

**Reflection for the First Charlie Pahlman Memorial Lecture by Margie Law  
Sydney University 11 November 2006**

I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and thank them for their generosity and patience with us.

Can you picture Charlie, in his indigo-blue Thai farmers' shirt, faded *yam* cloth bag slung over his shoulder, jeans a little too short and thongs: there he is in Vientiane having a beer at sunset at a bamboo-floored bar that hovers over the Mekong River; or on a canal in Klong Dan central Thailand sitting in a long-boat powered by a car engine; or eating sticky rice with farmers in Isaan, northeastern Thailand. In each of these scenarios, Charlie was always chatting, listening and wondering how he might assist while ensuring that he didn't destroy the development of ideas and actions at the local level. His capacity for talking sessions was second to none and was made longer the more beer or red wine that appeared.

Then there is Charlie in the water in the region. At one of the half-yearly seminars of the Thai organisation Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (known as TERRA), the river next to the hotel the team were staying in was flowing very fast. If you went in at the hotel you had to hold onto a rope attached to the hotel so you didn't get swept downstream. Of course, Charlie had the great idea to jump in the river 800 metres upstream and enjoy a ride back to the hotel. So he talked a TERRA colleague to join him and they jumped in and floated rapidly in the current. As they neared the hotel they realised their foolery as they passed the hotel mid-stream. Somehow, apparently with Princess Leah of Star Wars fame in their heads ("help me OB1 you are my only remaining hope") they swam against the strong pull of the river and returned to the hotel, wet and tired. The TERRA colleague slumped off for a shower but Charlie excitedly told of the adventure and convinced other TERRA colleagues to do it with him - again and again and again with his never flagging enthusiasm.

\*\*\*\*\*

Charlie lived and worked in Thailand and Laos for 10 years from the mid 80s to the mid 90s. His two daughters were born there. He made many friends through his work with the Canadian volunteer abroad organization CUSO, with Community Aid Abroad (CAA) and with TERRA. While some of this work involved understanding of agricultural systems, which was Charlie's academic qualification, the bulk of Charlie's work in the Mekong region was relationship building and organizational strengthening.

In 1996, Charlie returned to Australia to live in Canberra but he continued to work on Mekong issues. He established a working plan with TERRA and he often returned to the region for intense working "holidays". The only time he stopped was one time he was hospitalized for typhoid fever. Even then, he still seemed

to have more energy than me. When I visited him in hospital he wanted to know what was going on with THE DAM (this is the Nam Theun 2 dam which is currently being built in central Laos).

From his home in Canberra, Charlie organized study tours to the region for Australian friends and for Mekong colleagues to visit Australia; he lobbied the Australian Government and our representatives to the World Bank and Asian Development Bank; he gave talks; wrote articles; attended strategy and planning meetings; and learnt. Charlie was particularly passionate about encouraging Australians to think about the impact of our actions on other people.

On his return to Australia, Charlie also gave of himself to other organizations and issues. CAA, ANTaR (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation), ACTCoss (the ACT Council for Social Services) and the ACT Greens all benefited from Charlie's clarity and enthusiasm and with each of these he helped create and nurture communities. He made connections between local issues in Australia and global issues, especially those relating to the Mekong. He saw connections with companies, government policies, impacts on local communities. He joined the dots and helped many of us understand the connections and hoped that if we understood we too would take action.

Today I'll try to give a picture of why I think Charlie was so effective at being an activist, campaigner, advocate, researcher, organizer, colleague. He was all these things and more, and all these things with great passion, great energy, and great effect. Aren't you glad he was on our side? I apologise for the incompleteness of what follows. But how do you reflect on someone like Charlie in 20 minutes?

\*\*\*\*\*

Back in October 1984, Charlie applied for progression from Phase IV to Phase V in the Bachelor of Applied Science (Agriculture) at Hawkesbury School of Agriculture.

