in every school, and we are well on the way with the government pushing this Resource Smart Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative. Don’t blame us for the words! Governments choose the titles, but at least we are able to get on with the delivery. Imagine if every one of these schools is a little CERES and in every little CERES sleeps a handful of dandelion seeds.

And it may go further. Our Sustainable Schools website, crammed with examples of schools reducing energy, water and resource use while working on self-reliance and behaviour change, received 123,000 page visits from 107 countries last year. We have been working with a large school in Phuket and are planning to work with another in Manila. The dandelion seeds are now blowing on the monsoons. Perhaps the song ‘Blowin in the Wind’ was composed about Frank’s ‘dandelion effect’ (there are deniers). Certainly his Monash thinking influenced many of my meagre musical efforts. These have not sold to millions, but my mum listened to them! Perhaps a few hundred people have.

So let me finish this reflection with a verse to remind us that Frank encouraged in people not only new thinking and actions but also music when his dandelion seeds fell into the sound box of a guitar. Frank was a great admirer of Arne Naess and Deep Ecology, and those ideas I combined with a tune from that wonderful Irish group The Fury.

>This earth and me, my fluid’s like the sea;
My bones are made of limestone, I have trilobites in me.
The earth’s in me and I am in the earth
Playing my part in all great global cycles
Chorus: From mountain tops I watch the break of day
And the silver feathered starlight of the evening.
As distant sterile planets spin beyond my gaze
I thank our earth for being an oasis in space.

And I also thank Frank Fisher for being and remaining a dandelion oasis in our space.
John is a neurologist with a great interest in environmental matters. He has been concerned about the environment since early childhood, when he was upset by the forest destruction he witnessed in the 1950s in NSW and Queensland. He joined Men of the Trees in the 1970s and has been President of the Riverland Conservation Society for the past 30 years. In the 1970s he began to commute by bike, and by the time he graduated with the Masters in Environmental Science in 2000 the bike and train were his main form of transport. He went on to start the Bicycle Users Groups in Banyule and at the Austin Hospital. And with Frank and others he teaches the Tao of City Cycling, a workshop that empowers people to cycle with an understanding of the social dynamic of the road.

Frank has certainly been an enormous influence on my thoughts and actions, and perhaps I have also contributed to his. I first met him in 1996–97 when he gave a talk at Warringal Conservation Society, where the president had just finished the Master of Environmental Science at GSES. I asked Frank whether I could go to some of his lectures, and he invited me to come to anything in the course. So I enrolled and three years later graduated with a Masters.

By then I had become committed to bicycle/train commuting, had started two bicycle user groups and had gained a number of insights into social constructions of the environment (and of our lives). But the biggest benefit of the course was gaining Frank as a close friend. Since then, we have met weekly for coffee and a meal, over which we have discussed everything from the environment to health care, disability, family and friends.

Frank has awakened me to the world behind the light switch, the steering wheel, the visibly disabled person in the street, the academics and the communicators. He has explored the world of the invisibly disabled of which he is a prime example. He combines practice with intellectual analysis, demonstrating that they act synergistically. He has acted through numerous committees in the health and disability fields as well as the environment, and I have been fascinated by his description of his interactions.

I have watched Frank live his ‘talk’, unlike a lot of commentators about the environment. He inspires others through his simplicity and humility to follow a similar path. One cannot help but be influenced by his example.

Others will no doubt speak eloquently about systems thinking, social constructions and metaphors we live by. My knowledge and practice in all these areas I owe to Frank. I feel that I was sleep–walking and that Frank woke me up over the years I have known him. He has helped me gain insights into the social constructions of the environment, of ‘illness’ and the nature of science and technology. These insights have profoundly affected my thinking and practice.

I would like to explore one example. Frank and I conduct, along with Anthony James and others, a cycling course which Frank has called ‘the Tao of city cycling’. It is unlike any other cycling course on offer. It is not too concerned with the physical mechanics of the bicycle and how to maintain it but emphasises the social
and psychodynamics of the road users and how bicycles insinuate into this system. Our safety on the road as cyclists, car drivers or pedestrians is much more dependent on social mechanisms than physical engineering solutions. The latter have their place but can be counterproductive because they degrade the interactions between, for example, cyclists and car drivers, alienating both, rather than reinforcing cyclists as legitimate users of the road space.

Further analysis of car ownership and driving as personal transport reveals otherwise hidden facets. The real transport speed has to take into account the time spent maintaining the car, parking and garaging it and earning the money to cover all the car expenses. Then there is the huge physical and social infrastructure required to service the car as personal transport, from roads to police, and so on and so on. Then there is the alienation of space, neighbourhood and community by road traffic.

Analysis of the energy consumed by pollution (and greenhouse gases produced) shows that less than 1% of the energy poured into the DODO (driver–only driver–owned) vehicle is actually used to move one’s body. The rest is wasted initially as heat and as motive force for the car. And this does not include the embodied energy in the car nor in the infrastructure.

There is little realisation of the health effects of car transport. One may think immediately of road trauma, perhaps of the much greater illness and death from car exhaust pollution directly and through climate change, but rarely of the displacement of intrinsic exercise, possibly the car’s greatest deleterious effect on health. This is linked to cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes with all its complications, cancers, osteoporosis, arthritis and dementia.

The greatest effect of the car on the environment is described by David Owen in his book The Conundrum: how scientific innovation, increased efficiency and good intentions can make our energy and climate problems worse. He points out that the ‘knock–on’ effects of car use are a greater problem than the fuel they consume:

‘The critical damage is caused by all the other consumption that driving fosters...’ (p. 66). The car has determined our physical and social structures to an enormous extent, to the profound detriment of the environment.

In many ways it illustrates the Jevons paradox of increased efficiency and technological innovation leading to increased consumption.

This transport example demonstrates the insights that Frank’s thinking and analysis can bring. The same approach can be applied to many other fields. At an intellectual level I think this will be Frank’s legacy, his gift to us. His influence through teaching has also been of major significance. His students number in the thousands, and through the ripple effect he has influenced many others. Also his writings, some of which have been published in his book Response Ability, have had extensive readership.

At a personal level I am greatly enriched by having Frank as a friend. Through him I have met his delightful partner and family and many of his friends and associates. I and many others continue to be greatly enhanced by our association with Frank.

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A packed auditorium at Swinburne University’s Prahran campus for ‘An intimate evening with Frank Fisher’. Photographer: Rodney Dekker
Twenty or so years ago, Frank introduced me to the waste world through employment at the Centre for Innovation in Waste Management. He didn’t explain that once you get into waste, it is hard to get out. Thankfully Frank also gave me tools to better understand the waste ‘system’ – I use systems thinking for most waste problems I encounter, and it gives a depth of insight and knowledge different to most other people’s in the field. Through Frank’s influence, I see ‘waste’ as a verb/action rather than the ‘noun’ (or physical ‘stuff’) that most others see. The ‘stuff’ is symptomatic of the waste, but the actual ‘waste’ is the inefficient and unthinking ways we consume and pollute. ‘Life cycle’ thinking is mainstream nowadays (although often done in very mechanistic and reductionist ways), but Frank long ago helped me to ‘see’ the embedded upstream and downstream resources, pollution and waste in my life and everything I use. As a result, I live ‘in’ my environment, very conscious of how I live in it, however imperfectly.

When as a student at GSES I first encountered Frank, it took me a while to ‘get’ what he was trying to impart. As a third–generation scientist and rationalist, I found a lot of what Frank said confronting, impenetrable and I was suspicious of/bamboozled by the jargon. Frank’s almost Zen master teaching style also left me floundering at times – why was I taking this train trip to ‘see what I brought to it’?! Several ‘New Agers’ in the course had latched onto Frank as a guru, and like them I mistakenly thought his critique of science was a rejection of science. Slowly I realised Frank was teaching how to do better science by better knowing the limits of your science and seeking multiple ways of knowing. I think the scales fell from my eyes when one of my New Age classmates said something to Frank along the lines of, ‘So you’re saying there is no reality and the whole universe is just mental energy’, to which Frank replied with words to the effect, ‘No, there’s a real world there, but we cannot fully know it objectively.’ He gave similar short shrift to the idea that ‘all ideas are equally valid’, explaining the need for self–critical and humble examination and interrogation of ideas. Not being able to be fully objective did not mean we should subjectively invent our world and uncritically believe and respect all other invented worlds. I realised Frank and I were coming from very similar places, and he was talking about better ways of science/knowing.

Frank has been hugely influential in my life; not only did he set me on the path of what was then an unintended career in waste, he has helped me and given me tools to see the world differently. Systems theory, history and philosophy
of science (and history and philosophy of all disciplines) and deconstructionism are powerful tools for improving thinking, understanding and knowledge. Consciously and unconsciously, I daily apply insights of Frank’s such as these: the ways in which we construct our understandings of the world and ourselves through imperfect metaphors and models; how language and particularly common phrases can restrict and direct our (un)thinking; the idea of context; and perhaps most usefully, the idea that knowledge is best sought through multiple ways, with recognition of the limits of these ways. These inform how I live and work and I think make me a better researcher and analyst.

Before I met Frank, I had already been taught the adage ‘We compare data with data to obtain information; we compare information with information to obtain knowledge; we compare knowledge with knowledge to obtain wisdom’. Through Frank, I know we also need to compare wisdoms with wisdoms to understand both the limitations of those wisdoms to which we subscribe as well as the possible ‘truths’ in wisdoms to which others subscribe. As Frank demonstrates, the real outcome of all this is a humility – the acceptance that our constructed knowledge and wisdom are flawed, imperfect and possibly wrong. As Frank also shows, that doesn’t mean you give up trying ‘to know’; someone who recognises a base of uncertainty in their knowledge will keep searching when those who are ‘certain’ have long given up thinking about what they know/believe (if they ever thought about it at all).

I try to explain and model this stuff to my kids. I find I don’t have Frank’s humility, depth, wit, humour and gentle patience to teach/impart this, nor his way of letting it happen at its own pace. But I try, and I am delighted when the kids bring an insight of their own – such as when a five–year–old asked whether the organic insecticide I was using on the garden would ‘kill good insects too’ (it would have, and I hadn’t considered it); and when I am constantly quizzed on impacts of purchases and alternatives. I realise they get it better than most adults, and I find this way of thinking is more mainstream in their school (possibly reflecting Frank’s influence on environmental and broader education), which gives me hope for the future. Thanks.

I’m more interested in protecting the wilderness inside our heads than the wilderness ‘out there’. What we are looking for is empowerment of a particularly deep kind: the enablement of being – or even better, of becoming. For we humans are nothing if not human becomings, always in the process of change. It is a long road to such understandings, and a road that carries with it the profound skepticism of conventional society. Nevertheless the contradictions in present society necessitate that those of us already blessed with the wherewithal to question should continue to do so.
Writing this piece is an opportunity to reflect on the influence this generous man has had on my life, but it’s difficult for me to identify a single “idea” Frank inspired. I thought it might be more meaningful to share my experience over more than two decades, encompassing various attempts to resolve tensions between ideas and practice.

I commenced the Master of Environmental Science course at Monash in 1988. I was a recent arrival to Australia, having spent the previous two years as a US Peace Corps volunteer working as an engineer in the Kingdom of Tonga, where I met my partner Deb. I had no idea in what direction the Masters would take me, and it’s fair to say that I had even less idea when I commenced Science and Systems Theory with Frank in the first semester! What I did know was that I was in for a life-changing experience. It also turned out to be the beginning of a 15-year association with Frank as student, then employee, then colleague – Frank always a mentor.

That first semester with Frank will forever loom large in my memory. Having been completely immersed in an agrarian Polynesian culture which had challenged my cultural perspective, disillusioned with the aid sector, and at a stage where I was questioning my profession and starting a new life in Australia, here was yet another challenge to my world view. I have to admit to feeling overwhelmed initially, but at the same time exhilarated by the opportunity to uncover assumptions and make sense of the mess in my head through a new frame – a new way of seeing. Frank provided not only a way to understanding the context for social interaction with the environment but a mirror to our selves.

It all made sense to me, but what next? The personal/ontological understandings were enriching and liberating, but application was always the challenge, made more complicated by the practical reality of earning a living after graduation. It was one thing to build these frames into essays and student projects, but what then?

Well, this was partially answered when Frank employed me on a large grant he had received from the Melbourne City Council to trial a pay-by-weight solid waste collection scheme with the council. Frank’s idea was simple but profound: individual ability to take responsibility for waste avoidance was made more difficult by the lack of incentive to change behaviour. User-pays provided a pathway to personal responsibility. To make this happen, we rode on the back of rubbish trucks, analysed waste, developed billing systems, ran consultations with stakeholders and looked for ways to overcome equity considerations and practical implementation issues. In the end, although the council decided that it wouldn’t proceed with the
pay–by–weight scheme due to technical issues and council politics, we learned much through the project.

Practical barriers and politics aside, enormous inertia remained embedded in the dominant institutions that created the context for individual behaviours. Were there ways to more directly influence these institutions – businesses, financial markets and facilitating government institutions which enabled a waste culture? Sure, these institutions are themselves reflections of larger economic systems and political ideologies, but I couldn’t see a green–socialist revolution on the horizon. I understood that institutional change is brought about incrementally by individual change, at least to the extent that critical mass is achieved, but were there ways to speed this process?

