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Recollections of Gilbert F. White in Colorado

Gilbert White had a major impact on modern geography through his research and writing, as well as his leadership on numerous national and international committees and commissions (Kates and Burton, 1986; Wescoat, 1992; Hinshaw, 2006; Cohen, 2006). He also had a profound influence on the people with whom he directly came in contact. I was fortunate enough to have been a junior faculty member at the University of Colorado during part of Gilbert's tenure there. In this essay, I describe his role as a model and mentor during his Colorado years.

Gilbert White came to the University of Colorado in 1970 as professor of geography and director of the Institute of Behavioral Sciences, a post he held until 1978. The institute had been established in 1957 to promote collaborative and interdisciplinary research in the social and behavioral sciences. As director, White recruited outstanding leaders who contributed to the stature of the social and behavioral sciences at Colorado, including Stuart F. Cook, Richard Jessor, and Kenneth Boulding. In 1975, after a major assessment of research in natural hazards, Gilbert organized the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center (White and Haas, 1975). The center was organized around information sharing. Its mission was to provide publications and fugitive or grey literature to scholars, citizens and policy-makers, and to connect these individuals to one another.

One of the key activities of the center was the annual invitational workshop. Invitees included natural hazards researchers in a wide variety of disciplines, along with federal, state and local emergency officials, disaster mitigation planners and representatives of such non-profit organizations as the American Red Cross. The goal of the workshop was to exchange ideas and perspectives among these client groups. No voice had particular authority, but instead all voices were heard and valued. Through this process, at its best, a consensus could be achieved about how natural hazards research and practice should evolve.

A research agenda for the entire field was set, not by reference to abstruse philosophical precepts, but instead by identifying topics where research would lead to improving the human condition. For example, Gilbert advised Eve Gruntfest's thesis on the 1976 Big Thompson (Colorado) flooding that resulted in highway signage recommending that drivers and passengers 'climb to safety' rather than try to escape flash flooding by racing out of the canyon (Gruntfest et al., 1978). Gilbert also influenced my research. I became a faculty member in Colorado in 1977 having done research on the role of real estate agents as information brokers in the location decision process. Gilbert immediately saw a connection to a law being developed in California to turn earthquake hazard information disclosure over to real estate agents. He encouraged me to consult with individuals in various agencies such as the Red Cross, the national flood insurance program administration, and the California Seismic Safety commission, so that I could assess the potential of studying the impact of this law. By identifying the flaw in turning over disclosure to an industry with an economic interest in non-disclosure, this line of research was able to provide information useful to law-makers. From that point onwards, when developing research proposals, I attempted to collaborate with policy-makers and people who could potentially use the findings to make people safer.

Gilbert was also self-conscious about his personal role in academe, and the importance of developing new generations of leaders to follow him. One of the most memorable lessons he taught me was the idea of 'knowing when to leave the party'. He had observed that people may

come to believe that they are irreplaceable, and that therefore they should never retire or leave particular positions of leadership. Gilbert noted that it was always important to keep track of how long one spends 'at the party', and that it is better to leave too soon than too late. This is a lesson that I hope I will have the courage to live, as he did.

Several pieces written immediately after Gilbert White's death alluded to the influence of his Quaker faith on his research interests and on the way he influenced public policy (Cohen, 2006; Sullivan, 2006; Tierney, 2006). Although the Religious Society of Friends or Quakers tend not to have a defining 'creed', the Quaker testimonies codify some of their central principles (Hetherington, 2007; Quakers, 2007; Winona Friends Meeting, 2007). Four such testimonies are: truth (a consistency between what one professes and how one behaves); community (acceptance of people regardless of gender, race, economic condition); simplicity (avoidance of excessive consumption that allows us to preserve the environment and to make it possible to share resources with others); and peace (the search for reconciliation and forgiveness).

To me, Gilbert embodied these testimonies. He was endlessly generous in every context. I can recall walking along the street in Washington, DC, with him after a dinner at the Cosmos Club. We were approached by a homeless man asking for 'spare change'. My normal response to such a request, particularly after dark, is to pretend it never happened, and speed away. Instead, Gilbert opened his wallet and gave the man several dollars. He repeated this action several more times in the same evening. As I thought about this later, his actions were perfectly consistent with his general philosophy of trying to protect vulnerable people.

Gilbert was generous with his colleagues at Colorado and throughout the world, and set an example for an entire field based on sharing ideas instead of hoarding them. His mode was to share what he was working on, and collaborate on research agendas to bring out the best in all of the team members. For example, when he was advising on The Earth as transformed by human action project (Clark et al., 1990), he took the outline to the geography department at Boulder for advice and comment. This was a very different mode than most of our colleagues who were loath to share their work until it was 'finished' and published.

Gilbert was very generous with his students. He spent a great deal of time talking with students and helping them develop their own voices. He mentored women graduate students when they were a relative rarity in geography. He was direct but gentle in his criticism, and developed the best in all of the students with whom he interacted.

Gilbert's inclusiveness became particularly obvious to me when he asked me to take over the leadership of the Hazard's center in 1983. At the time, I had another administrative position in the university, and believed (very wrongly) that I could also handle administration of the center. What I quickly learned was the importance of Gilbert's frequent and wide-ranging personal contacts with researchers and policy-makers all over the world for the well-being of the center. The number of hand-written notes that Gilbert produced on a daily basis was daunting, and the amount of mental and physical energy that it took to run the center was far in excess of appearances. Gilbert's generosity was extended to me yet again when he graciously accepted my decision, after just a few weeks, that I could not administer the center.

The Quaker faith professes peace, truth, simplicity, and community. Gilbert was a promoter of peace – in the discipline and in the world. He lived his beliefs, in his promotion of peace and environmental conservation. He was direct and simple in his dealings with people, and he fostered a multidisciplinary research community based on mutual respect among researchers,

practitioners and clients. Gilbert made major research contributions that affected public policy. But to me, most of all, he exemplified the highest ideals of mentorship in academe.

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