

ЏОНАТХАН БЕРИД



8 NOVEMBER 1950 - 11 SEPTEMBER 2010

Jonathan Berndt was one of those unsung people who devoted their lives to the struggle for freedom in South Africa, but whose contributions generally go unrecognized, though appreciated by all those whose lives he touched and helped to change.

Jonathan was an ordinary person whose deep commitment to social justice and understanding made him extraordinary. His life as a whole helps us understand what integrity really can mean and we are here today to voice some elements of the living example he leaves behind, and to celebrate some of that real extra-ordinariness that everyone here experienced in their everyday contacts with Jonathan, whether through friendship, working life, education or even just walking the dogs!

A part of the meaning of integrity is that Jonathan's qualities shone through every aspect of his life, from his passionate devotion to cooking and coffee, the intensity of his commitment to his martial arts, his careful and loving intimacy with friends, his academic work and writing, his artistic work, and the great sculpting work of love that is his family.

In truth, all these different things were just the expression in different forms of one thing: Jonathan's extraordinary integrity, his deep desire to make the world a better place, his capacity for love, his commitment to the deep understanding of the world.

Jonathan was born in Ladybrand, in November 1950, and died at the Vincent Pallotti hospital in Cape Town on September 11th, just a month or so short of his 60th birthday. Stricken with polio at the age of six, Jonathan experienced at first-hand the weight of discrimination, and this, I believe, helped to prepare the ground for that lifelong commitment to social justice that transformed an ordinary life into an extraordinary one. Somehow, he was able to transmute pain and anger into compassion, understanding and a deep radicalism.

Leaving school in Pietermaritzburg in 1970, his headmaster noted how Jonathan could be 'very quiet and reserved, but at times, due to his wide reading, capable of brilliant and original ideas'. I think all of us here experienced the force of that gentle quietness and reserve, the sense of the deep well of intellectual energy, political commitment and passionate intelligence that animated all that he did.

Studying at the University of Natal, after some pretty poor Matric results, Jonathan moved, in the course of three years of study, to fist-class results in his main Fine Arts subjects of Graphics, Painting, Sculpture and History of Art in 1974. He moved from Natal and

went to Cape Town in 1975 to do an MA at Michaelis. A part of this was his proposed Masters' dissertation on Marx and Wittgenstein and the 'art as language debate'. Fired by the 1976 uprising – and the copy of Marx's writings that a janitor at the University of Natal gave him, and which marked him for life – the young firebrand set a theoretically and politically sophisticated case for the necessarily political nature of art against the then dominant UCT notions of 'Art for Arts Sake'.

To its shame, UCT doused this fire: Jonathan was told to leave the university and 'go and join a terrorist organization'.

He did the next best thing, and went off to work at the newly-founded Community Arts Project in Salt River, and became a driving force in the establishment of the Silk-Screen Project that played such a large role in the development of the South African Resistance Poster movement.

Jonathan describes some of the history of this project – and, in a very modest way, entirely characteristic of his natural reserve – in his book *From Weapon to Ornament*, published in 2007, noting the current commercialization of those posters and their history with a dismay that so many other ordinary freedom fighters now feel about the turn in politics from social upliftment to personal gain.

With that book, we touch on just one of the things that made Jonathan such an unusual person: not only the fact of his tremendous creative force, which came through in his own photography, graphic work, and in his three films, but with the very unusual intellectual capacity that sought to theorize and understand the nature of his own work through the labour of prolonged historical and theoretical understanding. Jonathan was a printmaker, a photographer, a film-maker and a graphic designer – in the broad sense, an artist and artisan, but also, unusually, had the intellectual capability and curiosity to seek to understand the history and theory of the practices he was involved in, always with a sense that the political had to be understood historically.

It was this that took him back to academic studies after a decade or so of graphic design work which he doggedly pursued in the NGO sector when he could have earned a fortune in the commercial world. After another of our regular coffee discussions on Marx and Benjamin, I suggested that he might consider taking all this intellectual and academic curiosity back into the academy, and perhaps begin

a doctoral thesis in the Archives and Public Culture project where I was working, and he did begin to do this with conspicuous success, enjoyment and energy, impressing everyone around with his restless probing intelligence, and wealth of knowledge (just as he had impressed his headmaster long ago):

I am sorry to say that after his last and very successful presentation at the Archives and Public Culture research workshop, Jonathan told me he wasn't feeling well, and went home early. I said I'd see him soon to discuss his paper more carefully, and give him a copy of a new CD, a tribute to John Coltrane that I'd copied for him.

It was not to be, and after a week or so in intensive care, Jonathan died, surrounded by his family, on the evening of September 11th, from complications arising from a bout of pneumonia, exacerbated by the ravages of his childhood illness.

In his last period of communicative consciousness, Jonathan described to Jill how he was floating above his body, and when asked what he was thinking about, said he was thinking about Marx, and how he might be able to come up with a new interpretation of the Soviet posters he was studying...

For all his astonishing gentleness, Jonathan was an intellectually and politically tough person, who never gave up on the commitments that made his life a model of integrity. We are here to let him live through us now as we remember him with all our love, respect and affection, as we come together with the centre of his life, his beloved partner in life Jill and his equally extraordinary children, Meridian and Simon.

- John Higgins