

Man in the Mirror: Personal Portraits in Tribute to Herman, a true forever friend.

By Gyekye Barzini Tanoh

Herman's immensely shocking and untimely passing on 17th September has brought forth a torrent of tributes and reminiscences from far and near. So much has been written and said that those of us who have struggled to belatedly compose ourselves enough to express who Herman was and meant to us, must now wonder whether there's anything original left to add.

Despite their diversity, the countless moving and enlightening recollections and reflections are unanimous about what a bright, lively, positive, generous, witty, warm and wonderful human being Herman was. Even in the depths of sadness it is impossible not to think of Herman with a smile, if not with laugh-out-loud mirth. To his family, to so many of his friends, and amongst the fellowships of partners and collaborators in his field of work and across his range of endeavours, he was also a touchstone, a quality he fully brought to life and with which he thoroughly imbued the projects and people he engaged with.

All these are well-observed experiences and assessments of Herman as a transformational influence on processes and persons. But one aspect of this seems in apparent 'danger' of going unsaid: the feat of self-transformation Herman wrought in his own character and personality.

Herman was one of my closest and dearest friends. In one way or many, we've been a presence in each other's lives for almost forever: from age 5 or 6 when we met in primary school, through adolescence and maturing youth, and the various seasons of adulthood, the early autumn of which we are or were just approaching.

Precocious Pods, Precious Seeds

From the beginning, Herman evinced warmth; lively imagination; fascination for cars and all things mechanical; colourful humour; loud opinions; and, significantly, a quirky perspective he brought to his understandings of how things work, of situations and of people.

This latter trait would mark him out as unconventional. While this added considerably to what made him interested and interesting, there didn't seem to be much room in the educational conventions of the time to recognise, let alone nurture, this trait. Moreover, as he was to discover much later, Herman also had a form of dyslexia. Accordingly, by the prevailing norms of our somewhat monochromatic education, not much would mark him out then, nor well into his teens, as someone distinguished by the keen intelligence so many came to recognise in him later in life.

No child can remain unaffected by this, and Herman was not immune. Yet there always remained ineradicable hints that there was more to him than met the eye. He was already 'a personality', never less than interesting. His magnetic talent for attracting entire armies of friends was already much in evidence. Herman always thrived with and among people. He had a genuine love for people, drawing strength and inspiration from others, and giving back more than his due in such priceless currency, something for which he became legendary in years to come.

Before then, in the early 1980s, two major and difficult developments would confront Herman, which came to constitute points of departure for his personal trajectory. The first was the death

of TT Blankson-Mills, or Tishi, as we all called him. Tishi was Herman's cousin and closest companion by far. They were inseparable, like the biological twins their Mums were. Tishi was part of our tight little Band of Brothers, which included the likes of the late, much-missed, Michael 'Ronnie' Ofori-Atta, Kojo Forjoe and Maxi Prah. The axis between Ridge where Herman's family lived, and the Blankson-Mills residence in Ringway (Kojo also lived nearby), was one of our most beaten tracks in those years. Tishi's tragic passing hit all of us profoundly.

For Herman though, it was life changing. He never stopped talking about this, returning repeatedly throughout all his years to evaluation of the deep, lasting, many-sided impacts on him - and on the Blankson-Mills family as well.

It was not long after this that Herman's parents, both of whom had achieved highest distinction as Public Servants at the national level, began a new international phase of their respective careers, working elsewhere in Africa such as Tanzania, Uganda and, most crucially for Herman's personal experience, in Sierra Leone where he went to stay, away from his armies of friends and the life he had known till then. This was the second point of departure for Herman.

Grafting and Replanting

In one sense then, it is not overly far-fetched to say despair (from profound personal loss), and dislocation (from the place he had grown up in) were part of the backdrop to this new phase of Herman's life. Not the most auspicious beginnings, we might well say. It is a massive testament to the love and support of his parents and family that Herman stayed on an even keel.

Except he did a lot more than 'stay on an even keel'. Because it was from this turning point, rooted in rupture, that Herman began to reinvent himself, finally come into his own, find his own unique place and purpose, and equip himself to make his own mark; becoming the personality loved and admired by so many today. This self-transformation must surely rank as one of the most remarkable and definitive in Herman's life of achievement.