I'm not sure what other students submitted. But I would think it was along the lines of "how rust in wheat can be overcome with organic methods" or perhaps "yields of strawberries under hydroponics".

But, Charlie, what did he submit in his application? "A Statement of Transformation". Isn't that sooo Charlie?

In his statement:

He asked the reader not to agree with him but to try to get a feeling for the whole picture and not to react to certain points.

He explained that the foremost aim in writing it was absolute personal honesty – the expectations of college were only of secondary importance.

Can you see him typing this up?

I'd now like to share with you some of his insights, his learning, that he tried to explain in this document. You may find like I did that this document seems to sum up his outlook on life – activism both here and in the Mekong; personal relationships with friends and with colleagues; and his political values.

Perhaps, like me you will hear his voice when I quote from his paper for as I read his work of transformation it felt as real and as relevant and as honest as Charlie was last time I saw him, 20 years after he wrote this paper.

\*\*\*\*\*

Charlie wrote that by seeing himself and the world around him as it was – not what he thought he should be or what other people thought he should be - he had gained a freedom – no theories to defend, nothing to be frightened of, no assumptions about the future to worry about, no expectations to live up to. This freedom, he wrote, gave him great passion and vitality to inquire, to find out, to learn. *And I quote*, “There is energy to really go into the questions – what is important? What am I on about? What am I doing at Hawkesbury? What am I doing at all? What is going on around me?”

In 1984, Charlie wrote that while he was concerned about the risks of nuclear annihilation, wars and atrocities, poverty, environmental destruction, he was excited to be alive. His excitement was bound up in the knowledge that he had *quote* “great energy and freedom to be part of the solution”.

He wrote that if we see the problem as being separate to us then we will feel helpless and frustrated and will fail to be part of the solution. We can be part of the solution by having a constant awareness of how we act in every moment of our lives.

Charlie felt every moment, each new cup of tea or glass of wine was a new experience to be cherished. And for those of us who shared these moments with him we know that he did cherish each moment – he did see the beauty at each time, he was open to new thoughts.

Charlie was passionate about learning and saw that learning required you to let go of your assumptions and structures. He wrote of learning as being an instrument of change, of coping with uncertainty. He wrote of learning being *quote* “Overlapping and complementing, the waves keep breaking at the shore, and there is an ocean of water behind them – silent and defying analysis. Each

wave is new, unique and different – yet inseparable from every other wave and profoundly dependent on the whole ocean for its existence.”

And so Charlie told his university lecturers in 1984 that he was excited by what he didn't know and that all he could offer if permitted to remain in the course was to face his own limitations, strive to interact with the world without being dominated by self-centered motives, learn from difficult situations, search for real meaning, for purpose and unity.

Charlie had faith that in every situation, however negative it may seem, *quote* “no matter how painful, how hopeless, how unbearable we PERCEIVE it to be, there is always a potential for good and positive growth.”

Charlie concluded that *quote* “perhaps the most important feature of my transformation... [is] to find meaning in living, learning and acting has changed the way I see the world and the way in which I interact with it.”

Finding this meaning meant that we had the Charlie that fought the fights for fisher people and farmers in the Mekong; against coal-fired power plants in southern Thailand; for the rights of Australian Aborigines to land, justice, health. Charlie, once he had the knowledge could not opt out. He couldn't hear a story academically. Hearing made him part of the story, part of the problem and therefore part of the solution.

For those of us here that knew Charlie, we'd all have experienced his passion for being part of the solution. Charlie heard of a problem and organized people to fold newsletters calling people to action, he heard of a problem and wrote to the relevant minister, he heard of a problem and learnt about it and consulted with those affected as to what he could do to assist their struggle. Charlie had a Pharlapian heart that would keep him at his computer at all hours of the night, researching and communicating with people all over the world.

In 1984, Charlie was concerned that the West was exporting its agricultural “knowledge” to the third world to supposedly help with world hunger but that we were also exporting our problems. Rather than technological solutions Charlie thought solutions were more tied to the individual and to political will.

