

In memoriam to Alphonso Lingis

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In his book *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, in the final essay “Community in Death,” Alphonso Lingis recounts how, while in a remote region of South India, he once fell gravely ill. Days passed, yet the sickness did not abate – on the contrary, it only grew more severe. At last, Lingis felt that “the paralysis that had incapacitated my arms was working its way into my chest.” (Lingis, 1994, 158) Tormented by fever, he somehow staggered out of his shelter into the “starless darkness of the heavy monsoon night.” (Lingis, 1994, 158) Summoning the last of his strength, he made his way to the shore, where suddenly someone seized his hand, steadied him, and led him to a fisherman’s hut. Persuading the fisherman to lend his canoe, the stranger placed the ailing man inside, rowed him across the sea to a fishing harbour, put him into a rickshaw, and then onto a bus bound for Madras, where the nearest hospital awaited – and then simply vanished. Without a word, without asking for reward, without even a parting glance. A stranger whom Lingis would never see again. A stranger to whom he could repay the debt only in one way – by remembering, for the rest of his life, “what it means to come to be bound with a bond that can never be broken or forgotten, what it means to become a brother.” (Lingis, 1994, 159) And unexpectedly – yet inevitably – I too will not forget this stranger: through his selfless act, he saved the life of a man I would meet many years later, and who would teach me to end our letters with the words *Cordially* and *Love*.

I first met Alphonso in 2013. Vytautas Magnus University was hosting a phenomenology conference dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the philosopher Algis Mickūnas. I travelled to Kaunas with a few fellow philosophers not only to hear stimulating and meaningful papers on phenomenology, but also to meet in person another philosopher of Lithuanian descent – one whose thought, elegantly entwining a philosophy born from wonder at the world with anthropological discoveries made through travel, I had only recently encountered in Lithuanian translations of his works. From the very first pages, they inspired me – confirming, as the philosopher Donna Haraway has beautifully expressed, that it is indeed possible to think together (Haraway, 2016).

I remember it as if it were today: Alphonso finishes reading – or rather, performing – his paper. The break begins, yet he remains surrounded by people. We seize the moment when he is finally alone, approach him, and begin to talk. I had a hundred questions, yet one dilemma, troubling me since completing my Master’s studies, demanded an answer: should I travel to India, or pursue an academic career by beginning a PhD in film philosophy? His reply was immediate: “Go to India.” And I did. That journey became a milestone in my life – the experience there, although it may sound like a cliché, awakened in me the resolve to write, something I had known I wished to do since early childhood. And here I am, after all these years, writing *In memoriam* to a man who,

indirectly, inspired me to follow the paths of words into the world and taught me that some experiences are remembered for a lifetime, even if they leave no trace on paper. This was precisely what happened during my first visit to Alphonso's home near Baltimore.

At the beginning of 2016, a friend of mine, who had recently begun his doctoral studies at New York University, invited me to visit him in the United States. I had long dreamed of travelling across the country, yet until then my gaze had often drifted eastward, and America had remained unexplored territory. This time, however, everything was different – I knew clearly that it was time to cross the Atlantic. Three weeks, during which I threw myself headlong into New York life, passed in what felt like a single day. Or, well, like two days – because on one of them, entirely unplanned, I spent time with Alphonso in Baltimore.

During one of my first days in New York, after watching a short film about mapping the universe at the Anthology Film Archives founded by Jonas Mekas, I decided, without much reason, to take a chance and write to Alphonso, asking if I could visit him – if he had the time, of course. But apparently, he did not. No reply came, and my time in the U.S. was slipping away. Eventually, caught up in the overwhelming intensity of New York, I was so dazzled by the city's excess that I had no time to think of yesterday or tomorrow; I had to stay balanced on the tightrope of the present – I even forgot about my request.

So I was both surprised and delighted when, just a few days before the end of my visit, I found a short reply from Alphonso in my inbox: "I deeply apologize for the delay in answering. I will be delighted to welcome you here." (Later, Lingis, when I timidly mentioned this – since I had thought my request might have been audacious and that he had simply chosen not to respond – half-jokingly, half-seriously, said that he does not know how to say "no," and I thought it fortunate that so few people, including myself, know this.)

I made my way to Chinatown, caught the cheapest bus to Baltimore, and after three hours, arrived on the outskirts of Baltimore near a shopping mall, where I was soon greeted by a smiling Alphonso. We got into his car and drove into the city, where he first took me to a centre of literary pilgrimage – the Edgar Allan Poe House, where the writer "rested his head and put pen to paper." (Edgar Allan Poe House & Museum, n.d.) Next, we visited his favourite museum, the American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM), which focuses on self-taught, intuitive art practices and often engages with themes of mental health. And finally, we arrived at the most fascinating place of all – his home.

His home was itself a living museum: hundreds of ancient artefacts collected from his travels across the world, each carrying its own story; an aviary filled with rare pigeons, some species on the brink of extinction; and a flourishing garden of trees and flowers where wild deer would wander as if invited. All of this was nurtured and maintained by his own hands. In every way, I felt at home. It was therefore a pity that I could spend only one day there, a day Alphonso fully dedicated to my visit. When night fell, he took me back to the bus station, and I boarded a midnight bus back to New York.

On my way back, I resolved to write down everything I had heard and experienced while spending time with Alphonso. I opened my laptop and began writing from the beginning, continuing until my hands were exhausted – just before we crossed back to the island of Manhattan. I thought that now, having written it down, I would remember everything. But I didn't. Mysteriously, the text – my souvenir from Baltimore – vanished. To my regret, I only discovered its disappearance after returning to Lithuania, when I wanted to revisit my reflections on the trip. Yet the initial pang of remorse quickly transformed into something lighter – I felt that this, precisely, was how everything was meant to happen. What I needed to remember, I would remember. And indeed, I do.

In one section of Alphonso's house, there is a niche with a fireplace, a small table, and a few artifacts – axes, Tibetan monks' skulls once used for collecting offerings, and a Buddha bust from Southeast Asia that Lingis had brought to the U.S. and installed in his home. We sat there, drinking mead that Alphonso had made, talking about everything from philosophy to anthropology. He admitted that he had always been fascinated by anthropologists, because unlike philosophers, they return from their fieldwork with at least one compelling story. I then asked him about the story behind a Buddha bust. Alphonso recounted how he acquired it and described his love for the artist's work – especially the voluptuous lips of the deity – and, to my surprise, confessed that his dream was to die one day sitting there, before the Buddha, gazing into the eyes that transcend light and darkness, time and space. In those words, I heard the murmur of what was to come.

Lingis once wrote that “We know ourselves in our mortality.” (Lingis, 1994, 159) And likewise, to paraphrase him, it is through the mortality of others that we come to know them. In that moment, hearing him speak, I felt such tenderness toward this man, whom I had only recently come to know in person, that I understood I would find the right words when the time came to speak of him again. In losing others, we learn how they continue to live within us, in the faint echoes that shape our days.

References

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