Tishi's passing made Herman more wary of sentimentalism, but simultaneously spurred the multiplicity of attachments he cultivated in place of the one he had leaned on the most. Herman's innate restlessness now looked outward rather than inward, morphing into a striving for meaningful connection and productive purpose.

He did this in new, explorative settings elsewhere in Africa, free of some of the baggage back home in Ghana, among new peers sharing common affinities as youth in Africa, while making the most of the additional stimuli that came from mutual novelty. Along with the exposure to the diverse expatriate international community which, through his parents, he was suddenly now a part of, Herman found a new sense of belonging.

In Freetown, he also worked as mechanic, a hands-on outlet for his mechanical interests and aptitudes, adding another layer to his intent to pursue Engineering at University. As he recounted, just as important was the exposure it afforded him to get to know and form friendships with people of very different socio-economic backgrounds. Never one to pass up practical opportunities, he also used that mechanic's yard as his language school for a crash course in mastering Krio! In effect, Herman had reconstructed and repurposed dislocation into relocation - a relocation into a richer, universalising Pan African panorama.

In Blossom

All this readied him for America and to take his place in the Black Atlantic, the international world of the Black Diaspora. Many from his past in Ghana would have been surprised by his involvement in the Black Liberation milieu on campus: he was President of the Steve Biko Solidarity Committee, an important anti-apartheid network at his university. This was also one of the formative vectors for his emergence as a leader in public spheres, uncovering many previously unsuspected talents, including that of public speaking which he took to like a fish to water.

Alongside this, Herman's capacities for professional proficiency, work ethic, single minded focus, multidimensional creative adaptability, were burnished to high degree in these undergrad and postgrad years. These were finishing touches, sealing polish on his personal transformation, now melded with active conceptions and agendas for the transformation of African realities.

Flowers into Gardens

Herman and I hadn't seen much of each other in those mid-1980s. But when we both found ourselves in London towards the end of that decade, our long-standing connection grew by leaps and bounds, always evolving thereon. In telling ways, the man who came from America was now a very different person. Here was a man with a new quality of self-assurance, a refreshing autonomy and independence. The breadth and depth of his personality and the scope of his interests had grown immeasurably, and he was at ease with being far more open than he had ever been. Points of connection and affinities proliferated without ever effacing individual distinctiveness and difference.

Yet he was also very much our same old steadfast Herman, as heart-warmingly irreverent, irrepressible and iconoclastic as ever, forever joking and teasing each other mercilessly. Little or nothing was off limits, Herman could enjoy 'provocation' just as much as 'instruction'.

He had a new boundless energy, permanently poised to reach out to grasp a new insight or delight or perhaps to welcome someone into the mix with his customary enthusiasm. 'O Chaale! you miss oo, you should have been there, we talked and debated all night', was his typical verdict on outstanding instances of what was for him the highest pleasure of all – communing with people and ideas. Not too far behind, evidently interconnected, was his love of food, of music, and of travel. He was worldly-wise and vital, a cosmopolitan African, almost always on a mission.

While not much given to the sentimental, he was sensitive, capable of sharp insight and ability to anticipate and respond to peoples' sensibilities and needs, revealing himself a very attentive and affectionate person. This was most evident in close family relations. He adored his parents, his siblings and cousins, becoming a confidante, a pillar of support and source of encouragement. He was as fiercely loyal as he was as proud of them.

Herman had a certain modesty and could become a little self-conscious when lavishing praise and extolling the achievements of his family, be it that of his parents, his sisters, Sadia, Nii Tettey or Naa Densuah. I often found his efforts to underplay some of this quite amusing, not least because they were hopelessly unsuccessful. But whenever he was really and truly moved by something or someone, his instinct was to downplay and try to render it in the driest, most matter-of-fact realist rationalist terms he could manage. This was how he talked about Sadia when they began their relationship- an immediate, dead giveaway as far as I was concerned. The young man had, as they say, 'got it bad'. They got on famously, and the affection and respect between them, enormous and palpable, endured ever since.