More waste projects followed, but the same questions continued to occupy me. Were there other points of entry further up the chain, levers to pull at the institutional level to bring about change more quickly? The questions reflected my headspace at the time, my youth and my impatience. Frank, it goes without saying, was always patient and understanding, always accepting of one’s stage in the journey. But more than this, I think he fully understood the need for each of us to find our own niche and life–work, hopefully informed by the tools he provided.

It was clear to me that I needed to try other avenues and experience other possibilities, which became a multi–year personal project to influence business and the corporate sector, including a stint in management consulting, then back to Monash to conduct research and collaborative projects and develop a new postgraduate degree aimed at changing corporate behaviour from the inside. There were modest successes with these programs, and the programs continue today, but on the whole I felt as though I was having little effect. The impediments to change wrought by larger forces continued to dominate my thinking; more institutional barriers to confront. I could not have truly expected otherwise.

Despite these frustrations, a new idea began to take shape from these corporate adventures (or misadventures), made possible by a confluence of people, ideas and fortuitous timing. The idea was to influence corporate behaviour from a new direction by leveraging investment markets. It was clear that investment markets were enormously significant to decision–making in corporations; the new insight was the ‘democratisation’ of the share market through mandatory employer contributions, which were legislated in the early 1990s.

Here again, by understanding social context, new opportunities to effect change were revealed. Publicly listed companies were increasingly reliant on superannuation investments as a source of capital, and everyone who worked and contributed to superannuation was now an owner of these companies. What’s more, the super funds embodied natural constituencies through their employer groups (public servants, health workers and so on), each with social agendas that might be tapped to actively influence how their future retirement funds were invested. The problem was catalysing fund members to exercise this influence through their indirect ownership of companies. At the time, this was latent potential, not yet recognised let alone realised.

It became a matter of joining the dots. In practical terms, the entry point was the creation of an environmental investment
fund, in partnership with a super fund (Hesta) and a fund manager (Westpac Investment Management), to direct investment toward companies which could demonstrate superior performance on environmental criteria. Launched in 1999, this ‘Eco Share Fund’ was to become the start of a program which has since extended in multiple directions, including several investment products and services focused on sustainability available to the superannuation sector. We now offer these through an investment advisory firm owned by institutional investors. These services have evolved to include direct influencing activities (or ‘engagement’ as it’s called in the industry), where we hold meetings with company boards on behalf of super members to communicate concerns regarding social or environmental practices, and set out expected behaviours to orient the companies in more sustainable directions. These are more than aspirational conversations, with $50 billion in member investments now sitting behind us to motivate behavioural change.

Nominally, this program is about using the market to effect change, but in practice it has been an exercise in translating sustainability and environmental values into terms accessible to mainstream investment institutions and listed corporations. The weight of the market gives us access to corporate leaders, but the conversations provide the opportunity to reframe these values in terms which corporate managers can understand and action. We’ve evolved a ‘language’ for this purpose to give the exercise legitimacy, a way forward to overcome institutional barriers embedded within corporate law, shareholder imperatives and the fiduciary responsibilities of institutional investors.

I’m often frustrated by the slow pace of change on a day–to–day basis (still impatient), but looking back over the past decade I can see meaningful change attributable to these efforts. We see this change on many fronts: energy efficiency and carbon abatement, improved safety performance, better workplace practices, cooperative relationships with local communities and so on. It goes without saying that many challenges remain, but it’s clear that sustainability–oriented investment is here to stay and will continue to exert pressure in positive directions.

Coming back to Frank, on reflection I think the gift he provided has been realisation of the possibilities created through an understanding of social context. I am forever grateful.
For me, Frank Fisher represents kindness and courage.

His sharing of his intellect is a kindness. It is courageous to think as Frank does, so I think I can too. And then he acts on his thinking – persistently (sigh!), so I can too. Structures collapse before Frank’s sensible laser-light challenge. This challenge is inward as well as outward. How can it be otherwise?

Fortunate enough to be in Frank’s Science and Systems Theory classes, I experienced learning that was both intellectually demanding and viscerally engaging. I could actually feel my mind lighting up and expanding – so exciting! I had never had a learning experience like this before. It fed an intellectual hunger.

Years of studying and working in the law (and demonstrating mediocrity or failure) had left me feeling intellectually dull and belittled. Frank didn’t teach how or what to think but rather offered an invitation to really think ... to think about thinking ... to push one’s thinking ... to be courageous and ... not predictable. Absent certainty.


In Science and Systems Theory 1, I took the opportunity to try and understand this ‘legal system thing’ that I had spent so many years trying to work with and teach to others. For an assessment I attempted a discussion on the systemic behaviour of the legal system with reference to language and legal terms; an analysis of legal ‘personality’ as a requirement to be the holder of rights (Do trees have standing?) for the purposes of law. I wrote about law’s impartiality and a judge’s decision being self-referential and part of law’s self-validating belief system.

Frank’s comment:

What would be the consequence of the law admitting to partiality in–a–context of attempted impartiality be? This is equivalent to the ‘new science’ admitting that the observer is part of the experiment ... which we now know is not just complicating but essential and certainly not embarrassing.

In Science and Systems Theory 2, I wrote an essay with the title ‘A Life of Work’, working at personal deconstruction. For this relatively short essay, which was partly an exercise in self–pity, I submitted a paper with a bibliography of 31 references. The ‘work’ was a pleasure – I was inspired – and not about the result but the process of thinking that I had been encouraged to explore.

In the introduction to this essay I mentioned a coincidence of events which had given me the idea for the essay.

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1 Frankincense is said to be stimulating and elevating to the mind. It is useful for visualising, improving one’s spiritual connection and centring. It has comforting properties that help focus the mind and overcome stress and despair.
Frank’s comment:

It’s you, however, who sees and renders opportune the coincidence. (That is, the observer is part of the system(s) he wishes to observe\(^2\)).

And Frank kindly and encouragingly suggests I read Jung.

My thesis, *Unsettling the Law: A Systems Approach to Aboriginal Land Rights*, was written in 1992, the year of the *Mabo* decision (now celebrating its 20th anniversary). I would today give this thesis a different title, such as *Indigenous Title to Land – A Systems Approach*.

My thesis outlined various theories which challenge law’s objectivity, including feminist legal theories. I wrote (as a development of my earlier writing on systems theory) about law’s detachment being reinforced in a judgement about the admission of women into legal practice – a demonstration of detachment and neutrality rather than involvement or responsibility.

**Frank’s comment:**

*In other words, what feminist legal critiques are saying is that such detachment is really another form of attachment and needs to be acknowledged. This attachment is to known legal structures and processes.*

With the benefit of reading Wetlaufer, I wrote about the transformation of a client’s story into language and categories of the law; that Indigenous plaintiffs in a land rights case have their story transformed according to the practices of legal discipline with lawyers’ rhetorical commitments to objectivity, closure, certainty and so on … and that this is really an appropriation and leads to the story’s diminishment.

**Frank’s comment:**

*Analogous to this is the translation of one language to another and the meaning lost in the process. It may be that the legal system ‘diminishes’ a case in order to deal with it. In doing so, it need not diminish the people who have brought the case for hearing. Note that this is different to speaking about ‘plaintiffs’, as plaintiffs bring cases understood by the law.*

So put that in your pipe and smoke it!

Which reminds me: I also wrote a systems analysis about my smoking addiction – a step towards my giving it up (a step to self-awareness) – which has to be a step to understanding and absorbing the full impact of systems theory – to interdependence and the consequences of one’s actions – to response-ability; that is, thinking about what one is doing and why and how it affects one’s personal and social environment.

So what have I done with all of this good mentoring?

At the risk of banality, Frank helped me change my life. I left a secure job in the law to work with an environment and planning law community agency (Westurb). Thanks to GSES contacts I then taught at RMIT for some years, including delivering a subject called Radical Ecological Thought, its content much inspired by a systems approach.

I dabbled in the employ of Vox Bandicoot but was not that sort of courageous.

I taught ‘straight’ or dominant systems law to Indigenous law students and learned to appreciate that straight teaching could be integrated with and benefit from

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a questioning of its dominant paradigms and that teaching is learning… i discovered a passion for teaching about the legal system to people so they can more easily participate and understand and thereby change it… learning from students how best to do that… and writing educational materials that open up areas of the law to people already affected by it.

These next words are inspired by the published thesis of one of Frank’s past students from my cohort, Jennifer Crawford, sadly deceased, who dared to challenge Frank, to his delight and everyone’s benefit.

Jenny wrote about a Gandhian approach to communication – the art of turning a question around and thus responding (kindly) to the fixed attitude of a questioner. The question can then become the vehicle for showing the truth that the question in its original form actually obscured (Crawford quoting Aitken 1984). Jenny was referring to Gandhi being asked whether his reasons for settling in a village were purely humanitarian. His response was, ‘i am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self–realisation through the service of these village folk’.

I find this interesting because, in a 2010 article submitted to The Age, Frank wrote about how self–interest, from a systems view of life, is mature and is something we ordinary folk can do, acting in our own and wider self–interests, with knowledge. We need, wrote Frank, some form of community/civil defence education to formalise our desire to have knowledge and do good with it.

This is Frank’s gift – encouraging others to see beyond the immediate, to seek the connections and support others to do the same; for example, in Frank’s words, … when one is open to other systems of knowledge one might be able to perceive that one travels more slowly driving a car than riding a bicycle.
ON POSSIBILITIES

By: KATE AUTY

Professor Kate Auty was appointed Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability in June 2009. She has worked in agriculture and academia, as a solicitor in her own law firm, as a barrister and as a multi-jurisdictional magistrate in both Victoria and Western Australia. She was a senior lawyer for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia. In 2008 and 2009, she held the Chair of the Ministerial Reference Council on Climate Change Adaptation and was a member of the Premier’s Reference Committee on Climate Change. Kate recently accepted an appointment as Adjunct Professor in the LaTrobe Institute for Social and Environmental Sustainability Centre and is a member of other academic and research boards.

My tertiary education, before Frank Fisher, inspired me to avoid books with titles like Torts in Australia. Even in Arts I was oddly out of step as not a single Australian novel – not Riders in the Chariot, not The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, nothing by Malouf – was required reading. Books had always been significant to me as I grew up. Ulysses, The House of All Nations, Anna Karenina, Australian history and travellers’ stories were shelved all over Australia as my family moved from place to place. At any new house the first item of furniture installed was the bookshelf; the first things unpacked were the books. My tertiary education had crushed this enthusiasm.

So, imagine my surprise when I applied for, was accepted into and then started exploring the course that Frank offered at Monash (for which I have Louise Kyle to thank). I had been struggling with the question of policy implementation in indigenous issues in the three years immediately before I enrolled. And suddenly here was a book, in its third reprint but old and hard to find, called: Implementation. How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland; Or, why it’s amazing that federal programs work at all, this being a saga of the economic developmentsadministration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hopes. The Oakland Project by Jeffrey L Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky (University of California Press, 1973)

And, it was relevant...

As I strived to understand how things were connected across that field of ruined hopes, Frank presented us with the article by ‘the two Michaels’ (as he called them) – ‘Decision making under contradictory certainties: how to save the Himalayas when you can’t find out what’s wrong with them’ (Michael Thompson and Michael Warburton, 1985, Journal of Applied Systems Analysis, 12, 3–34).

Reading this clear rigorous and open–ended discussion I found myself laughing out loud at Table 1. The two Michaels describe the key variables in Himalayan fuel wood consumption, and the figure which they confront us with is not tons of timber taken but rather the ‘factor by which expert estimates vary’. And they give it a number. How extraordinary. How true candid and compelling, but not a data set found in any government report on Indigenous health, legal system exposure or environmental management.
I vividly recall talking to Frank about Johnson and Covello’s book *The Social and Cultural Construction of Risk*. For me it was a revelation. Frank immediately wanted to know where I had found it and he said something like, ‘I have been wanting a book on risk’. Everything was enquiry, enthusiasm for ideas.

As I became aware of the possibilities for scholarship I also started to write as I liked (although not without bumps along the way). My reflective essay on a group project about engineering works and rock chutes on a small Gippsland creek I titled, ‘Bruthen creek, Cartesian anxiety and the rockness monster’. Fabulous creature, fictional need, smoke and mirrors, deeply serious considerations – a play on the Lochness monster. As I presented on the essay, starting with the title, in the auditorium, Frank laughed out loud. I was delighted: he got it, he always gets it.

Not only did Frank provide this wide open vista for ideas in the course I did at Monash, he changed the way I used the course itself. I started with a law and environment focus because that is what I knew I could do. By the time I finished the course I had explored parts of the Indian subcontinent, learning about Chipko, the dams issue and water scarcity, and I spent time studying community development methodologies along the way. Undisciplined and sponge-like it may sound, but gaps in my knowledge, frustrations in my working history and possibilities for the future were all opened up, contemplated and, sometimes (not always) even resolved. Implementation and the Oaklands Project spoke volumes across oceans and cultures.

I went into Frank’s Monash course as a bruised and embattled lawyer coming out of Western Australia where we had built Pat Dodson’s report on the issues which underlay Indigenous deaths in custody (33 out of the 99 deaths occurred in Western Australia).

