Michael and I

I am Stephen, Michael’s brother. He was born in Shotley Bridge, Northumberland in October 1941. I was born in Stanmore, Middlesex in November ’42. We were ‘War Babies’. When he was about 18 months old Michael was taken to hospital with severe enteritis. Fearing that he would not survive unless he received more consistent care our parents took him home and our mother nursed him back to health. This didn’t seem to result in any particular bond between them. It seemed to me in the ensuing years, more obviously when Michael was in middle age, that their relationship, though affable, was unsatisfactory for both of them without either being aware of it: long phone calls from Michael when he was troubled or depressed would leave him no further forward and his mother rather bemused. He was 9 when our parents told us they were to separate, and cried. He told me many years ago that this, and everything else in those early years, he had forgotten.

Michael as a boy was skinny, lively - quick both physically and mentally. I think he was difficult to handle, because he was sent away to a boarding school for a while, probably at age about 8. He spent some days in hospital at about that age having his tonsils out. Difficult times for him. We were close in age but very different in character, with few shared interests. He was not interested in sports: as far as I recall he never once played football or cricket with the rest of us in the street or in the park, whereas I did as often as possible. On the other hand he became good at chess, and as an adult learnt how to play the fiendish game of Go. He had that kind of brain. I didn’t. We had very frequent and noisy fights, quite possibly every day. If I was able to get out of the house in time and run, he would chase me, and until I was about 11 he’d catch me. Being bigger, he would win. After a fight I would avoid him, but he would seek me out as if nothing had happened. He needed company. He’d quickly forget what had just been going on and rush on regardless. There was an innocence in this, but I only understood that many years later.

We did some things together: checking off varieties of birds, buses, buildings or stiles in I’Spy books when travelling; rock-pooling for crabs at the sea-side; racing sticks down the stream on our uncle’s farm (we were both inspired by Robert Louis Stevenson’s Where go the Boats: “Dark brown is the river/ Golden is the sand. / It flows along forever, / With trees on either hand/..….Away down the river, / A hundred miles or more,/ Other little children / Shall bring my boats ashore ”). We chased and caught butterflies together in France when we were 11/12. We both liked to run down the fields, and through the trees. Michael in recent years, before Alzheimer’s came, gave me a book/cd with bird song. When I played some of it to him two years ago, after Alzheimer’s had fully claimed him, he could listen for only a few seconds – he had lost even that.

But our lives were very different. In his early teens Michael stopped growing and remained like that until he had hormone treatment when he was about 20, when he grew quickly, to be taller again than me, and the height we all remember. But all through his teens he had to cope with being smaller than me and all his classmates. At school he compensated partly by mischief (I’ve been recently told by an old classmate of his that he liked to stand on his head in the classroom), partly by being very early into Elvis Presley and Little Richard, and partly by ‘running a book’ in school – ie by being a ‘bookie’: taking his friends’ bets on the horses and making some money in that forbidden pursuit. At Keele University, while he was still, and even more obviously, undersized, he smuggled a record player into the Chapel and from behind a pillar played the BBC-banned ‘Leader of the Pack’ while the Sunday service was being broadcast to the nation on the Home Service. I don’t know how much of that disgraceful record was played before Michael was apprehended (as he fled), but his crime was exacerbated by the facts that a) Churchill had died the night before and b) the Vice-Chancellor had just returned from compassionate leave after the death of his wife and sat in the congregation to hear prayers for her soul and sympathy for himself. Michael was thrown out of Keele and although then in his last year he was not allowed to return to take his finals. After a year in Paris he went to Leeds for a two-year degree course.

In his teens, and thereafter, he loved cycling, and cycled to France for the summer holidays to where our French family came from. He learnt the language very fast, because he always needed to communicate. In his late teens he got into motor-bikes, found Spain, and then learnt *that* language very fast. He was well read, loved books, learnt other languages (Japanese for example) – and he delighted in facts, especially obscure facts, which he loved to recount.

We saw little of each other in adulthood, largely because he was not living in England but also because it seemed to me we had little in common. I had come to define the two of us as opposites – and this contained the idea that, while I felt I knew who and what I was, Michael didn’t, and was always floundering: looking for an identity, for something to hang on to, for anchorage. I confess I discounted him in many ways. But in my 50’s I began to see, and to accept, that though we were indeed very different, I was more like him than I’d thought – and even looked and sounded somewhat like him, which I’d always denied! It was mainly I think his pleasure when we did meet that came through to me: his way of greeting me with “Stephen! My brother!” as if it were a very good thing to have me as a brother. This drew me out, and drew me towards him. Then I could see the goodness there: the strength of his loyalties, the generosity of his spirit, his openness to others (and naivety), his kindness and total lack of cynicism. In this way he made me reflect on how one can be; he brought us together and opened up our overlapping lives - all without knowing it: that rare innocence. I am glad that he was my brother. I would now greet him, as I am sad never to have done, with “Michael! My brother!”

This is a much extended version of what I said at Michael’s funeral in Brussels on 20th August 2018. He had died on the 15th, aged 76.