

Arthur Gillette

(- June 2016)

The following obituary is excerpted from a longer memorial written by **Peter Higginson**, a fellow CIE student, longtime UNESCO colleague and lifetime friend of **Arthur Gillette**.



The overarching feeling one has in reflecting on Arthur's career in UNESCO is that he was not so much executing an approved program as he was living an idea. He had so many talents that, in the end, it really made little difference where he was assigned. In everything he touched, wrote or spoke about, he lived the "minds of men" words in the Preamble, words so well known to all of us. His interest in working with youth as an age cohort, which goes back to his early days with Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service or "Coco," was not, it is felt, so much born of a special love of the young per se as because, teacher that he was, he saw young people as UNESCO's chosen ones, those who showed the greatest promise to fashion the socio-political change implicit in the words of the Constitution's Preamble.

Arthur engaged in the "swords into plough shares" challenge first from the perspective of the conflicting east-west ideologies of the Cold War belligerents. By forging environments where engaging in a common task - e.g. building a latrine - would furnish the mute but powerful language needed for east-west cross-cultural communication, he hoped to achieve what clearly eluded the diplomats.

... Safely arrived in Castries (St. Lucia) after sailing a small boat across the Atlantic from France, Arthur was joined by the present writer who'd come down partly for some West Indian hospitality in a glass and partly to persuade him to give up his sea-faring days, go back to school to acquire some formal grounding in the educational sciences, and return to where he was needed: UNESCO. He agreed and, this time with new baby girl Elise in tow, he headed north to join the doctoral program of the University of Massachusetts Center for International Education (CIE).

Two Freire and Illich-filled years at the CIE followed by a doctoral dissertation on Tanzania's national campaign to eradicate illiteracy and Arthur was ready to return to Paris to take up the cudgel in the Education Division of UNESCO.

Moving to Place Fontenoy, however, brought him face to face with a totally different matrix of preoccupations and a new axis of endeavor, this time north-south. Struggling former colonies took little interest in Coco's free-flow of information emphasis, for them no more than a rich country's concern, when they were faced with towering illiteracy rates and poorly trained primary teachers. The seeds were sown then for what followed.

It was, however, during those years that UNDP decided to carry out an extensive evaluation of UNESCO's much touted flagship program, the "world experimental literacy program." Arthur was assigned the delicate task of the evaluation itself based on a series of country studies prepared by former colleague, Seth Spaulding.

One of only two real literacy specialists that ever worked in ED (his published doctoral dissertation was on the Tanzanian literacy campaign), he wrote the substantive part of the UNDP-funded evaluation of the "experimental world literacy programme" that was to have a devastating effect on this one-time flagship Sector programme. He rescued Museum magazine from an untimely death, served as EXBD Secretary, and single-handedly gave the Youth and Sports Division a programmatic profile that endures to this day.

Arthur didn't amble through a UNESCO career: he took it by storm, marking the path he took with his humor, poetry, teaching, singing, photography, prodigious language skills (which included fluent Russian and Mandarin Chinese), and love of French culture and history. After retiring from UNESCO he created a series of entertaining and highly informative Paris tours, the equal of any of the professionally accredited ones.

UNESCO has, with the passing of Arthur, lost more than a former staff member. How many of us think twice about the words of the Preamble to the Constitution "if wars begin..."? How many of us went the extra mile in the defense of our declared mission? How many of us sneered at grades and promotions, at the countless perks, at the size of the office we were assigned? The line between Arthur's work-day output and what he did on his own was always a thin one. UNESCO, for him was less an organization than an idea. He lived it; he became it. Old friend, we salute you.

Some of the many comments we have received from those who knew him are below.



I first met Arthur after he spoke on a panel about needs of youth around the world at the American Cultural Center in Paris in late 1963, when he already had an important post at UNESCO in Youth & Sports. I introduced myself to him. I believe my friendship with FLHIII had something to do with both his and Arthur's joining CIE. When we were at CIE, Arthur told me his goal was to publish an article a month. Yes, WOW!