I came out the other end (and continue to look for the end) more confident that some of the questions I was asking were the right ones. I was more able to find cross-disciplinary intersections which might aid the resolution of fraught issues. I gained skills in persuasion, which continue to stand me in good stead, because I learned about flexibility and was encouraged to be more reflective. I learned about framing issues in a way I could not have previously considered.

It is Frank’s quiet insistence that we ponder the problematic and also act that will always resonate for me. Making us find our way to Monash on public transport, telling us to hand write an essay, then, himself, seriously considering our essay content and providing deeply connected comments, Frank blended thought and action in everything he asked us to do. It seems to me now that we entered into a learning partnership. I have learned a great deal about collaborations from Frank Fisher.

Prosaically I now order books with titles like *Inspiring Sustainable Behaviour. 19 ways to ask for change* (Oliver Payne, 2012, Earthscan/Routledge) and *The Green Braid* (about culture and architecture design) and then, very Frank-like, I circulate them. Also somewhat Frank-like, I am not troubled if people don’t always get it, as I think it is all about generating possibilities.
I was a greenie – you know, someone who cared about saving the wilderness, recycling, tackling pollution, that sort of thing. So, naturally, I felt at home in GSES. But my life’s work took another important turn soon after I graduated from the Masters course. I became a parent. As a huge fan of Frank’s ideas, I started this endeavour a firmly committed post-structuralist social constructivist with a bent for theories of autopoiesis. Er... I thought I could have a go at influencing my children’s world and teaching them to do the same.

Frank taught that we’re more than part of the system; we are the system. We’re no passive players in the structures that make up our lives. We’re actors, generating our economic and social systems, our political institutions, our physical infrastructures, the very beliefs that drive our society, as they make us – whether we like it or not.

So we might as well understand and use the knowledge of our control to make a better world, yes? Could do so? Should do so!

I took this duty seriously and applied it to the family. My kids participated in far-reaching discussions around the dinner table in which they learned the state of the world, the relevant theories about it and how to discern between them on the basis of their philosophical strength. We didn’t watch television (aka 20th century’s most infamous mind-numbing drug), but we read newspapers and analysed ads and other persuasive texts so the kids were armed and ready when they watched TV at other people’s houses. We travelled everywhere by public transport or on our bikes, just like Frank, learning to feel connected with the natural
and built environment. The kids were expected not only to take up the intellectual mantle but become activists. They attended rallies on social and environmental issues of importance to them, participated in letter-writing campaigns and were encouraged to challenge authority in other ways through dialogue and logical argument. Fully living ‘the personal is political’, I gave them a democratic say in running the household, instilling in them that while they had rights (to follow their passions, be treated with respect and so on), they also had responsibilities (to think about their effect on others and the environment, do chores, resolve conflict peacefully and more).

Not to be deterred, I joined school council and got a couple of dogs.

My next big challenge was – you guessed it – the education system. I challenged big corporations’ insidious take-over of schools (the dreaded Cadbury chocolate drive), got a grant for an environmental art project, started an indigenous herb garden, organised an Aboriginal history class and helped the students plant a veggie garden so they could learn about food systems.

I was so proud of my kids; they were running their own campaigns now. My daughter became president of her Student Representative Council and started a students’ environment group. My son successfully lobbied to be able to write a novel in Writing Class instead of learning to spell the ‘50 most used words’, because he was already reading Tolkien.

I’ll admit there were hiccups. Both of my kids displayed what I’d like to describe as a robust scepticism about arbitrary authority. There was more than the occasional note sent home about ‘talking back’ and ‘need to knuckle under’ and once even ‘law unto himself’. A certain someone spent a whole term of recesses sitting outside the staff room. A certain other someone was nearly sent home for refusing to wear shoes. (She wanted to feel more grounded, literally.)

The next thing was something I should have seen coming. The kids decided they’d had enough of school and weren’t going back. This would have been fine except that they hadn’t yet tackled secondary education.

We were back on public transport, visiting museums and galleries in our own time, going camping during the week, exploring our local bushland as well as bustling city lanes, and partying with other home schoolers.

‘What about Maths and Phys Ed?’ I cried. The kids were too busy to hear, but they were managing their own budgets and racing up and down skate parks and circus rinks, so I didn’t overly worry. The older one learned *Romeo and Juliet* by heart, and wrote, self-published and sold her own illustrated ‘zines and pamphlets. Then she went out and got a job. The younger one, a keen guitarist, drummer and BMX–rider, was also into cooking. He started a Certificate course in Hospitality. They were becoming so confident – working the system;
actors not players. My daughter would phone me: 'I’m flying to Adelaide!’ My son would text, ‘Gone skating. See you Thursday.’

Often at the end of the day, I would sit down with a cuppa, look around the living room and raise my mug to the other two sitting there. I’d ask, ‘Have we integrated the learning enough?’ The dogs, of course, couldn’t answer me directly, but their plaintive whining said, ‘Dunno, and where are the kids?’

And now, a few short (but somehow long) years since I became a parent with those high hopes of influence, as I sit here in the living room still, clock–watching at midnight, wondering when the hell the kids will be home and why one thing they certainly didn’t learn was to keep their phones charged – this one at a music festival, the other one on a late shift – I’m finally out of pat answers. I soaked up Frank’s learning, it told me I was powerful in the world, I used that power to empower my kids, and what happened? What happened to being able to mould the world the way I want? What happened to driving the future? What happened to control?

Then I remember something Frank told us in a Science and Systems Theory lecture all those years ago. ‘In this course, I’m not so concerned about the wilderness out there. It’s the wilderness in here I care about,’ he said, tapping his head. ‘If you learn how important it is to protect that, then you’ve learned something valuable indeed, and I’ve done my job.’

And, Frank, I think I finally know what you meant. We need to learn to be free, not in control. Life, ourselves, other selves – they’re not objects to be known and moulded ‘object’–ively. We can only ever see the world through our own socially constructed and ever–changing paradigms, not through some illusory static lens of truth. The world does indeed change under our influence, reflecting that influence back at us, but what we need to understand is self–reflexivity. In taking on responsibility for freedom and change in the world, the greatest change occurs in… us. And this is not to be lamented. Instead, we can work with this understanding – to be humble and open, respect and learn from other paradigms and, ultimately, get a glimpse of the vast unpredictable wonder that is a person, a being – or as Frank would say, a becoming – in their environment.

This is what I faithfully taught my kids, as it turns out, and they did integrate the learning, and now they’re teaching it back to me. They’re happy and free, protecting the wilderness inside their heads – and what’s more, I think I’m grateful.
IT’S SYSTEMIC
By: MARGARET BATES

The bigger picture Frank:
I’m trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You’re the one that has to walk through it. Morpheus, The Matrix, 1999

This resonates with what the Monash course was all about – showing us a way of being in the world and understanding that it is transcendental.

There was a feeling of liberation and validation in being a part of the Monash course. To me, this says a lot about the man behind it – Frank Fisher. The course seems to me to have been built around his perspective, which is in part integrally inclusive of others’ perspectives. There were the Frank classes and the Peter Cock classes and the John Grinrod classes and so on; different perspectives and approaches but all part of a journey toward a fundamental shift in point of view and capacity to articulate that point of view. And then act on it. That journey is both personal and public, sacred and profane.

I remember going along to the information session on the Masters course at Monash. There was Frank dressed in his bike gear and useful-looking vest (that I would normally associate with a fisherman or someone involved in covert military operations). He spoke quietly with a self-effacing, seemingly resigned air, which I have come to realise has more to do with grace than with giving up: ‘That’s the way it is, but...’ And that ‘but’ is everything.

I also remember John Grinrod in moccasins holding a large handmade earthenware mug – I felt I had found my people!

The personal Frank:
Sooner or later you’re going to realise just as I did that there’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path. Morpheus, The Matrix, 1999

The most significant gift Frank gives me is a critical part of my path to personal acceptance. For me what Frank teaches has more to do with the personal than the environment or activism and yet the personal is a powerful feeder into sustaining both of those things.

On the personal side, my friendship with Frank, part of my connection began from the fact I have arthritis. I was diagnosed with a bone condition that leads to premature arthritis when I was 13. It affected my hip mainly from around that time, with periods of severity and then almost a remission period of...
relative normalcy. Then around the time I was in the Monash course, pain began to affect my shoulder, wrists and ankles.

I went to the doctor for the shoulder as I had suddenly lost a certain amount of function. I had an ultrasound and enjoyed telling Frank of waiting in the changing room and hearing the nurse tell the radiologist that the ‘shoulder’ was in Room Three. Frank sighed.

The doctor said it wasn’t arthritis; it was that I had irregular bones and had wrenched the shoulder. The pain would pass and function would return, the doctor said. I found the whole experience emotional and confusing and frustrating. ‘This is what it’s going to be. I can cope.’ And then after years something else changes and something else happens. I wasn’t prepared or told of this when first diagnosed.

I spoke to Frank about it all. He succinctly put me out of my misery and confusion. ‘It’s systemic,’ he said. Arthritis is systemic. Click. Clarity. Of course. It makes sense. Okay. That just lifted it for me in a way nothing else had. It was more to do with someone really seeing and acknowledging my experience and knowing that they knew something of what it can be like.

When Frank asks you how you are he means it, and he doesn’t expect or give a rote answer. That is rare and something I always appreciated.

I wish I could convey the impact Frank has on me personally. He is himself and as such he embodies for me self–acceptance and I suppose the idea that we are our own social construction and we still need to come to self–understanding in order to forgive ourselves as much as anything else in this world.

I have always appreciated Frank’s humour and gentleness. There is something inherently kind in him. (This is what I will hold to.) I respect his intelligence, philosophy, experience and legacy, but one of his greatest gifts is to experience his humility.

To Frank, I say, you will live on in more ways than you know and more ways than any one of us can foresee. Hold to the mystery, recognise your own grace. And, Frank, you will always have my love and respect.

The story doesn’t end with just you and me
The story becomes another story which becomes a dream
a cure
a song
a three–part symphony
a play and the players
compassion and the clown
Fill the heart with song
Make the throat sore with laughter
And tomorrow when we wake
what shall we see?
Is it a rainbow?
That spectrum that the eye can’t see
Looks beautiful to me
And the sound of rain always brings me home.

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It’s Systemic, by Margaret Bates
Sue is a member of the Legislative Council in the Victorian Parliament. She was first elected in 2006, joining her colleagues Colleen Hartland and Greg Barber as the first Greens elected to the Council. She was re-elected along with Colleen and Greg in 2010. Sue has been a member of the Greens since 1996 after volunteering on the federal election campaign that year, is a founding member of the Greens Port Phillip branch and has been a state councillor since 1997. Sue studied Arts and Applied Science before going on to the Masters in Environmental Science. A former secondary English and Physical Education teacher, Sue has also worked in retail, hospitality, as a fitness instructor, and an environment officer for a large national union.

It is a privilege to be asked to write a few words in recognition of the amazing work and influence of Frank Fisher. Anyone who has known Frank, in whatever setting, will have been profoundly influenced by him – by what he says, how he says it and mostly by what he does, how he really walks the talk (on his bike mostly). And so it is with me.

In the late 1980s, when I was working as a secondary teacher, my interest in and concern for what was happening to our planet prompted me to enrol in the Masters course in GSES. I graduated in 1995, after six years part-time. The course changed my life, as I suspect it did for most people who completed it. In some ways I found a home there because much of the reading, writing, discussions and other work we engaged in tapped into what I already felt or knew but hadn’t really identified or articulated well. On the other hand, many of the concepts we explored; for example, with Frank in Science and Systems Theory 1 and 2, challenged the way we see the world – as, of course, he intended.

I remember that having got through Science and Systems Theory 1, I was looking towards Science and Systems Theory 2 with quite some trepidation and at the folk who were doing it with a sort of awe. I’m sure many an erstwhile student of Science and Systems Theory would relate to sometimes having a light bulb moment and thinking, ‘Uh huh, I get it’, only to later feel it sort of slip away and then come back again.

I was particularly proud of my paper and presentation (looking at the social construction of artefacts – a particularly challenging notion at first). It was about the construction of Stonehenge, which took place over centuries, signifying that it must have held meaning for generations of people – else how could that level of precise construction be sustained over such a timespan? It’s not something we could comprehend embarking on today.

Science and Systems Theory was hard work, but worth every minute. I rarely missed a class. So thank you, Frank, for the journey you took us on, that most of us are still on today. It is a testimony to Frank that of all my teachers and mentors his ideas still resonate in how I do, or try to do, my work. I do ask myself, ‘What would Frank think?’ or ‘Am I approaching this in the right way? What are the social constructions here? What are the non–technical solutions?’
In my inaugural speech to the Victorian Parliament, I referred to the influence that GSES had on me: that it was an absolute privilege to study under the farsighted and fabulous people who developed the course and who challenged our thinking about the world and how it works... that we gained an understanding of the interconnectedness of the philosophical, the social, the political, the ecological and the economic. I mentioned, ‘Structure is destiny’, which is something I still think about and use, and when I bring it out, it does make sense to people too. We are in the pickle that we’re in because of the way we have structured our places and institutions, so I find it frustrating and even infuriating when I see governments and others perpetuating or putting in place structures that will inevitably create more of the same problems or make new ones.

