Coenraad van Houten – In memoriam

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My mentor and colleague Coenraad van Houten died on Maundy Thursday, 28 March 2013, at 7.45 in the morning in the presence of his wife, Shirley Routledge van Houten. He was born on Valentine’s Day in 1922 and died during Eastertide, a time which links Christians with the mystery of death and resurrection. It was on Maundy Thursday that the washing of the feet and the Last Supper took place.

For me the period from Valentine’s Day to Maundy Thursday resonates well with the life and personality of Coenraad. There was something so free and easy about him, so boyish; he relished life, was open to the world and enjoyed company. Despite being overweight, during the years when we worked more closely together he still walked with a sanguine lightness of step - except when going upstairs. That lightness served him well in his thinking and in process management. When he arrived from Forest Row, near London, to take part in our seminars at the Forum Kreuzberg, Berlin, he had had time during the flight to think things through and make plans. Frequently his first words after saying ‘Hello’ were: ‘I’ve had some new ideas for the seminar.’ We’ll do it quite differently this time!’ For me as his colleague and co-organizer this was marvellously creative and made sure that life would never be boring; but on the other hand the necessary reorganization and new content often presented a challenge. His notes, from which I had to type out the guidelines for the working groups next morning, were written in the three languages in which Coenraad was most easily at home, Dutch, English and German. He would swap over in mid-sentence; if he couldn’t quite call to mind the German word, he would use the English or Dutch one instead.

In his lectures, too, Coenraad seasoned difficult themes with lightness, and the complicated concepts he presented were given with simplicity and trueness to life. He did not want to cause discomfort; as formulated in the principles for his new venture in adult education, what he wanted to do was to ‘ignite fires’ and not to fill buckets. For some this appeared too trifling, too watered down, but also sometimes too fiery. Once in a while the choleric side of his temperament would break out, with the fire leading to rolling thunder and lightning flashes. This was the less public side of his nature which his colleagues and assistants were ‘privileged’ to discover.

Coenraad’s personality was many-layered and many-sided; there were also cracks and fissures and dark corners. His was a twentieth-century personality. Some of those who had initially placed him on a pedestal subsequently knocked him off it after experiencing his less agreeable side. Like the rest of us, he had to be taken as a bundle and not only the parts pleasing us. Despite the type of work he had chosen to undertake he did not hide behind a public persona and thus has made himself vulnerable for to being attacked. Under such circumstances sore points came to light. In his relationships with anthroposophical establishments and with The Christian Community he maintained his independence and was sometimes pugnacious. In conflicts between official position and personal relationships he tended towards the personal. For some this made the relationship easy while for organizations he was often perceived as being difficult.

He struggled to reach an esoteric understanding of Christianity. In this connection I sometimes could not understand what he meant when he talked about Christ. But on the other hand I was profoundly moved by his discourse on the significance of the five deeds of Christ on the road to the Cross. ‘/ On the final Sunday of a four to five-day seminar about destiny learning he often spoke of this; it was his way of bringing a period of intensive work to a festive conclusion.

The Maundy Thursday and Easterly part of his life’s signature also meant that he wished and was obliged to experience many highs and lows. He was no theoretician who draws logical conclusions while reading Steiner’s Complete Works. He needed people around him with whom he could discuss his findings and reach conclusions. This is also how his books came about, not as a theory of adult education and karma but as he himself put it in the title of one of his books: ‘Practising Destiny: Principles and Processes in Adult Learning.’ This book was being written during a period when we were working together as colleagues, perhaps in some ways like a father and son. I was able to experience how his texts gradually drew together like a condensation of the experience gained in thirty or more seminars per year and countless encounters with students and colleagues from various countries. This process of condensation did not come easily to Coen, but on the other hand once he had found the right words and formulations he defended them. Nothing was easy here; something which had undergone a strenuous process of earthly consolidation had attained resurrection within him! At such moments Coenraad’s ‘cardinal double’ would let loose a battle of words which was no fun. On the other hand this also had something to do with the Easterly part of his signature: to carry ideas through the depths of life and resurrect them in words. Coen possessed the gift of touching people’s feelings through ‘the way he was’ and represented,
surely not only for me, a signpost along the path and a point of orientation.
In this, among much else, he drew on the intensity with which some of his colleagues in the Dutch diaspora
sought, independently from Dornach, to find an ‘operational’ understanding of anthroposophy. He spoke of the
Elder Zeylmans and of Bernard Lievegoed, both of whom he regarded as teachers and colleagues.

I would like to conclude this contribution with some very personal comments which I hope will be considered
appropriate within the framework of this retrospective. The personal does, after all, always also contain a supra-
personal element.
On Good Friday I was making preparations for a journey and getting ready to attend the Act of Consecration of
Man when I heard that Coenraad had died. I immediately contacted my colleague in Germany and was told that
she would be going to his funeral. I asked her to convey my condolences. I imagined a large congregation, only to
hear later that quite a small group had gathered to send him on his way. Perhaps this, too, offers a glimpse of his
signature: Coenraad meant a great deal to many people who were, no doubt, scattered all over the world and
Europe at the time of his death. He had to strive for ‘public recognition’, whereas personal recognition was given
to him easily and gladly.
I first met Coenraad in May 1988 at a seminar on ‘Adult Education as an Awakening of the Will’. This encounter
brought me to the beginning of a path which I am still following today. I cannot imagine what other possibilities
destiny might have had up its sleeve which could have given me – born in a small village in northern Hessen
(Germany) where I gained a seriously inadequate grade in English – the ability to work in collaboration with an
international group of colleagues. Since my first summer schooling course in England in 1997 I have led more
seminars in English for international participants then in German for German speakers.
Coenraad van Houten and Gudrun Burkhard have been my most important and influential teachers. It is to them
that I owe the privilege of having been introduced to destiny learning and biography work. I mention Coen fre-
quently in my seminars and lectures because he was the one who communicated to me the processes, methods,
course design principles and fundamental attitudes on which all my seminars and courses are founded.
When Coen asked me to take over a lecture, it was not always easy to see him sitting, either interested or bored,
in the back row taking notes for the subsequent discussion about my performance.
I am grateful for what Coenraad has given to me and to the world. I experience his impulses working on in his
colleagues and students, and I trust in continuing support from his immortal individuality. We shall surely have
much need of such support in whatever the future brings.

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Australia, and used to be a frequent visitor to the UK where he contributed to the
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1) Reference to Rudolf Steiner’s lecture given at Stockholm on 12 January 1910 about the re-
appearance of Christ in the etheric realm.