Charlie thought he might work in a third world situation when he finished his ag science course – but was clear that he would be there to learn, not to teach. He was adamant that he would not be desensitized to the problems of the world, that he would feel something, that he would strive to *quote* “feel alive so he could find a way to do it – not a hundred reasons why it cannot be done.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Those of us who have worked with Charlie know that whether he helped by listening, researching, stuffing envelopes, writing to multilateral banks, visiting politicians, giving a shoulder massage or facilitating a meeting, Charlie was passionate, compassionate, fearless, challenging and principled all in one breath. He drove us up the wall - he drove us on to complete the mailout. He gave us a shoulder to cry on - and asked us to carry boxes of coloured hands out to the car. He stretched our thinking when we'd rather go to sleep. He challenged our assumptions and encouraged us to laugh. With his constructive outrage Charlie brought diverse groups of people together to find common ground. And through all of this he exuded humanness and loved everyone around him.

Charlie was not only quick to learn the heart of each issue he came across, he excelled at communicating these issues to a broad range of people including those he strongly disagreed with. While he'd make his opposition clear, he allowed the space for disagreement, to name it, shape it, and see if something could come out of it. But he would never compromise because the issues were not his to decide.

Charlie always looked for solutions. Thinking and talking and empathizing were not enough. He had to seize the issue with a passion and never let it go.

\*\*\*\*\*

Charlie was effective because he saw that there were no limits to what he could do except those he created in his own mind.

Charlie wasn't a philosopher but he did have some moral benchmarks to measure things by. When people talked of development, and this could be development of a hydroelectric dam on the Theun River in Laos or development of a plan for reconciliation in Australia, Charlie would ask, "Development of what and for whom?" As his constant starting point, this question allowed the most complex of issues to seem clear.

Charlie recognized that the people living along the Mekong River and its tributaries have a wealth of knowledge and technical expertise that is in tune with the ebb and flow of the rivers' seasons. Unlike proponents of mainstream development, Charlie recognized that development does not start with a blank sheet, there is something there already and that what is there has value. He was not against change but always fought for the rights of local people and communities to determine their futures.

Charlie was effective because he did not compartmentalize his life. He didn't see things as being environmental or social, they were the same thing. And his work, his friends, his connections with the Mekong, his participation in Australian life were all one for Charlie. Unable to be untangled.

Charlie lived his politics. And his politics sprung from his pain, his passion, and his dreams. He gave the best and encouraged the best.

\*\*\*\*\*

I know that people who met Charlie only briefly were deeply touched by him. Others of us have spent many an hour debating with him. That we all feel so deeply, that we mourn so strongly, that we miss him, hear his voice and deep throaty laugh, can see him towering over us sometimes with his head sometimes with his feet above us is a tribute to the strength of our connection with him.

Wouldn't Charlie love to be here today?

He could have been asked to be chair. But he would be happy to see his mate Patrick there.

He could have been on the panel discussing development in the Mekong. But he'd be happy to see Witoon, Michael and Phil holding the baton. He would have warmly welcomed Marjorie from Ausaid, made her feel welcome, listened keenly to her arguments and story, let them challenge him, change him, then with a new awareness he would put back to her some questions to also challenge her thinking. Then of course, after the public part was over he'd invite everyone on the panel to join him drink a glass or two of red wine. And the talking would continue probably over dinner and into the night.

So, in the spirit of our dear friend Charlie, please sit back, relax, listen, open yourself to the possibility of change, learn, ponder, be challenged, offer up some challenges, learn from the responses and then drink some wine and talk some more.

Let us all have a Charlie moment (well, couple of hours) this afternoon.

### **Acknowledgments**

In preparing for this reflection I read all of the tributes to Charlie on the Memorial web site. I'd like to acknowledge the many ideas, words and feelings I borrowed from these tributes.

I also acknowledge Charlie's paper "A Statement of Transformation", which not only formed a large chunk of this talk but also changed me as I read it.