I have caught up with Frank from time to time since leaving GSES, once or twice to speak to students, or I’ve run into him at an event or on the railway station with his bike. It’s always good to see him. I really enjoyed the ‘Intimate Evening’ with him (at Swinburne University) on 9 May 2012 and catching up with old friends from GSES. There were some great photos there, and I asked Frank to pose with me in front of my favourite – the one about structures. Thanks, Frank. It also made me think about the wonderful fellow–GSES students with whom I worked and made friends but may not have seen for years, so ‘hello’ to you all. Hopefully I still am and always will be inclined to subvert the dominant paradigm, and I hope you are too.
A contemporary of mine, Nichole Stuart, described Frank’s teachings as ‘a revolution of the mind’. I agree.

Frank assigned his systems thinking class (Science and Systems Theory) to collect rubbish lying on the ground in a public space and observe how people reacted. When I was picking up rubbish, I thought about disassociation of responsibility; that is, how people feel it’s not their responsibility to pick up rubbish, and how in a wider sense this is how we have neglected the earth. Frank provided me with the structure to draw that connection. He taught me how to think via a different and better framework. The earth and all her beings are better for his presence.
Frank Fisher is one of only two true mentors I have had in a professional career spanning some 40 years.

Frank Fisher taught me how to:

• manifest passion without aggressiveness
• demonstrate wisdom and insight with consummate humility
• understand the Tao of ecological systems.

And above all I am still cycling to work after 30 years!
SCHOLARLY ACTION

BY:

ANNE BOLITHO

Annie is a facilitation consultant who loves bringing community interests and voices into project designs and outcomes. Previously she was involved in the development of the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of Melbourne. She and Frank acted as examiners on GCALL, a program in which grad students worked on applied interdisciplinary projects relevant to the future of the campus and the city.

Bring references of the utmost relevance
invest in the qualities that make them so
drawing everyone in
Bring books that may now be out of print
links to the latest
spell out the connections very clearly so that
we see how things fit in the great world
Ride the direct routes
forget those ridiculous meandering scenic bike paths
we need room on the road
to get where we're going.
Frank Fisher taught me
how to see, or look for, our
Social Constructions.
Sometimes hard to get
where he is coming from – but –
Changing Consciousness...
Kind, humble, wise man
Cruising around on his bike
= inspire + rational!

FRANKLY
BY:
MICHELLE BENNETT
Michelle studied at
the Graduate School of
Environmental Studies,
Since 2000 Michelle has
been working in local
government, first with
Darebin City Council and
now the City of Hume.
I still remember the first time I saw Frank. It was autumn 1999 at Hanging Rock. Sustainability was a new word in our world, so it seemed to me back then, and I was a person in search of meaning and understanding. My partner and I wandered around the various tents and displays at the Sustainability and Environment Expo in the warm sunshine, there was a lot of information to look at and a big crowd wandering around amongst the solar hot water displays and vegetarian food stalls.

After strolling around in the warm afternoon sun I drifted into the main tent where a series of talks were being given on the ‘environment’. After sitting through a few of these Very TED–style talks of 20 minutes of ‘experts’ telling us what was wrong, what we needed to do and how to do it I was feeling disappointed. Sure solar hot water was a good idea, so was the 3Rs, but the solutions being offered didn’t seem to fit the problems that I was grappling with.

Then a small silver haired man with overly big glasses and tightly cropped white beard took to the stage and said that he was going to talk on ‘Dissolving the problem of public transport’. For the next 20 minutes I was spellbound. In the Australian city, car infrastructure demanded a third of all the land; freeways and increased traffic demand coevolved and self–reinforced; a creation of our mental default options. It seemed to me a whole new world was being peeled back in front of me, one in which my vocabulary and comprehension was inadequate to grasp, but I recognised it as being hugely important all the same. It was captivating, but the thing that stands out for me even now

Dean Bridgfoot is a Project Officer for the Mount Alexander Sustainability Group, lives in Castlemaine in a clustered housing precinct with shared water, energy, food, and transport infrastructure, rides his bike around with his 3 boys, likes whisky and seems to watch a lot of soccer lately! He worked for 15 years as a Veterinarian in various parts of the world including 2 years in El Salvador, before changing tack and gaining a Masters of Environmental Science at Monash University.
on that first day when I saw Frank was his final remark to a question from the floor. When asked what level of subsidies was necessary in Melbourne to solve the public transport issue, he stopped for a moment and said, ‘I’m not interested in subsidies or money to solve this problem. I’m interested in the six inches between our ears and if there is enough wildness in there for us to be able to dissolve our needs for solutions to our transport dilemma’.  

Wow. Now that was wild.  

Six months later I was enrolled at Monash University as a Masters student because of Frank and his six inches of wildness. That was where my next most vivid memory of Frank comes from. I clearly remember being handed the little A5 stapled black and white Systems Thinking and Practice handbook, opening the cover and being thrown into a world I never dreamed of, and a huge reading list I thought I would never see the end of. Such a variety of different topics, authors with unpronounceable names, topics I’d never heard off: Bertalanffy, Capra, Csikszentmihalyi, Wilber, Macy, Margulis, Fukuyama, Bateson, Merchant, Shiva, Maturana & Varela, Levins and Lowentin, C.S Lewis, Naess, Sachs, Postman, Roy. I still have the booklet (it has managed to survive several house shifts, mice plagues and silver fish), and somehow much of what I read survived the gradual numbing that our current newspapers, TV shows and what passes for intellectual thought causes.

But our first assignment in this lofty world of postgraduate studies and impressive-sounding foreign authors was to go to a public place and ‘quietly and unobtrusively clean up all the litter’ (his emphasis) then reflect upon the experience. I still remember the surprise in the class room, lots of questions being asked and my own thought that he was ‘taking the piss’. He wasn’t yet he was! I still get onto trains to this day and pick up the rubbish, mindful of the effect on me and my fellow travelers – the solution that lies within us not in the number of rubbish bins or laws enacted. It was a revelation.  

So now it’s a decade later. I am walking through Yarra Park on my way to the soccer with my three little boys. I don’t get ‘down’ to the city very often, and it always seems a rush, both in my time and the way the world is unfolding around me. I am walking in the warm summer evening along the footpath, and who comes peddling my way but Frank. I have heard that he is not well. We stop to talk. He is still looking remarkably tough and alive, despite the decades of ill health and operations, despite the seemingly inevitable slow unconscious train wreck that is our civilisation. I ask about his health, and how he is going. Unflinchingly he describes the cancer and touches on the treatment. We both laugh about his question to the cancer nurse on the effects of the chemotherapy metabolites on the sewer system and her answer as if his question was a metaphor not an inquiry; an inquiry into the impacts of those chemicals on the wider organism that is Frank, that is ‘I’, that is us all. We say goodbye, and Frank cycles off. His body does seem weaker than I remember. His transcendent intellect and humanity is not.
FRANK FISHER’S IMPACT ON MY PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

BY:

TREVOR PLUMRIDGE


Trevor is currently a teacher in the National Centre for Sustainability at Swinburne University.

Frank is a regular visitor to my thinking, especially when there is a quandary involved. I predict, sometimes confidently, what Frank would say about certain options; for example, jump on the bike, or jump in the car. Sometimes a guilty conscience is pricked, but I am confident that it is 100% my own ‘guilt’. Frank has no interest in making me feel guilty. But he would be pleased that he makes me think, and think again. And I am pleased that I am prompted to think, and it is a particular type of thinking, thinking about thinking.

Other times I wonder what Frank would think about an issue, knowing I have no idea what his response would be. But I know it would be interesting. Years ago when a high-temperature incinerator was proposed he suggested that, if it were to happen, the proper location would be the old Spencer Street Power Station. How could a person interested in the environment and the safety of people have such a thought? But in a heavily populated city, stringent performance standards would be established and maintained; the incinerator and its environmental and safety costs could not be forgotten or ‘externalised’. My own version of this is in relation to nuclear waste. If we are going to produce it, the place to store it is under Parliament House, Canberra. What better place to make it ‘safe’?

As a student, I had to work hard to wrestle with the issues and the tasks set by Frank. It’s so basic to think about how I think when I travel to classes, but also deeply fundamental when ‘forced’ to articulate the experience. I reckon some of the best writing I’ve ever done came as result of such tasks. I also had the pleasure and the privilege to occasionally share a staffroom with Frank. Sometimes I did not get the planned work done, but it was great fun that included discovering a wicked sense of humour. Frank can also make a mean loaf of grain bread (in an appliance salvaged from scrap, of course).
Grad Post

The Monthly News from the Monash Postgraduate Association and the Research Training and Support Branch, Research Services Division.

Volume 2, No 4
August 1995

Postgrad Centre News

I once wrote that the ideas introduced by Frank made me feel like the Princess and the Pea. Not that I consider myself a princess but the new ways of seeing and thinking about my world niggled at me through multiple layers of existing social constructs, much like a pea under many mattresses, keeping me awake at night. Thank you Frank for the awakening that continues to influence and guide my work and interactions with people.

Annette

A couple of significant things that Frank has contributed to my life and thinking include: encouraging and providing practice in thinking about how I/we think and construct my/our thinking/reality; and, in being an example and inspiration for ‘walking the talk’ (or should that be ‘cycling the story’) in the way he is profoundly thoughtful and profoundly practical at the same time.

Trevor

I treasure the insights that Frank stimulated in how to recognise contexts and identify systems, their inter-connections and construction. They have continued to frame my approach to work in the public sector in treasury, education and environment. I am pleased to report that context and systems thinking are now important to my children’s approach to life and work. Forever grateful.

Amanda

Student Profile

Every Monday morning these four students sit down in one of the Postgrad Centre meeting rooms to work on a project. The project is examine and report on environmentally sustainable tourism in Halls Gap and the Grampians, is formidable in size and scope. When finished it will form part of the requirements for their Master of Environmental Science degrees. It will also be the basis for the development of tourism in the Grampians.

Being the only international student in 1994 gave me the opportunity to have Frank one on one during extra tutorials. I will not forget how he could turn a conversation about what I had for breakfast into a discussion about cultural constructs that shape the way we experience and act in our world. My teaching practice is greatly influenced by Frank’s approach to everyday events but accompanied by deeper reflective thinking about thinking. Maraming salamat Frank. (Thank you!) Robbie

Trevor Plumridge, Robbie Guevara, Annette Cook and Amanda Curlewis
PHOTOGRAPHS

The following captions describe the images, running from left to right, top to bottom:
(Photographer unknown)

- Flanked by his young sons, Sam and Tim.
- On beloved mountains.
- Prehistory (before the bike!).
- At home in the office, at Monash University.
• ‘An Intimate Evening with Frank Fisher’ draws a full house to Swinburne University, Prahran, in May 2012. Photo: Rodney Dekker.

• Filming the documentary about Frank’s life and thinking, at one of the cafes he spent so much time in over 25 years at Monash University. (With Chris Grose from Scout Films and Sophie Parker from the Understandascope in the foreground.)
  Photo: Anthony James.

• Kate Auty, Victoria’s Commissioner for Environmental Sustainability, Anthony James, Convenor of the Understandascope, and Fran Macdonald, Editor of Frank’s book ‘Response Ability’, join Frank with a full house at the Edge Theatre in Melbourne’s Federation Square in June 2012, for ‘Through the Understandascope’, a public event in Frank’s honour.
  Photo: Rodney Dekker.
• ‘Through the Understandascope’ at Federation Square.  
  *Photo: Jacqui Hillen.*

• A standing ovation closes proceedings at the Federation Square event.  
  *Photo: Jacqui Hillen.*

• James Tonson, from the Understandascope, and Fran Macdonald, hold the ribbon, as Kate Auty shares its cutting with Frank, officially re–launching the Understandascope at Federation Square.  
  *Photo: Jacqui Hillen.*

• Filming the two Franks reminiscing over decades of sharing each other’s company at Richmond train station, one as commuter, one as staff. With Chris Grose from Scout Films to the left.  
  *Photo: Anthony James.*
• Frank talks about the book ‘The Conundrum’, referring to it as effectively the third in a trilogy of contemporary environmental literature, following on from Silent Spring and Small is Beautiful. Photo (right): Rodney Dekker.

• Frank commutes on bike–rail via Richmond train station, a ‘home away from home’ for over 30 years. Photo (far right): Anthony James.

• Kate Auty shares a moment with Frank before the event at Federation Square begins. Photo (above): Jacqui Hillen.

• Frank shovels the first lot of soil into the garden planted on his allocated car space at his Clifton Hill block of flats, in December 2010. Photo (right): Anthony James.
It is imperative that we question how we do things, why we do things and if we need to do them at all. This is my enduring lesson from Frank.

I remember first being introduced to Frank about ten years ago and wondering how this man had become such a legend in his own lifetime. He looks quite frail and has a certain humility about him that is quite disarming. He is also very grounded in his solutions – you need to think only of energy conservation, one of the ideas he promotes regularly; such a simple solution to our environmental and social problems.