One day, quite out of the blue, Herman asked me to repeat some critique of the institution of marriage I had apparently made years prior. It seemed a bit odd but I jumped in all the same, two feet first, holding forth on the subject to Herman's non-committal noises which were supposed to pass for responses.

Turns out it was all a set up. Because the very next day, Herman called me up and said, I have been toying with the idea of you as a potential best man. I exclaimed 'best man'? He said yeah, Sadia and I are getting married. After my long congratulations, his voice dropped a decibel or two, and said, sotto voce, 'but given all you said yesterday, abi you accept you've disqualified yourself'? I couldn't stop laughing. It was highly unlikely he had ever given any serious thought to this probability. If you know your people, you also know what they are least able to represent and what roles they are most ill-suited for. I wouldn't even ask my own self to be 'best man'. But typical of Herman, he might have anticipated it was safer to head off that unlikely prospect anyway, and that the best way to do so was to get me to fall on my own sword.

This speaks to another side of his character. Herman would assiduously anticipate scenarios and alternative outcomes, especially in relation to business. Behind much of his disarmingly apparent spontaneity, serious due diligence had been done, the man had put in the work and came very well prepared. He could therefore communicate in ways uniquely attuned to the person or personalities involved – no doubt part of his success in marketing and in winning people to a vision and its execution. This was very much also in keeping with the attention he paid, how much he listened, and tried to understand the character, values and tendencies in people, to better give them their proper due.

Herman respected people. He was a convinced Humanist. But he was not a yes man or a hero-worshipper of anyone or anything. He practiced the creed that most people, himself included, are simultaneously capable and flawed. Evidently, the relative ratios of this admixture are different in individuals, but not necessarily static or permanent in most. People could reconfigure themselves, shifting the dial towards enhancing their proportionate capabilities. Our job is to help each other to do so, enable opportunities for doing so, including, from this orientation, facilitating agency and interconnections between people.

Back in Accra in the mid-90s, Herman excitedly kept telling me about a woman he was really keen for me to meet. She was sharp, funny and, to quote him directly, "a proper, fierce, Irish rebel". Now this may sound very alien and unrelatable to many, perhaps even an unattractive characterisation. But in my world, disinterest in meeting a 'proper Irish rebel' is simply out of the question. And Herman of course knew this very well.

That's how Herman introduced Eilo and me. She was everything he'd said and more, and we hit it off very well indeed. We were driving around town one evening when Herman spontaneously said, lets go visit Eilo. It was my turn to try and downplay my excitement. He suggested he'd simply drop me off there, but I objected with the rationalisation that if things didn't go as well as earlier, his presence would allow us to make a diplomatic retreat, with no loss of face and everyone's dignity intact. He said, 'I hear'. But he had decided just as quickly to 'unhear'. When we got to Eilo's, I went to use the washroom, 'where's Herman' I asked when I resurfaced. He had told Eilo I had said he was only to drop me off. My man had slipped away into the night, leaving me to contend on my own with this 'fierce Irish rebel', - who, I might add, I am still contending with to this very day.

Home for Harvest

By then Herman was established in Ghana. He had co-founded the SoftTRIBE, which was already making its mark as a pioneering software development company in and beyond the country. It was a lively, buzzing laboratory of creativity, a veritable hub of young professional African talent. Although I haven't the tiniest technological or entrepreneurial bone in my being, it was always a joy to drop in over the years, get to know and engage with the likes of David, Tetteh, Francois, Kuku, Joe (who was an old friend and classmate), and many others. This too became a true family.

Herman, at the centre of this, had inaugurated the most prolific period of his life.

Above all, when Sadia joined him here, the family they created and the home they made, was a happy and welcoming place for their relatives, friends and colleagues, a berth for many, refuge for some, a node of nourishment for all. Herman and Sadia discovered new dimensions to each other. He was mightily proud of the relationships Sadia developed with his family and parents, chuffed and intrigued by the lawyers' cabal she formed with her father-in-law, and the friendships she developed with many of Herman's motley crew.

He was prouder still of Sadia's success in building an accomplished career in legal, banking and civic organisations among others. Just as crucial was her own independent social circles, and the formidable friendships she made, the wonderful Preba Greenstreet instantly coming to mind here as an exemplar.