I am looking at "Certain Conditions," Selected Poems 1955 -- 1995" by Arthur Gillette, inscribed, "For the Grants, La Mouffe, 1 Oct. 2007, Arthur." Abigail and I, my daughter Sylviane and her guy, were spending a week in a rented flat Rue Mouffetard. Arthur showed us hidden early walls of the neighborhood.

The man had extraordinary talents and charm. Couldn't keep up to him. He was always into something new. I recall one exchange as we sipped a coffee at UNESCO:

SG: Arthur, the years have been good to you.

*AG: Steve, I've been good to the years. RIP. **Steve Grant***

*Arthur had a giant mind, a giant passion for life, and a heroic itch for justice. Together with **Lillian Baer**, they made the greatest pun competitors of all time - and gave Ginger and me an historic, almost unforgiveable, evening of laughter. **Bill Smith***

Arthur and I came to the CIE at the same time. He had come from France with his French wife, Nicole, by sail boat. Nicole was quite pregnant and when they landed in the Caribbean, their daughter Elise was born! Liz and I came to Amherst with our 7 month old daughter, Christine—and Arthur, Nicole, and Elise and our family soon became friends. Nicole and Liz

exchanged babysitting—and Elise and Christine became good friends. We have stayed in touch with Nicole over the years and were saddened to learn of her death in Colorado in recent years. We remain in touch with Elise and have enjoyed receiving pictures of her youngsters.

*Like others our admiration for Arthur and his intelligence and many talents was profound. Those were good years we shared. **Ron Bell***

*I was saddened to read of Arthur Gillette's death. He will be missed by the international community and those Center Members that spent time with him. Arthur had a unique adventurous spirit that was contagious and helped to enrich those around him. That special zest for life will be remembered by all that knew him. **George Urch***

*So sad to lose Arthur. I last saw him in Paris a few years ago. We made the rounds to a few of his haunts. He also generously read my book and gave me a valuable set of suggestions. I recall a CIE admissions meeting at which Arthur's application was reviewed. The committee's reaction to his qualifications was, "WOW." A great, generous and fun person who we all will miss. **Michael haviland***

*Arthur was a later generation of Harvard guys. He and Peter Higginson were very worldly fellows, both super fluent in French language and culture. Art made me rather proud of being part of CIE in those Camelot days. A few years later, after he had joined Unesco, Arthur revisited Amherst, while I was there to (I think) defend my thesis. Art gave a terrific talk to the students. Being with Unesco (seen as neutral in those days), Art told us what was really going on in Cuba, where he'd been on a mission. Many positive changes had been made there, quite different from the US line we had been getting. One point -- oddly -- comes back to me: that since Battista, Art had found that Cuba's literacy rate had gone from 37 percent to 93 percent. He was a charming DOER. And this little item which I took away that day seems to have indicated many other important things he would contribute for years afterward. **Hank Holmes***

*Thanks for sending this sad news. Besides Arthur's keen intellect, I always remember his adventurous spirit—which led him to sail a small boat, along with his wife at the time, Nicole, across the Atlantic. **Steve McLaughlin***

*I met Arthur back in 1971 at the CIE and I remember him as an enthusiastic bike rider and strong believer that socialism was the answer to the sad inequities between people and also between countries. A month ago while visiting Amherst and talking with you, David, we mentioned his name fondly. I salute his memory now. **Patricio Barriga***

I am sorry David to learn of the passing of a former comrade from UMass. I didn't get to know Arthur well—he came along after I had finished and left for Houston. But, I heard much about him from those who remained at the Center. The feedback always commended his professionalism, the knowledge and leadership he brought with him and the level of guidance he provided for newcomers. I did not know that he was ill, and sincerely regret his passing. I offer my sincere condolences to his loved ones, friends and extended family of CIE.

Ambassador Cynthia Shepard Perry