Frank was introduced to me by Kipling Zubевич, a staff member at the National Centre for Sustainability at Swinburne University of Technology, when I was the manager there. We had just developed a new postgraduate course – one of the first of its kind – called the Post Graduate Certificate in Sustainability, and Kipling suggested that maybe Frank would be interested in teaching some of the course. Kipling himself had undertaken the environmental course that Frank was running at Monash at the time and had been significantly affected by the ideas and concepts explored in the course and in particular by Frank.

I thought that an Associate Professor from Monash University would probably not be interested, but I realised we had nothing to lose by asking. Much to our delight Frank was very keen, and so commenced an enduring friendship with Frank for which I will always be grateful. Frank, through his great reputation, in being challenging and disruptive in his ideas and actions on the environment, attracts a wide range of students to the course. It is a rare student who is not touched by Frank and changed in some way.

Over the years, Frank has been active in so many ways that to explore them here would make for a very long essay. But just a few things are worth mentioning. His drive to create free public transport may not be fulfilled in the next ten years, but it makes so much sense and some of us may still see it happen in our lifetime. He has also developed novel ideas about rubbish. Take the McDonald’s example – his idea that rubbish is actually a type of marketing by companies and that they should take direct responsibility for it; it’s not only novel but demonstrates how we can all try to think more laterally.
Perhaps the most important concept that Frank has developed over the years is that relating to systems thinking. As he recently wrote in a newspaper article (one of many he has written):


In conversations with Frank about systems thinking, there is always a sense that you can learn more from him and that your own knowledge is still somewhat superficial compared to his depth of understanding. Yet, at the same time he is able to ground the concept in real ideas – one such example was relating to bike riding, another passion of his.

I was presenting at a conference on behaviour change and wanted to include an example of systems thinking. A brief discussion with Frank meant that I felt confident to include a systems approach to infrastructure around the issues of promoting greater use of bikes. His solution, of course, is obvious – build safer roads and bike paths and you will find that people can then use their bikes and they do! We have seen this occurring over the past five years, and the surge of bike riders has been significant. More needs to be done, but the process of change has begun.

With the powerful influence Frank has over so many people, he still remains humble. There is never a sense of judgment when you have expressed an idea he might not fully agree with or when something in the system has let him down. This is an extraordinary part of his nature considering the struggles he regularly encounters. As he often says, ‘To understand all, is to forgive all’. No wonder we sometimes struggle to forgive our politicians.

Frank has lived with chronic illness since the 1970s and has been able to demonstrate that if you have the will you can learn from anything that confronts you and create your own future. In one of his journal articles on chronic illness he demonstrates we can all be agents of change if the need is strong enough within us:

*[if we recognise that we are responsible for the everyday realities we create and therefore, that we can actually change them – as so many have done before us. and It does mean that the way we understand and therefore the way we act are both our realities and therefore that both are changeable.*’ (Fisher F, Chronic Disease, Self Management and the Liberation Inherent in Understanding the Social Construction of Chronic Disease, http://docs.health.vic.gov.au)

In all of Frank’s work and life there is also a persistent optimism that means that he never stops working to make change and create awareness around issues that are important to him.

Frank, you are a great friend to so many, a wonderful listener and a great inspiration.
REFLECTIONS ON A WAY OF BEING, EMBODIED BY MY FRIEND FRANK FISHER
BY: JOSH FLOYD

Josh wrote and taught the unit Energy for the Future with Frank for the National Centre for Sustainability’s Graduate Certificate in Sustainability. Together they also took over the core unit Principles of Sustainability and have continued working together since then. Most recently, they have taken a version of Principles of Sustainability into the Master of Civil Engineering program in Swinburne University’s Faculty of Engineering and Industrial Sciences.

From my friend Frank Fisher I have learned love.

I’ve tried to take some care in expressing this: it’s not learning about love, or about how to love that I’m pointing to here, though along the way I expect I’ve learned something of that too. I’m not trying to say something like, ‘Prior to our friendship, I didn’t know love.’ And I don’t know that Frank actually set out to teach love. It’s more along these lines:

Walking awhile with Frank,
Love is embodied.
Natural,
And ordinary.
Nothing to remark about.

Let me try to give a more concrete sense of this love via two short anecdotes.

Early in 2007, Frank was seriously ill with a hospital–acquired infection. He’d exhausted the entire antibiotic armoury and was being treated with the option of last resort when the microbes finally responded favourably (at least from the perspective of Frank’s health) to the pharmacological discouragement.

As a result, he wasn’t able to be present in person for the first day of our Principles of Sustainability subject.

Naturally though, Frank’s orienting conversation with the students proceeded – he phoned in from the hospital.

We discussed the CSIRO’s Total Wellbeing Diet. He pointed out that it’s not quite what it purports to be, and some students expressed consternation with his pointing out – it was in their eyes unfair on the authors. In response, Frank pointed out the circumstances of his own present being, and the consequences of this for his understanding of total wellbeing. He offered a wider opening within which the students might see what he was seeing – without requiring that they ‘see his seeing’ in order to know that they were seen by him.
Towards the end of 2008, Frank, in coming to rest following an unorthodox bicycle dismount, broke his neck.

The morning he was discharged from the hospital, his head encaged in stainless steel scaffolding, happened to coincide with the final session for our subject Energy for the Future. The day commenced with a class visit to the Essential Services Commission. With MairiAnne’s assistance – and travelling on this rare occasion by taxi – Frank, responding to the opportunity, proceeded directly from the hospital to our excursion venue in the Melbourne CBD. If my memory serves me, he was a little late…

This isn’t a matter of heroics or a suggestion of wavering faith in others’ response-ability when breakdowns arise. This is simply alignment of Frank’s purpose and being, expressed through being together. There’s no question of being somewhere else or, as many of us might find entirely fitting, shifting focus in such times to ‘more important priorities’.

I think, for Frank, there are often no priorities more important than where he is, so when the weather turns, there’s no need to be some where – or some way – else. I’ve learned through my friendship with Frank that when a way of being is motivated by and oriented towards the expression of love, then work can become effortless.

A few years ago, I discovered Marcial Losada’s translation of a poem by Humberto Maturana titled ‘Plegaria del Estudiante’ (‘Prayer of the Student’). Given Maturana’s influence on Frank’s and my own thinking and practice, it was perhaps natural that we found our own hopes for the expectations students might hold of us well aligned with the poem. In this context, for a number of years we offered it to students in the Graduate Certificate in Sustainability course at Swinburne University. We introduced it as a poem that captures the essence of our intent, noting that in our experience constant vigilance is needed to remain true to this intent in practice, and asked that students make allowance for our shortcomings in that regard.

So, I’d like to conclude by presenting Maturana’s ‘Prayer of the Student’. I think it conveys something of the love that I’ve learned through walking with Frank:

Don’t impose on me what you know.
I want to explore the unknown
And be the source of my
own discoveries.
Let the known be my liberation,
not my slavery.
The world of your truth can be
my limitation;
Your wisdom, my negation.
Don’t instruct me; let’s
learn together.
Let my richness begin where
yours ends.
Show me so that I can stand
On your shoulders.
Reveal yourself so that I can be
Something different.
You believe that every human being
Can love and create.
I understand, then, your fear
When I ask you to live according to
your wisdom.
You will not know who I am
By listening to yourself.
Don’t instruct me; let me be.
Your failure is that I be
identical to you.3


Anthony James is a sustainability educator, writer, artist, course developer and consultant, in his role as Co-Convenor of the Understandascope, alongside Frank. He develops and facilitates integrative and transformative courses, workshops, projects, materials and services for sustainability. The courses include the post-graduate program in sustainability at Swinburne University’s National Centre for Sustainability. Anthony also produces analysis and music on the physical and metaphysical aspects of sustainability, and is the founding Editor of the Journal of the National Centre for Sustainability. He has been a commuter cyclist since the 1990s.

Frank has developed a manner of speaking that has become particularly endearing to me. It quietly warms my heart whenever I hear him say ‘anyway’ – his primary means of returning to the core theme of a talk after navigating an array of inter-connections. ‘Junk’ is reserved for anything that professes sustainability ‘cred’ while failing to consider social context (as good a word as any, I suppose). ‘Bastard’ – reserved for those who talk ‘junk’. Though this is usually suffixed by ‘No, he’s not really, but …’. And my favourites: ‘Love to’, in response to whenever I call him to get together for dinner, a presentation or project, if he’s not already due somewhere. And of course, ‘To understand all is to forgive all’. If one can access this, the process of change becomes the endlessly fulfilling task of improving oneself and one’s relationships. It goes from being a ‘battlefield’ to a ‘growth field’. From an act of anger, frustration, even vengeance, to one of love.

When I returned to Melbourne a number of years ago, I was among a large audience listening to Frank at a conference. I’d noticed debilitating murmurs of despair and cynicism throughout the conference, so I loaded Frank with a question about hope: Where does he find it? He answered simply, addressing the full room: ‘You’re here’.

Of course, there is more to it than that, but there is nothing more without it. We must ‘turn up’, he reiterated at a recent evening in his honour. What’s more, we must ‘represent ourselves’ when we do. As our sense of identity is socially constructed, this is the very means of ‘knowing’ who we are, and of course learning to become something different, something more sustainable, together.

Frank often reminds people that he would fight for democracy before he fights for ‘environment’, so fundamental a mechanism it is for understanding self and society as socially constructed. It also facilitates our primary task, to relate ever more sensitively with that reality – which is really just saying that it’s to engage in more sharing, thoughtful and considerate living, terms Frank often boils his teaching down to. Indeed, how could it come down to anything else? The extent to which we perceive democracy as inadequate is the extent to which we are called to engage with it more deeply.
Changing consciousness

Having been ‘groomed’ for a career in commerce, this seemed to me like damp wood for the fire of my life; at least as it was presented to me, largely disconnected from a broader purpose. It was as a musician and lyricist that I felt the world open up within me. Here was a language and means of practising a deeper connection with and for life. In a twist of fate, as my band called it a day and I geared up to head overseas, a friend took me along to one of Frank’s lectures at Monash. I found it irresistible and joined her in the course.

My interest and understanding of ontology had felt liberating as an artist, but I soon became aware of how bound I remained by a lack of epistemological understanding. The course was a fortunate encounter, as anger and cynicism were filling the void. Frank was not blind to this, commenting that my essays were strong but a ‘bit bleak’. And, ‘Recognising system dynamics and its coherences can help give one greater patience’.

This stayed with me. Frank had offered me the tools to make a coherent and compassionate ‘whole’ of my existing knowledge and awareness and opened the way to go on with it.

The wild mind

Martin Flanagan wrote recently in The Age about Jim Stynes, the famous Irish star of Australian Rules football who also committed his life to the service of others. I was moved by how Martin’s words could be applied to Frank, so I’ve supplanted Frank’s name for Jim’s here:

*He believed he had a vocation, a calling, and he went the whole way with it. Do I call him a hero? I do, but I would be doing a grave disservice to [Frank] and his legacy if I did not stress how egalitarian, how commonly attainable, his idea of heroism was.*

As we develop better understandings of our socially constructed realities, we are not only in a position to ‘get’ how to take responsibility for those realities, we also develop the eyes to ‘see’ Frank as he would have us see him – as relatively unremarkable. He lives with chronic illness because that is his lot. He embodies his insights on that, and sustainability more broadly, because not to do so would be to consciously limit and even harm oneself.

He doesn’t live without flaw, because none of us can. ‘Perfection’ is among the more nonsensical ideas Frank often makes a point of. In fact, it offers a clue to the ways we think about things that require attention.

Frank has felt the discomfort of being called a ‘hard’ man. Some have reacted to the barbs he applies occasionally or the counterpoint that proves unwelcome. But this is a man who so fundamentally believes in the value of moving ‘from being precious to precious being’ that he is happy if all we get from him is a hint of a more robust means of being with each other. The ‘wilderness within’ is what he is most keen to protect – becoming less predictable to each other. This is the motor of our learning. We mustn’t hold ourselves back for preciousness, or play uncritical chorus to convention.

Despite widespread and growing recognition of his pioneering work and insights, Frank still feels relatively marginalised. Perhaps this is the lot of a pioneer, always at the frontier, often receiving more rejections and rebuttals in daily life than acceptances. He occasionally laments the still somewhat scarce practice of the insights gained by graduates and others. Against this, he is surprised by the groundswell of high regard for him. It seems telling to me.
For a man who perceives a strong relationship between the exaltation of the hero and the commensurate self–diminishment of the exalter, being the subject of enormous popular regard can feel like it comes at a high price. For self–diminishment relative to the ‘hero’ limits the belief in ourselves to be able to practice the insights we gain. The extent to which we admire this ability in Frank can often occur to him as the extent to which we ‘leave it to him’, because he is somehow extraordinary. The degree to which this may be true is ours to reflect upon, with the gravity of knowing that he sees us as no less capable.

I creaked and stumbled through my initial years of experimenting in systems and cultural change, attempting to resolve newly discovered personal contradictions as the means of practising this new way of being. This practice is the cornerstone of what Frank is about, why he reiterates the importance of ‘being the change’. And why this is what speaks to Frank loudest in terms of illustrating the value we perceive in his work.

In our teaching, Frank and I are sometimes asked what difference it makes to practise change within our own lives (from showering less, to picking up litter, to relinquishing our private cars or flying, to joining a committee), if society as a whole pummels on. How could we propose to shift our consciousness, to become more sustainable, without practising what we believe to be ‘sustainability’ at any given time, in every part of our lives? This practice is the very basis of our ‘knowing’, our ‘becoming’ sustainable.

