

Tyll van der Voort

An Appreciation by Aonghus Gordon

(Edited transcript of the speech given at the presentation of the Lifetime Achievement Award to Tyll van der Voort at the Glasshouse College, Stourbridge during the Biodynamic Conference 2014)



'I have been asked by the Biodynamic Association to do an honour for a very remarkable member of its pioneering spirit. This is Tyll van der Voort. When biography and vocation conjoin in such a way you see that there is a flourishing, but at the same time there are nothing but challenges. I have been asked to do a very short appreciation of Tyll's achievements. One way to look at that is to say, where is your will in what you achieve? Is it your will? Is it a will that is deployed in such a way that it radiates possibilities, health and vibrancy.'

At 28, he was an activist in Germany. He was an artist working in a design company. At that time there was a ferment in Europe. There was an awareness that things could change. He also had a yearning question around how to change the world. That was not going to be through graphics, but he discovered his aesthetics could be deployed through biodynamics and through working with anthropology.

That finally took him through an apprenticeship model of learning to Oaklands Park (Gloucestershire) in 1982 where Joachim Grundmann had just started a remarkable project with the Camphill movement on how you can bring biodynamics into a restorative, transformative experience for life. Now it so happens that Ruskin Mill started in 1982 too. We then discovered in Stroud that there were these boxes of biodynamic vegetables that were being hauled out by the dozen. Remarkably cheap, vibrant vegetables.

A few years later I heard through the grapevine that if anyone wanted to see a highly honed, outstanding market

garden then it was at Oaklands Park. So I trotted along to see what was going on. There I saw this boundless field of energy. Not just Tyll, but like a community of bees working heads down and beautiful vegetables. I was stunned. What I really saw, as a fellow artist, was an aesthetic. It was an aesthetic predominating social production.

Well sooner or later I had a knock on the door from Tyll. He had a request. Would Ruskin Mill join him in a vision that he and Bernard Jarman had been considering in setting up an apprenticeship programme. I said of course. How else can we actually ensure succession in education and social care institutions without an apprenticeship programme. He then launched with his colleagues the Severn Bore Group. That was an affiliation of local Camphill communities, Kolisko Farm and Ruskin Mill. The biodynamic movement put on what is actually now a thriving apprenticeship programme that many of the young people, which we heard during this weekend, are still taking part in. It has in fact grown the biodynamic movement

So in the appreciation of biography we need to look at how your will is deployed. Is it a weekend will? Or is it a cultural shifting will? Tyll's will is a cultural shifting will. After that there was a bit of a rumble in the press. I was reading my Guardian one morning and read how Oaklands Park was defying DEFRA and they had refused to allow a government agency to come in and slaughter the cows (*Ed: This was at the time of the Foot and Mouth epidemic*). I followed this on a national level and here was a resilient community saying no! And they got away with it.

In 2000 Tyll then undertook a master's degree in organisational management. I remember him sending me some really interesting books. These were 'mind changers'



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about how things were working out in new business organisations. Out of that came the initiative with The George (in Newnham, Gloucestershire).

But possibly more remarkably was the sense that things had to change in Camphill. There were conversations that led me to believe that maybe one day Tyll might be working in Ruskin Mill. It was a very slow process. And as these conversations took place then an opportunity arose when Clervaux, a project in collaboration with Ruskin Mill, started up in Darlington. Sybille and Tyll came to that project and what was motivating them above all else was the cultural renewal through aesthetics. Biodynamics was a method, which is an interesting distinction.

With Tyll in the garden and Sybille in the craft room, a remarkable initiative took place, which I think is still in development. It was a young teenage mother's programme. These teenage mothers came from Darlington and they were about to have their 'bambinis' requisitioned by social services because these were at risk. They came over into the garden and the workshop as a collaborative measure between Tyll and Sybille. Within 6 weeks these little babies had been taken off the risk register!

So what was going on. It was will. It was will that had been transformed. Rudolf Steiner describes so beautifully in his pedagogical course, instinct, impulse, desire, motivation, wish and into the love of the deed. So when vocation and biography become love of the deed anything can change. This we saw in that collaboration between the gardener and the crafts workshop at Clervaux with those little children. That project was researched and we now know that those teenage

mothers are now digging gardens with their 'bambinis'.

So at that time something of a total transformation took place and that was because of two things. Tyll joined the trustee board of Ruskin Mill and soon after he discovered that he had a very serious illness. It is not too far to say that he faced death's door. So what does a biodynamic practitioner do if they understand how to use their will. They go into self-transformation. And it's one of the most humbling experiences to see somebody to apply their life's vocation to themselves. So deep internally that the will of the activity of the vegetables you grow yourself and for the community is part of the healing process. So there has been a rebirth and whilst he was undertaking that rebirth in facing a life challenge with death not far behind the door, he undertook a further transformation of High Riggs Nursery and Garden Centre in Sheffield. Within a few months and with such resilience and vision he passed that on to a new vision of biodynamics at Freeman College. Then Peter van Vliet came to take that project forward.

So what we see is a constant effort and will to transform the world and the ability to also transform oneself. You will agree that he is a living example of vibrancy and quality in that respect. So this Lifetime Award is for your work not just in the UK because I also am aware that countless Biodynamic apprentices come from around the world and they see the quality of your work.'

An interview with Tyll will appear in a future issue of Star and Furrow