

21

Heinz von Foerster: A Personal Farewell

Abstract

This short piece is an obituary for Heinz von Foerster. It talks of Heinz the man, rather than Heinz the scientist, talking of him in terms of the word “wonder”.

I shall write of Heinz the human who I loved, rather than of Heinz, the scientist’s, work. Here, I will honour him as a person. There will be a time, later, to honour his contribution.

When you read of who Heinz von Foerster was, and what he did, one youthful activity—the performance of magic—seems to catch everyone’s attention. I remember being first told Heinz was a magician by Gordon Pask (no mean magician himself, although in another context), through whom I met him, in the early 1970’s. And Gordon was most particularly talking of Heinz’s membership of the Magic Circle.

But when I look for one word to describe Heinz von Foerster, it is not magic. Rather, it is wonder. This simple English word has so many meanings and applications, and all of them seem to fit.

He made us wonder: he wrote and spoke in such a way and of such understandings that the only response seemed to be to wonder. What does this mean, how can this be? I wonder what...? That sort of wonder: the wonder of being uncertain and trying to decide how to proceed.

He showed us a world of wonder: a world that was full of the mystery of his magic. There were some who thought he intended to baffle and confuse, to take away from us and our human achievements—which, to be sure, he did. But not as an end in itself: rather in the greater cause of giving us reasons to see the wonder, to wonder about it, and to learn in amazement that we were part of that wonder, not its controllers standing outside it.

He taught us the joy of wondering—in both senses: wondering what we should do, and the amazement that we could wonder what we should do—that second sort of wonder.

Magic and wonder are not that far apart, of course. Indeed, the whole purpose of magic is to help us towards wonder. Heinz was, all his life, a magician. He could change the mood of a room as easily as he could saw a woman in half. He could not fail to attract, as a person, as a teacher, to himself and to his ideas. What gifts! I remember him telling me how obvious the physics of magic were, and yet how although we knew magic tricks were obviously deceptions we would wonder at them, be transported, amazed. He was not interested in the trick, but in the transportation, in what we could feel.

Heinz was a man full of wonder: a wonder-full man. We are fortunate to have had him as a teacher, a mentor, a colleague, a father figure. Those of us who were fortunate enough to have met him, even to have heard him lecture, and, more yet, those of us who could call him friend and love him, are privileged humans. Heinz had spent a long time dying. I was favoured to see him a week before he died. He was in pain and, I believe, close to despair. He spoke of his coming death. But through this shone the same old Heinz, a twinkle in his eye, a sharp question, a delight in champagne and in the simple food from Duarte's, his unpretentious local restaurant. He couldn't leave that person for long!

When he died, his neighbours in Pescadero flew the town's flag at half mast in honour of this in-comer.

Heinz von Foerster was born on 13 November 1911 and died on 2 October 2002. He leaves us his wonderful wife Mai, and their sons Tommy and Andy. What condolences and wishes can one send that will soften the loss of wonder? There will be many opportunities to celebrate the contribution Heinz von Foerster made to cybernetics, to other fields, and in science. In this journal we are already advanced in our plans for a commemorative issue.