If what we do and how we do it moves us
To feel life and the consequences of our actions upon it
A little more deeply
We do more than find the meaning of life
We create meaning within it.

A decade after meeting, Frank and I began teaching together. The programs Frank and others developed over more than a generation constitute a powerful legacy I feel very fortunate to share in, and driven to continue. Much like Frank, I had not considered myself a teacher. But I have found myself called to it with the gift of what I received through Frank, the wish to offer it to others and the belief that it is a way that may yet emerge from the margins to more widespread consciousness and practice. Those that continue to turn up for this are now the source of my hope too.

To a man of integrity, insight and kindness; a man who simply acts with good sense upon ‘seeing’ his humble but empowered place in the world; a pioneer, mentor, colleague and great mate, thanks. Andamos juntos siempre.
EXTREME RATIONALIST

BY:

RICHARD LESTER

Richard has worked in education in the public and private sectors for 15 years in both Australia and Japan. He completed his undergraduate degree majoring in Chemistry, and has taught general science, chemistry and Japanese, at both primary and secondary levels. Richard joined the National Centre for Sustainability in the middle of 2008 to deliver the Carbon Accounting course and is now widely recognised as an expert in this emerging field.

I have only known Frank for three or four years, but I have known him by reputation since I was an undergraduate at Monash in the early 1980s. I have been fortunate enough to teach a unit in energy in the Graduate Certificate in Sustainability with Frank for the last few years. One of the ‘Uh huh’ moments for me during this time wasn’t directly about energy but his empathy with those who actually objected to wind turbines.

While recognising the lack of evidence of adverse health effects suffered by those living close to a wind farm, Frank pointed out that the psychosomatic reaction of those who were upset by the development, whether on the grounds of aesthetics or a genuine belief in a detrimental health impact, was very real. The stress caused by the uncertainty or the anger could and did induce real symptoms. His approach was the antithesis of dismissive of those suffering in this way.

In the unit we teach, we try to take a whole system approach to energy issues, whether they be metabolic, domestic, commercial or industrial. Each year we trundle off down to the Latrobe Valley to see where most of our electricity comes from. Frank’s commentary begins as we join the Monash Freeway and look at the sub-station near Holmesglen TAFE; our trail winds its way across the south eastern suburbs, through the professor’s truncated digestive tract, spiralling down the open pit at Loy Yang, up a conveyor, round a cooling tower to Sweden and off on a side trip to Tassie along the Basslink interconnect.

Although this is an excursion many of us first did as primary school students and probably a number of times since, it is like seeing it for the first time – standing back and getting it in focus, not just looking at ‘how it works’ but really looking at how it works for us.

The trail continues over the Strzeleckis, munching on some silicon wafers on the way, full of embodied energy if not nourishment, and spinning around the Toora wind turbines. Students and colleagues alike are given the good, the bad and the ugly of the sun, the wind and the tides as well as coal, oil, gas and the power of the atom. Nothing is spared except McDonalds: ‘I must remember to nominate them for an award from the Continence Foundation.’

Full of surprises!

If I was to describe Frank Fisher as simply as possible in terms of his approach, it would be as an extreme rationalist. What free market think-tank would dare to suggest that the land covered by freeways should actually be paid for by the users? Frank would.
RECOVERING THE FUTURE WITH FRANK FISHER

BY:

RICHARD SLAUGHTER

Dr. Richard A Slaughter is Director Foresight International, Brisbane, Australia. He is a writer, practitioner and innovator in Futures Studies and Applied Foresight with a particular interest in Integral Futures. He has been based in Australia since the late 1980s. During 1999–2004 he was Foundation Professor of Foresight at the Australian Foresight Institute, Melbourne. During 2001–2005 he was President of the World Futures Studies Federation. He is the author or editor of some 20 books and many papers on a variety of futures topics and a Board member of World Future Review (WFS), Futures (Elsevier), Foresight (Emerald) and the Journal of Futures Studies (Tamkang U). Two of his most recent works are: The Biggest Wake Up Call in History (2010) and To See With Fresh Eyes – Integral Futures and the Global Emergency (2012). He has won two awards for ‘Most Important Futures Works’ from the Association of Professional Futurists. In 2010 he was voted as one of ‘the best all-time Futurists’ by members of the Foresight Network, Shaping Tomorrow.

In 1986 I was invited to Australia to address a conference entitled Futures in Education organised by the then Commission for the Future (CFF). While there I noted some huge differences between it and the UK environment. I’d finished my PhD in 1982, been out of work for a year and, by chance, received a post–Doctoral fellowship from the then Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). But that was it. Once the fellowship was over, I was stranded. No one wanted a freshly minted futurist. Foresight projects had yet to be invented. Then came the call from Australia.

To cut a long story short I subsequently received a further invitation to another conference in Melbourne. This time it was for the centenary conference of the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). I was a visiting fellow there for a while. I took part in the meeting and also ran a series of workshops. It was here that I met Frank Fisher who then headed up the Graduate School of Environmental Science (GSES) at Monash University. As a result of that meeting I was invited to deliver a series of lectures there in 1988. Recovering the Future was a result of that invitation.

By then I was living in Australia and had written a mere handful of published articles. These minor successes, and other related work, had encouraged me to feel that there was a chance I could ‘make it’ in this new environment. But things were not that simple – they seldom are. It took a good deal longer to land a lectureship in the Institute of Education at the University of Melbourne. These were difficult times both for myself and for my extended family.

Frank was one of the few people who understood. He took a genuine interest both in my work and what I was attempting to do personally. He invited me to assemble a selection of readings for the course I was to teach on Alternative Australian Futures. It built upon what had been achieved earlier by others (including Frank, Peter Cock and Noel Gough) and presented, perhaps for the first time anywhere, a truly ‘critical’ approach to futures enquiry and action. Frank and I agreed then, as now, that the term ‘critical’ did not imply criticism as such. Rather it meant ‘looking, or understanding, in depth’. Some 20 students took the course and I felt that we had accomplished something new and valuable together.
Without access to anything approaching a commercial budget the book was fairly basic in production terms. It had an unappealing sans serif font, the figures were unsophisticated and the layout unexceptional. Nevertheless, I was proud of my first Australian book. It was divided into four sections: Futures now – exploring the extended present; Taking issue with ‘the way things are’; Futures in education – a quiet revolution?; and The answer is a journey.¹

The central proposition was that ‘by recovering our individual sense of the future we may steadily recreate what has been for too long missing from our public life: a quality of participating consciousness in space and time.’ This and many related themes have since been worked out in much greater depth (and hopefully greater clarity) in subsequent papers and books.²

Frank and I continued to stay in touch over the following couple of decades and to occasionally swap publications. In 2006 I gave him a copy of *Futures Beyond Dystopia*³ and was delighted to receive in return a signed copy of *Response Ability*⁴ – a superb compilation of some of his best short work. Looking at these and other publications reminds me how central Frank Fisher has been to my life and work in Australia. He helped open the door and, once I was through it, provided a sense of ‘fellow feeling’, the kind of encouragement and support that helped to make all that followed possible.


² A list of publications, sample papers and YouTube clips can be found at:
http://richardslaughter.com.au/?page_id=2


⁴ Fisher, F. *Response Ability: Environment, Health and Everyday Transcendence*,
FRANK – A DESIGNER AT HEART

BY: SIMONE TAFFE

Simone is a Communication Design Lecturer in the Faculty of Design Swinburne University of Technology. Simone has worked as a graphic designer and design manager, including for the City of Melbourne where she worked on the signage and communication for Frank’s ‘pay by weight’ initiative (see following page). Simone also managed major branding projects for Flett Henderson Arnold (now Futurebrand).

A friend introduced me to Frank seven years ago. We were seeking his advice on how to engage with childcare workers to overcome barriers to ‘green cleaning’. I had an image of Professor Frank Fisher as a lofty academic. Frank wheeled in his bike covered in stickers through the university corridors into the meeting room. He was dressed in bushwalking clothes and sturdy boots. Before we had time to say hello he was explaining how he had sailed past the cars from Brunswick to Hawthorn and how it never ceased to amaze him how much quicker it is to get from A to B in Melbourne by bike. Frank then said I was probably wondering why he was dressed the way he was and he discussed the practicalities of clothing options.

I was struck by Frank’s way of talking through the visible and invisible things around us, and his natural teaching gift. Frank pointed out the lights in the meeting room and told us of one of his many ideas: ‘Why don’t we put the light switch at ankle height and hide it in a box with a hard to open lid to make switching on a light difficult and thought provoking?’ My mind was racing with what designers and clients have not yet dared to create. We finally got to the academic discussion of systems thinking in relation to behaviour change and green cleaning, but his visionary creative mind had made its impression on me more generally.

I was delighted when Frank joined the Faculty of Design to ‘green our faculty’ from the inside out. Frank turns things on their head.
‘Pay–by–weight’ scheme

At the moment, if you put out no rubbish at all (only recyclables) you still pay your share of council rates which include a charge for garbage disposal. At the same time, the person who makes no effort to recycle or compost will still pay rates, but is getting more garbage removed for the same money. In other words, the extra garbage is being subsidized.

Now, along come mechanically lifted bins to save the garbos’ backs, some cheap electronic name tags or microchips and some very clever electronic weighing devices and a recorder. With these, we have the means of exposing for the first time the immediate consequences of putting out your rubbish. Your garbage is weighed and the cost of its disposal can be charged to you.

As for the prospect of dumping in other people’s bins, that is unlikely for 4 reasons:

- It is not easy to consistently dump into other’s bins
- The amount charged per kilo of garbage is actually very small, so you would have to dump a lot to make much of an impact
- Most Australians are fair–minded
- It is illegal.

Extract from Frank’s article in the Herald Sun about the project (republished in his book ‘Response Ability’).

Simone worked on the ‘pay by weight’ project when it was piloted by Melbourne City Council. It was a significant success, only to be derailed by the Council amalgamations of 1993 which at the time resulted in most residential services being shifted outside the City of Melbourne.
For example, a bold printed message appeared in our staff kitchen with the message ‘clean up your own mess and do your own dishes.’ A cheeky graffiti style note quickly appeared signed by Frank saying ‘we are all vulnerable at different times in our lives and need others to look after us, so what is wrong with cleaning up for others sometimes?’ I love Frank’s ‘human approach’ to behaviour change. As he often says, sometimes the best way is to put your arm around people to show them, take them or lead them.

I joined Frank’s house keeping committee and we developed a student project to rethink the collection of waste in our building. Frank challenged the students to rename the word ‘rubbish’. Our favourite concept was to name the red bin ‘bad design’. Everything in the ‘bad design’ bin our students began to see as their responsibility to redesign or not design at all.

Each year on orientation day, Frank has an audience of hundreds of design students, to whom he presents probably his three favourite props (apart from his bike helmet): a china mug, a polystyrene cup and a stainless steel commuter cup. He would hold them up and ask the students, ‘which cup is the sustainable choice?’ After much discussion one of Frank’s conclusions is that any one of them would do the job. The main point is to own only one in your lifetime and take it everywhere you go. This continues to play on my mind as we teach designers to design useful cups for particular contexts and different end-user needs. It has made me think about designing one thing for multiple contexts. Or maybe we could redesign the context itself and the cup would take care of itself?

Frank loves working with communication designers as he believes clear and thoughtful communications play a significant role in shifting consciousness and behaviour. Frank introduced us to the ‘Story of Stuff project’ by Annie Leonard as an example of a great way of making a message. Frank wants to signpost everything. We make signs for the things we have done and not done but would like to do. It was no good silently introducing a sustainable idea. We needed to signpost it with efforts like: ‘we would like to change the lights in this room but;’ ‘we are aiming for smaller bins or no bins at all;’ and ‘Want a lift? Take the stairs’ (one of Frank’s favourite signs).

Frank teaches us that we need to be patient when working for change, and have the change embedded in systems. Designers pride themselves in their creativity, lateral and problem solving skills, but Frank shows us up time and time again with his ‘wild’ ideas.

It’s a privilege to work alongside him.
I grew up in an enchanting historic town called Knutsford in the heart of Cheshire in the north of England. It is located in a part of the country where you could lie comfortably in the lush summer grass and gaze up to the heavens, observing the trails of white plumes of condensed exhaust expelled as aircraft crisscross the blue skies at 30,000 feet. The town also happens to be 15 miles from Manchester Airport and directly beneath the flight path for arriving aircraft. I recall being fascinated with these airborne beasts, their stark apparition from above the chimney tops, the purpose of their mission, the manner of their motion and, indeed, the wonderment of how they actually remained up there! Also, perhaps prompted by the intense, conversation–stopping, droning noise which accompanies each arrival, and the occasional but unmistakable odour of aviation fuel in the atmosphere, I was invariably curious as to the impact that these planes and their pollution were having on the planet.

I would postulate that around this time Frank Fisher was also observing those vapour trails in the Alps and contemplating their consequences, as he convalesced following treatment for Crohn’s disease. Of course, he was doing so through the eyes of an engineer beginning to ‘see the light’, rather than as a naive child. And it is through such encounters that Frank came to dedicate his life to helping us understand our place in the world and the consequences of our behaviours.

