



SIGMUND KVALØY SETRENG

A Lasting Love for Wild Nature and Wild Souls

BY HELENA NORBERG-HODGE

Sigmund was one of the greatest thinkers I've ever encountered. His deep, broad analysis continues to be essential for creating a movement that can lead us away from the disastrous path we are on. He was able to view the industrial growth economy—which he labelled ACID: advanced, competitive, industrial dominion—as though from the outside. Equally importantly, his embodied intelligence and deep sensibility provide us with beautiful articulated guidance into nature.

Here is a quote from “Inside Nature”, an essay he wrote for our book *The Future of Progress* (1992):

The Euro-Cartesian culture is a unique phenomenon in human history, in that its world is static . . . We are accepting a world that is an

abstraction in relation to the concrete life-world of human beings—the world that made them and keeps them living. The human being grows and expands and matures through movement of her body, through concrete activity. The wonder of the human being is not her intellect but her endlessly complex body (or “body-mind” if you must). Without the body and its movements in concretely moving nature, the world would have no color or sounds, or touch, or shape, or rhythm. Without qualities like these, no sense of beauty-versus-ugliness, could be built. Worse, there could be no sense of good-contrasting-bad and worse still, no quest for comprehensive meaning. In other words, without the human body there is no aesthetics, no

morality, no religion and no philosophy. This is where artificial intelligence is the wrong track: the computer can have no body.

The audacity to make judgments about aesthetics and about morality, is something that postmodern academia has attempted to drum out of us; those of us who speak in these terms are described as eco-fascists. But I am proud that Sigmund called me his *lille syster*, or little sister. We were closely bonded through very similar experiences, far beyond our Scandinavian roots, in the Himalayas. My western worldview had been turned on its head by many years of experience in Ladakh, or “Little Tibet.” Perhaps I’m projecting, but it seems to me that Sigmund’s holistic rejection of ACID, as well as his clarity about the way forward towards nature, stemmed from his experiences with the Sherpas in Nepal.

Sigmund and I were friends and colleagues for more than three decades. We first met when he gave a talk at the Architectural College in Oslo in the late 1970s. It was so wonderful to hear someone speaking essentially the same language that tears flowed down my cheeks! The life-changing experiences in pre-industrial culture provided us both with a lasting love not just for wild nature but for wild souls—for people who had the privilege to be embedded enough in the living world to be authentic, to be humble, and yet part of the grandeur of this endlessly exciting, pulsating, forever-changing web of life.

Our common perspective included the lessons we learned about work and about the education of children from less industrialized cultures. Here again is Sigmund:

A basic difference between the third and the first world has to do with work. The third world

has meaningful work, work that is a constant interchange with living nature. Thus it has to be a creative process—with human beings inventively meeting challenges to the totality of their bodies, maturing throughout their lives into the manifoldness of Nature. Since Nature’s body is an enlargement of our own body, just separated by “semi-permeable membranes,” this kind of maturing brings deep satisfaction.

In a viable human society, Nature sets the ground rules, while politics human rules—are secondary.

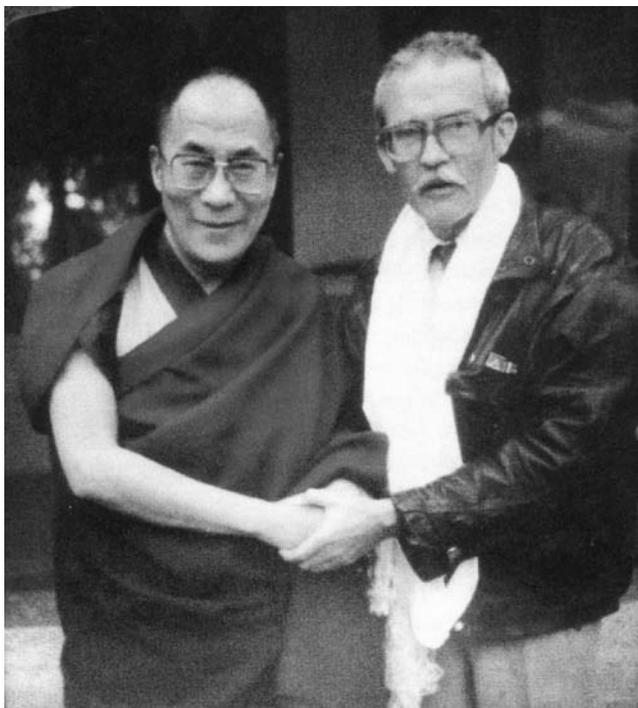
My contention is that we have removed our children from the trusted role as serious contributors to society’s survival—treating them instead as playthings, or investments in a remote future through training programs outside of society and nature. This goes a long way towards explaining why we are left with a society that is sliding unawares into eco-social catastrophe.

Steering away from this path will require people with identity from within their own culture, self-assuredness, inventiveness in the practical sphere, originality of approach and willpower. We have systematically removed the training basis for such individuals who—anchored in their culture—function well only in socially cooperative contexts. What we have instead are masses that are easily molded by commercial mass media.... ACID removes its citizens from a concrete relationship with nature and teaches them to accept being clients of an abstract “dream-world.” Contrasted with that, societies based on meaningful work teach

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their members in a systematic way from early childhood, to understand and feel their manifold dependence on the natural world, and so teaches them to take care not to harm nature.

Sigmund and I also shared the frustration and loneliness of trying to wake the environmental movement up to the threat of the economic centralization that trade treaties, including the EU, were foisting on unsuspecting people. We both saw that “free trade” meant ever more concentration of power in the hands of unaccountable banks and corporations. As members of Ecoropa—a group started in 1976 to promote an ecological Europe—we organized a meeting in Oslo



Sigmund visiting the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala.

PHOTO FROM THE BOOK *ELVETID*

to contribute to the Norwegian “No” to EU campaign. Along with another Ecoropean, Edward Goldsmith, we were also quite alone in our critique of science and technology. For us, there was an inextricable link between a top-down corporate monoculture, reductionist science and mega-technologies. This system was simply incompatible with life in its infinite diversity. Sigmund provided memorable intellectual tools in trying to formulate these ideas. His distinction between complexity and complication beautifully sums up the difference between the richness of the natural world and the stupidity and clumsiness of ACID.

As I write, I am reminded of how much I miss being able to sit and talk with Sigmund. Whether we were discussing architecture, music, food and farming, or civilization versus culture, we saw everything through the same looking glass. Perhaps this was born of the fact that our non-western experience happened to have been in Buddhist ecological communities. The sophistication, intelligence and humor of these people made it impossible to dismiss them as somehow inferior. On the contrary, knowing that these cultures provided a much higher level of individual self-respect, social cohesion and truly sustainable economies than our own way of life could not help but lead to a deep questioning of the underpinnings of western civilization. These cultures, so connected to their particular place on earth, also led us to reflect on the link between cultural and biological diversity, and to conclude that decentralization—or localization—is a prerequisite for human and ecological wellbeing.

With governments and corporations spreading ACID across the globe, Sigmund’s analysis—as well as his abiding faith in Nature and his deep humanity—are more relevant and needed than ever.