Sadia and Herman's individual independence was as invaluable as it was indispensable to the unstinting mutual support they gave each other, to the bonds and the loving partnership they crafted uniquely and specifically for themselves. Born into and nurtured in this setting, it is gratifying to see the unpretentious dignity and confidence with which Sadia and Herman's children, Nii Tettey and Naa Densuah, have grown up with. They are repaying their proud parents with the vivacious, pleasant, resourceful and strong personalities they have become.

For the Many

In this happy place, Herman was now fully home, able to consolidate and multiply his endeavours, launching additional ventures, initiatives and linkages, uplifting many more along the way.

Mentoring younger African minds and talents became one of his hallmarks, most of all in connection with various concrete agendas, adding up cumulatively to address African challenges. His conviction in the rightness of this mission, accorded to himself the right to distribute responsibilities to any of his peers he expected to be able to contribute.

Once, after fielding an inconveniently early morning enquiry from yet another of the mentees he had 'allocated' to me, I sent a cranky pre-coffee message of protest to him. His reply was along the lines of 'we are all busy, who among us isn't, but you still have to try harder to be more generous with your time'. My immediate reaction, admittedly, was to be taken aback. Chunks of my working life has been spent teaching. I still teach. Even more, is the time spent everyday, as an activist and campaigner, pretty much all the time, with young people. Herman knew this. But his attitude was 'if you are proven in something, it is likely you can give more time to it'.

'Time' was one of Herman's big things. He invested seemingly improbable amounts of time in people, and many invested in him, including those who projected on to him, and through him, their own aspirations to do and to become more and better. As evidence for his convictions grew, so did the magnetism with which he would animate and draw together many acquaintances to

be part of common projects. As many have testified in their tributes, Lubango Heights, the hilltop community outside Accra which he almost single-handedly started, thrives as a living statement of this.

Man in the Mirror

A lot has been said about the qualities that endeared Herman to many. I venture to add that his most special quality of all is that he was a ‘whole’ person. For a great many of us there are dissonances and gaps, sometimes disabling ones, between various aspects of our lives – our ideals and ideas versus the actual content of our practice, our ostensible public positions in contrast to the reality of our private lives, are just two examples. It is a rare thing to attain fulsome and seamless synthesis such that all dimensions flow into and mutually reinforce each other. But this is what Herman seems to have come very close, closer than most, to attaining: an uncommon degree to which the different domains of his life were integrated and attained a unified harmony.

You don’t have to agree with many aspects of Herman or fully share in his views to honestly appreciate and value the merit of this wholesomeness, and this being who got so near to fulfilling his optimum.

The truth, they say, is in the whole, and a true whole is always more than the sum of its parts. Every facet of Herman’s pan African life, that sartorial style, culinary tastes, so much of the music he loved, his life partner and love Sadia, the family they created, his friends, the demographics of his home and workplaces, the ideas he promoted, the products he created, the networks he helped build and was immersed in, his world view - hard-wired into and emitting from practically everything about Herman was rolled into one.

Herman was like that proverbial man in the mirror. You got from him, even in partial experiences, a good version of an interconnected whole. This was his primary governing quality. Our good luck is that he was uninhibited about this. That he could share of himself so freely. It is why he was liked and loved, why he is missed this much.

On the morning of 17th September, the grief at the Chinery-Hesse family home was overwhelming. Sadia, all too understandably, was in a state of bewildered shock, Naa Odarley was practically catatonic, I heard his mum Auntie Mary, greet a top Ghanaian VIP, an octogenarian, who had come to condole, in the most heart-rending voice “your dear friend Herman is gone”! Yet there was dignity and fortitude very much present in all of them, Nii Tettey exemplifying this particularly well. Relatives and close friends gathering there in solemn solidarity and sincere support, were trying and managing to find wee smiles, spontaneously beginning to recall and recount their treasure troves of happy memories of this person all were already missing so much.

Yes, our man is gone. But like the true comet he was, the luminous light Herman Chinery-Hesse shone for, and in so many people will not be dimmed a long, long, long time to come.

You did so well, Dear Friend. Go well, Man in the Mirror.