Many years later, I found myself in Australia as an immigrant, embracing a new life in a marvelous country. However, reflecting the experience of many Australians, I am constantly wrestling with the notions of ‘home’ and being torn between two worlds. Therein lies a dilemma, especially for a recent immigrant with family and friends on the other side of the world. They are held so dear that there is a ceaseless yearning to be with them.
Given the colossal consequences of flying around the globe, and the now indisputable environmental impacts that accompany each and every flight, how do I reconcile my actions? Should I fly? There are no comfortable answers. Despite buying carbon offsets, the complicity and culpability lies deep. In conversation with Frank about this, he reassured me by saying, “it’s not air miles but love miles!” While it doesn’t assuage one’s misgivings regarding international travel, the prevailing importance of love and the significance of our relationships come to the fore.

Despite what we recognise is happening to the planet, and our complicity in this, Frank readily acknowledges with passion how wonderful and amazing humankind actually is: what it is to be human – all that is inherently good – the love, the empathy, the laughter, the respect and compassion that we, as humans, can bring. I recall on a number of occasions when his eyes would widen with vitality when, for example, students completed insightful work, or produced project outcomes that turned conventional thinking on its head. This is where Frank recognises the potential for change: in our humanity and our ability to challenge the manner of our existence and the social constructs that dictate the way we live. This is what he has worked tirelessly to bring about through alternate perspectives and ways of understandings that have, in turn, increased our awareness and our capacity to act.
SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

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[Cartoon image of a person throwing waste into a bin with the text: "IT GOES AWAY..."

And another person asking, "WHAT PLANET IS THAT ON?!"

Cartoon artist: Simon Kessell]
A NEW MENTAL MODEL  
BY: KEITH DAVIS

Keith has been on a self-directed ‘continuous learning journey’ for personal sustainability and ‘Permaculture living’ over the last 20 years. He is motivated to understand more about what makes society learn to live more or less sustainably.

Keith has a Permaculture Design Consultant’s Certificate and was awarded the Applied Diploma of Permaculture Design, Education and Site Development by Bill Mollison in 2001. He completed the Graduate Certificate in Sustainability at Swinburne University of Technology in 2009. He also has qualifications in business, building, assessment and workplace training, including the Graduate Certificate of Professional Education and Training at Deakin University in 2012.

In the foreword to Frank Fisher’s book, Response–Ability: Environment, Health and Everyday Transcendence, Professor Ian Lowe writes: ’It is our thinking that is the real challenge...we urgently need a new approach that addresses our thinking’.

I feel immensely privileged and very grateful to have been exposed to the framework of thinking and way of life espoused by Professor Frank Fisher through my participation as a mature–age student in the Graduate Certificate in Sustainability at Swinburne University.

Frank’s generosity in relation to my entry into this course was greatly appreciated, even to the extent of offering that I stay at his flat during visits to the university campus when he realised that I would be travelling quite some distance to get there; a rare and pleasant thing from one complete stranger to another, but this was reflective of Frank in so many ways, as I later came to understand.

As someone with a long–standing interest in both sustainability and learning, I found the teaching and learning in this course both challenging as an epistemology and profoundly ontologically transformative within me personally. The impact of Frank’s thinking and teaching stays with me, as a profoundly reorganised way of thinking and interacting with the learning of others around me. This change resides as a new mental model of just how much we are all personally responsible for socially constructing a better, saner and more just world for both present and future generations; and for working to sustain a life–giving, healthy planet for all species.

Not long after completing this postgraduate course, I found I could no longer tolerate the internal frustrations in my mind and the practical barriers to making a real difference that were presented by my employment in an environmental sustainability role within local government.
So I searched for a regional position hoping that my contributions to sustained ‘good work’ (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 2001) would be more effective in my community. I later moved to a new regional sustainability work role, this time in the water sector, where I have continually tried to put some of that deep learning into practice, and I feel that my efforts are more worthwhile as I contribute in some small way to constructing that better world.

On reflection, I feel that some of my fellow students would have struggled with being exposed to the ‘ontological disturbance’ and new thinking–frames–of–mind that Frank presented during the course, and that the personal impact on others may have not been on the same level as the impact I experienced.

However, in line with Bateson’s learning levels theory (Bateson 1972), such a deep–learning experience is likely to be difficult and rare to attain and even more difficult to describe to others. But I’m very confident that there are many people’s lives that have been altered in some very positive ways through meeting and knowing Frank. For myself, the timing of our meeting was ideal at my stage of lifelong learning and personal development, as I was ready to receive such wisdom and knowledge presented in new and challenging ways, and it was widely applicable in both my personal and working life.

Since that time I have continued my continuous–learner approach to creating personal sustainability and have recently completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Education and Training at Deakin University.

I can say I was far better equipped during these later studies, as a mature age student, to think on many different levels, constructing my own learning and gaining a great deal more insight by linking my interests in education and learning for sustainability with the Deakin course’s focus on understanding broad frameworks for professional education and training.

My task now is to write a book that captures my thinking, ideas and long term study and research, combining the fields of learning for sustainability and education and training for professionals into a framework for incorporating sustainability into modern professionals’ higher education, where I feel the source of much of the ‘un–sustainability’ evident in global society today originates.

I feel much better equipped to meet the challenge of writing my thesis on this subject now, but I’m sure that this would not have been the case if I hadn’t encountered both Frank’s gracious teaching and his challenging ideas.

My own words are insufficient to describe the indelible impact on me personally of knowing Frank Fisher. I can only say: ‘Thank you sincerely, Frank’, and I hope that I can continue to grow and learn as a human being and strive to share and create every day the kind of learning experience I received with others, as we all go through life together.

In closing, I offer instead some words of wisdom from Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends, ’Tis not too late to seek a newer world... It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles...

References


Tennyson, A, 1833, ‘Ulysses’
i’ve tried to recreate Frank’s awesome garlic pesto and pasta on many occasions but haven’t quite matched it yet.

i met Frank only about three years ago on my orientation day in the Faculty of Design Bachelor Degree at Swinburne Uni, and shortly after took up his offer to do the Grad Cert in Sustainability.

i wasn’t really interested in sustainability at the time. In fact i thought it was just another fad and had largely ignored it. But he cleverly pitched it as an opportunity to get an extra qualification while i was here, and i thought that might be cool.

What he didn’t tell me was that his ideas would come to drive what i do and who i want to be.

i’m finding it surprisingly hard to write this – not because of a lack of things to say about Frank’s effect on my life but because i’m not sure i can do the man justice.

i am very thankful to Frank for helping me start to see the social underpinnings of the big, and day to day, issues humans have brought into existence. i’m finding this a very challenging lens through which to explore my possible futures – where and how i can meaningfully contribute to this world. i can see however that i’ll find very rich experiences along this path.

i’m currently trying to apply what he’s taught me to social development and corporate social responsibility in the mining industry. i’m also starting to think how i might do something more on an entrepreneurial and local level with a social business kind of model, with the aim of displacing unsustainability in appealing and deeply satisfying ways.

Frank has helped me to tie together a lot of mental loose ends and questions by offering a framework for arranging them in. i think that might be what i was really looking for when i quit my job in search of a career change three years ago.

Frank is an inspiration for not only what to do but how to do it. He seems to have an incredible capacity for understanding and patience; for empathy. This is something i find difficult to practise but try to remind myself of.

i’m especially grateful for the times he has chosen to share with me, over coffee, on the phone and also up at MairiAnne’s farm. i’ve always come away with a bit more insight, but also a lot more to think about than before!
Latoya Voogt is a secondary school teacher who has worked in Western Australia and Victoria in both rural and metropolitan schools. Graduating from Edith Cowan University in 2008, with degrees in both Education and Performing Arts, she has a passion for cultural theory and existentialism, which have proved insightful when deconstructing the cultural norms that can often be barriers to sustainability.

White wisps of whiskers
That frame his ascetic face,
Behold: the ever-learning teacher.
The Old, Wise Sage.

He travels through the seasons,
Steel spokes swiftly spin,
Never tires. Never tyres.
Just the power from within.

Illnesses and hardship,
Hath given strength to The Sage,
The power to empower,
The power to engage.

They gathered in their spaces,
Patient, piqued ears peeled
For the words of wisdom whispered,
The truths, The Sage revealed.

Those myriad eyes and ears,
Betwixted this land and that,
Impart which was imparted,
Sweet words to ponder at.

The Sage enlivens all,
Democracy is reborn!
Enlivening our spirit,
And inspiring the forlorn.

Like planetary pests,
Knowledge will breed and grow
and spread.
Precious beings no longer precious,
Nor captive, to things we dread.

I look to you wise Sage,
For I do not fear my death
But to leave this world knowing–
That behind– nothing have I left.

I wish, I pray, I wonder:
Will I ever make the impact that you do?
Will I rest my head on that weary day,
Myself, a wise, old Sage, like you?
ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD

BY:

GUY ARUNDEL

Bsc (Hons) Industrial Design (Napier University, Edinburgh), Swinburne Post Grad Cert in Sustainability (2011–present).

Guy is originally from Dublin, Ireland and has been living in Melbourne since 1994. He currently works in the Design Department of Visionstream Pty Ltd, Melbourne.

Frank is a thought implanter, but being a relative newcomer to the area of ecological, economic and human sustainability, ideas discussed on the course could take time to take root, many being of a kind not thought of in great depth before.

After my initial ‘What have I let myself in for?’ and ‘What the hell does epistemology mean again?’ moments, I moved on to the issues presented, some of which swirled around my head like a stirred-up hornet’s nest. Notions of the systems, constructs and structures of which we are part started to knock on my ethical and moral consciousness. Incubation of concepts gradually occurred over time enabling me to see with fresh eyes the evidence of Frank’s teachings permeate around me; to start to see internal and external nature in a new light; to acknowledge and embrace the bare fact that I have a duty of care for the biosphere and all the life forms it supports; and to act commensurately.

Bleak realities are presented, but belief in a better future for all still prevails. Discourse supporting existing paradigms or challenges to newly presented ones are expected and debated, but based on the times I have been fortunate enough to be in Frank’s company they are met in a light-hearted gracious manner and, it seems, an acceptance that a person’s awareness, understanding of and beliefs in alternatives to the ways and means of human existence may be enhanced by a continual exploration and deliberation of the particular matter, before the potential arrival of the seemingly all elusive mind-shift in the individual occurs. But if it doesn’t happen, it doesn’t happen. There is no coercion or agenda at play.

Fuelled by Frank’s example, as a passionate participant in and proponent of the use of pedal power and an advocate of the numerous benefits of cycling (and in conjunction with public transport), I assessed my complicity with the nation’s personal transport default option, the automobile. Could I really regularly cycle to my new work place on the other side of the city 25 kilometres away? Is it just too far for me to commute? There are no shower or locker facilities provided by the company either! True, I did not like the daily ‘rat run’, but would I really change my job to be closer to my workplace, as I had declared? I dwelt on the issue of when I would do this, but before long it went on the back burner.

Eventually I returned to the idea and tried to figure out another way. Of course, it’s simple! The solution is right at hand! I can cycle to the station, catch the train to cover half of the journey and then cycle the rest of the way. I even find that I usually...
have most of the carriage to myself, even at rush hour! Though there are people that look at me incredulously, as if I must be mad to cycle all that way, sometimes in bad weather, I enjoy the experience, and my sanity has never been in better shape!

Most of us are only able to make very small contributions towards accomplishing a sustainable future. However, the total is always a sum of the parts. Education is one of the key factors in the equation. Frank steers those that jump on board, to be part of the burgeoning armada heading towards this goal, on a journey of incremental personal realisations and recognitions that each and every one of us has a part to play in attempting to traverse across these sometimes seemingly un navigable and stormy waters to a safe port of call.

As Lord Jaques, a character in William Shakespeare’s As You Like It, says:

*All the world’s a stage,*  
*And all the men and women merely players:*  
*They have their exits and their entrances;*  
*And one man in his time plays many parts.*

But just with any theatrical production, some actors get to shine by playing the leading role, as it is with Frank Fisher.
YOU DIDN'T TELL US ABOUT YOUR CHRONIC ILLNESS...

...IF I'D KNOWN IT WAS A PRE-REQUISITE
Rebecca Maxwell is the narrator of ‘Blind and Busy: Life stories of people who use braille’, about the value of braille and the opportunities it provides for its users. Throughout her education, including University and Teacher Training College, braille has enabled Rebecca to live a full life and benefit from the power of accessible knowledge. Rebecca now lives in Melbourne, writes poetry, and is on the committee of the Society of Women Writers, Victoria. Her poetry means a lot to her as a way of understanding herself in the world. She lives in a mainly Vietnamese language area, where she has enjoyed coaching students and teaching English to older neighbours. She is involved in the Disability Advisory Committee (DAC) of the Yarra Council, alongside Frank, and appreciates the contribution Aborginals have made to our sense of “Mother Earth”, and other enriching perceptions.

He Wears His Erudition Lightly

Frank is on the DAC (Disability Advisory Committee) of Yarra City Council, as I am. This is where I note how he contributes to broaden our thinking, and the efforts our committee makes towards matters of access, equality, and sustainability. (I am saying ‘equality’, though I really needed to find a word that embodies ‘empowerment’ and ‘justice’ as well.) I like to think of Frank’s awareness as ‘the frank and full perspective’! When Frank puts a point of view, one feels that he has taken the issue in his hands and ‘revolved’ it, so that he can show it from various aspects – perhaps some aspects that one had not thought to look at. He is not voluble; in fact, he doesn’t say much, but what he says is pithy and brings a refreshing stance. The effect of his contribution is to show that we can join the dots differently; that a fixed sequence is linear and ignores breadth.

Last year, Frank was part of a sub-committee from DAC who attended a Yarra council meeting to discuss the new Urban Design Strategy for Yarra. He succeeded in broadening the perspective for the councillors who were working on the vision pertaining to future developments in Yarra. The vision under discussion had focused on future developments ‘reinforcing a coherent, harmonious, and appealing urban environment’. Frank brought the emphasis from developments to community. With this change of vision, orienting towards development that is compatible with building community, the council resolved to add into the Urban Design Strategy a reference to the ‘importance for future developments to be more responsive to existing heritage character, as well as to better environmental and accessibility outcomes’. Not enough extra words to be alarming, but a richer concept of sensitive future development.
Frank seems able to quickly skim a complex document and find its essence, which he then can convey succinctly. We really value this gift of his in our work as a council committee.

Frank has worked assiduously on Yarra’s public toilets policy, inspecting available structures and making useful suggestions where necessary. His objective has been to ensure there are suitable and accessible well–maintained public toilets available 24–7 in our locality. I think the old term ‘public conveniences’ is apt here.

It’s a pleasure to have Frank Fisher at DAC meetings. He is quietly informative, wears his erudition lightly and understates without diminishing. He explains the difficult documents by diffusing any obfuscation and without the need for accolades. He’s a jolly good chap, from whom I learned not to be coy about one’s reality.

Frank attends lengthy meetings despite his fragile state of health. He has admirable tenacity.
Dear Frank,

Not long ago you said to me that one of your great regrets in life was how little influence you had had with health consumers. I was greatly perturbed you felt this way partly because you have been a consistent and persistent protagonist for empowering health consumers but also because you contributed your own unique point of view.

When I thought about it, I thought I had little hope of assessing the impact you have had on health policy and health services or on other individuals. I can only speak for myself.

When I first met you it was at the establishment of the Chronic Illness Alliance in about 1995. You became an instant supporter of the Alliance, embracing it for its vision that health systems operate on the principles of fairness and equity for all people who have chronic and disabling illnesses rather than on priorities developed by politicians and bureaucrats.

You introduced ideas to the Alliance that no one else did.

I remember you talked of the global politics of food production and how this impacted on the health of nations and of individuals. This was at a time when only a few people such as Susan George (How the Other Half Dies) were writing about global food politics. You were able to relate the looming environmental crisis associated with dairy and meat production to the health of people with Crohn’s disease.

At a time when I had begun exploring the impact of theories of science on how health professionals constructed the concept of chronicity and how people with chronic illnesses perceived their own health and illness, you were one of the few people who knew what I was talking about.

I remember being at some forum where I met you and then walking down Collins Street where we discussed Kuhn’s and Polanyi’s theories of science. I think it is fair to say you considered the theoretical from the point of view that health systems operate on the principles of fairness and equity for all people who have chronic and disabling illnesses rather than on priorities developed by politicians and bureaucrats.

There are many other examples of what you as an environmentalist brought to the Alliance.
Reducing the amount of packaging for medicines was one. Over-reliance on cars was, of course, another. You lead by example in many of these areas.

And perhaps that last example demonstrates your ability to move from the ‘Big Ideas’ to the practical and this will be one of your most enduring contributions.

Through Health Issues Centre, Consumers’ Health Forum and Chronic Illness Alliance you engaged in many of the changes which took place in the health system over the last few decades. I know that a driving force behind that involvement has been your commitment to a fair and equitable health system where access to public hospitals, the Medicare system and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme must remain as the centrepieces of our national health system.

Once again you didn’t just offer verbal support but participated in the Coordinated Care Trials and supported community health services both in terms of governance and in the practical manner of being a consumer of their services. You have served on advisory groups of public hospitals as well as using their services.

When it was not fashionable or perhaps politic to claim public hospitals were better than private you were prepared to praise them when they had served you well, but you offered constructive criticism when you thought there were improvements to be made in their services.

If I learned anything from you it is that a sense of one’s dignity can be a barrier to real dignity.

I am thinking of the work you did on developing public awareness of the importance of public toilets being open to serve the needs of all unwell people, and the need for a map of public toilets. You weren’t afraid to publicise your own needs in this matter, and by so doing you made a contribution to Melbourne’s public health that recalls John Snow’s contribution to public health in 19th century London.

This letter has not done justice to all you have achieved.

It is here to suggest to you that if you have influenced one person over the years you have most assuredly influenced others.
These posters bring to light the normally unnoticed connection we have with the things we throw ‘away’. When something is ‘thrown away’, there has to be an ‘away’. In principle, nature does not know such a category, humans have created it and on a finite planet we cannot keep doing it; ultimately there is no away.

A series of teaching aids for the Discards Management Scheme (DMS)

‘You Are Your Discards’

Developed as part of the Discards Management Scheme by the Faculty of Design at Swinburne University.
My essay is written in the spirit of a Festschrift – a celebration of a person and his intellectual contributions. My first encounter with Frank Fisher was at a lecture he delivered at the Centre for the Human Aspects of Science and Technology (CHAST) at the University of Sydney in the late 1980s or early 1990s. I do not remember the particular cartoons Frank used but I do remember that he used a lot of cartoons. I imagine Frank had already recognised that if you want your audience to really hear what you want to say in ways that are outside the prevailing paradigm then you have to provide an experience that triggers a different manner of listening. Cartoons offer some possibilities in terms of a Gestalt shift or as metaphors that take the listener to never visited intellectual places. I appreciated the lesson and have used cartoons, when possible, ever since.

When reflecting on how to compose this essay it was my experience of Frank using cartoons that came to mind. So this is an essay mediated by cartoons that honour the contributions Frank has made to responsibility, through his own lived actions, and response–ability through the spaces and reflections he has opened up for others such that their own capacities for responsibility have been transformed. The cartoons I use come from my own work, or that of close colleagues, and have been especially commissioned with Simon Kneebone.

For a long time now Frank has drawn attention, in a multitude of ways, to the inadequacy of the foundations of thinking and acting we use to govern our society, design our institutions and prioritise patterns of investment (Figure 1). He has been an advocate of a particular form of systems thinking and practice, and all too often a lone voice in the experiences of students. It is one of life’s mysteries as to why the field of Systems scholarship seems to threaten so many vested interests within academia and beyond. The challenge that is faced by those who have been touched by Frank’s thinking, is to translate his understanding into both practical action and new institutional arrangements that secure investment in new foundations. There is much still to do.
Frank has always been ahead of his time; for example Frank could be considered a ‘reframer’ par excellence (Figure 2), but it is only in recent years that intellectual fashions, and need, have made framing and reframing matters of concern. Donald Schön, another scholar ahead of his time, argued that policy positions rest on underlying structures of belief, perception and appreciation which they call ‘frames’ (Shön and Rein 1994). As I understand it much of Frank’s academic praxis was assisting others to begin to do their own reframing.

Of course reframing is a moral as much as intellectual responsibility (Figure 3). In this respect Frank has, in my experience, sought to act in ways that maintain congruence between his espoused theories and theories in use. This is a manner of living that seems challenging for many. So how might our circumstances be changed so that it becomes easier? The path of responsibility involves being open to circumstances and reflexive consideration about what we do when we do what we do (Ison 2010). As an educator Frank has opened up pathways less travelled for his students and we, especially Victorians and Australians, are better for it (Figure 4). In many ways Australia and Australians are in the midst of a power struggle at the moment, over continuing to walk the path we have been on, or being open to our circumstances within a global context, and making new choices; choices that involve acting systemically, and thus responsibly, in the way that Frank has invited us to consider.

I know that being ahead of one’s time can often be a lonely and isolated place, and requires supportive conversations with friends and colleagues. My experience is that Frank has been fortunate in this regard with a strong network of friends and family. But the creation of supportive milieus for systemic, socially relevant innovations in thinking and practice cannot be left to chance. One thing we could all do to conserve the manner of living that Frank’s example invites us to reflect upon, is to work cooperatively to foster, facilitate and institutionalise a conversational milieu from which continuing possibilities of difference – differences that make a difference – emerge.

![Figure 1. Our business as usual approaches exist on inadequate foundations as we enter the Anthropocene yet we do little to invest in building new, more robust foundations.](image)

References

Figure 2. (above) A metaphor for the reframing effort that is needed and to which many are now contributing, often in what seems an uphill battle.

Figure 3. (right) Engaging with thinking and practices that are no longer relevant to our collective circumstances is as much a moral issue as an intellectual one.

Figure 4. (below) Ethics is the act of opening up real choices for people, in their living and managing of the systemic choices that appear, at the level of the individual and the collective (Source: Ison 2010).
I was first drawn to Frank at a meeting of the Melbourne Swedish Students organisation, the Bellman Society in (I think) 1972. We were receiving a slide presentation by Frank about his travels in South America to what seemed such exotic places, climates, politics, cultures and philosophies. I found it entrancing and inspiring in its breadth and through his careful vivid explanations and beautiful photographs and references to uplifting music.

I was already a health professional, a young Occupational Therapist, whose education and profession covered enquiry into whole multidimensional appraisals of people, environments and situations that posed problems and required creative solutions. His many levels of enquiry were in my areas of interest, and we became friends.

I found this memory of Frank an inclusive snapshot of the person I came to know as we later shared life experiences, study and ideas.

Frank, with his electrical engineering background, was drawn to detail and the microcosm and effective ways to improve the lot of fellow humans in their environments. He was interested in the ‘small is beautiful’ philosophy and practice. These ideas were influential in the work of some aid organisations, amongst them Community Aid Abroad, with whom I travelled to India, Thailand and East Africa observing and reporting on some aspects of projects.

Frank was keen to explore cultures and social justice practices and what we now describe as inclusiveness in communities, and he was active in the Australian Natives Association process of welcoming and assisting immigrants to Australia.

We both returned to study and enrolled in Geography together at University of Melbourne where we undertook projects in the bush and around inner suburbs studying environments and ecological processes.
I retained my therapy career while Frank moved on to bigger endeavours incorporating his passions and knowledge and continuing to share his philosophies with others.

The big difference between Frank and many others continued to be that he practised his ideas daily, often to his own discomfort but with integrity and care. He has remained a passionate advocate for them and for the concerns of people with disabilities. His enquiry and leadership have influenced many others as he stayed true to those early values, as far as I can tell, with strength, courage, persistence and love in the face of an increasingly 'big money' world of compromised values where integrity often fades to a light grey.

Frank, I thank you for these shared experiences and inspirations in my life and for your forthrightness in promoting powerful ideas for the good. I feel the stronger for having shared a little of this.
UNAMBIGUOUS CONTRIBUTION

BY:

SANDY TOUSSAINT

Sandy is Professor of anthropology at The University of Western Australia. She is also a best friend of Kate Auty and had this to say about Frank’s ripple effect.

I became aware of Frank Fisher’s ideas and influence through Kate Auty. Frank made a marked impact on her thinking and practice, an impact that often entered our conversations. Via Frank’s scholarship, Kate introduced me to the work of systems analysts such as Thompson and Warburton who showed the problems that arise when human agency is excluded from environmental equations. Zukav’s work in the field of modern physics and its contribution to cross-disciplinary inquiry was another inspiration fostered through Frank. I have often referred to these texts since that time.

I met Frank briefly in 2004 at an environmental conference organised through Melbourne University. It was noticeable that he arrived and left on a bicycle, scurrying through the dense Melbourne traffic. But even more noticeable was the unambiguous contribution he made when speaking to conference participants – environmental change will only emerge when it is embedded in people’s everyday practice, as well as in their minds.
Letter to Frank, by Andrew Tyson

Andrew trained as a metal tradesman then an electronic technician, a role in which he worked for about 12 years before being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. He became too sick to continue (at the age of 41), then studied psychology and has worked in supported accommodation for people with intellectual disabilities.

Dear Frank

We have never met, nor had I even heard of a Sustainability Course at Swinburne during the time I was a student. When I received the invitation to attend a presentation hosted by yourself and friends, I expected the evening would cover a very interesting topic and that I would come away with increased knowledge but otherwise unchanged. Instead, I witnessed how a brave man faces his death and continues to share with, educate and illuminate people. Given that I developed multiple sclerosis in early 2011 (well, that was when it was diagnosed although not when it started), I find your example profoundly touching. I admire both your strength of character and conviction and find you to be an inspiration for me to try to live up to in the longer term coming of my own increasing disability and eventual demise.

Thank you for a gift for which I cannot express how truly grateful I am, and how unexpected it was to have received it.
'Being precious is a necessary consequence of seeing ourselves as separate from nature and requiring protection from it. If we do not subscribe to separation from nature, even the things we have grown most frightened of, death and suffering, no longer carry such fearful implications.'

Frank Fisher
Please visit The Understandascope website and further the conversation