

RECALLING GILBERT WHITE: EXTENDED COMMENTS BY JAMES K.
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This session in honor of Gilbert White is being held at a time when public discourse in the United States seems to be increasingly characterized by confrontation, willingness to base decisions on opinion rather than evidence and reluctance to change entrenched views. It is my hope that by reflecting on Gilbert's life and work we can encourage a more thoughtful and productive approach to public decision-making.

Gilbert proudly identified himself as a geographer and he privileged a decidedly outward looking orientation that sought to engage humans with big problems that face society as a whole – among them, international development; nuclear war; water scarcity; natural hazards; environmental sustainability. The process of decision-making under uncertainty was his central intellectual concern. By combining insights from behavioral science with data from detailed field studies he systematized criteria and constraints that had been largely overlooked by prevailing theorists of risky choice but whose value was readily apparent to practicing environmental managers and professionals.

Much has been written about Gilbert's life and work, including Robert Hinshaw's excellent biography *Living with Nature's Extremes* and a slew of academic papers. To avoid duplication, and in the interests of brevity (a White hallmark), what follows are some of my personal recollections of the man over the 40 years I knew him as his student, colleague, friend and admirer. These are intended to emphasize Gilbert the humane individual, because his distinguished public scholarship gained much of its power from his ability to relate to people in attractive, ethical and empathetic ways.

My first encounter with Gilbert took place, fittingly, against the backdrop of a record-setting blizzard in January 1967 that shut down the city of Chicago. At the time I was looking for an appropriate place to pursue a Ph.D. degree and he was the only other person who had made it into Rosenwald Hall at the University of Chicago that snowbound morning, so we fell into a lengthy conversation. What quickly caught my attention was that Gilbert offered a way of seeing the world that opened up multiple possibilities for action. Coming as I did from Northern Ireland where there were only two sides to every issue – a Protestant one and a Catholic one - it was truly liberating to be introduced to a range of choice in the management of uncertainties that was one of the pillars of Gilbert's thinking. His emphasis on observing real world choices made by ordinary people led Gilbert to promote decision-making schema that accommodate multiple nuanced alternatives rather than over-simplified Olympian "solutions".

For example, during the Fall of 1967 students in Gilbert's Resources Management seminar were taken to Kane County, on the western fringes of Chicago, for discussions with farmers in an area that was then undergoing a shift from dairying to grain growing. After an hour or two's interaction with the farmers, the inadequacies of prevailing economic optimization explanations of agricultural decision-making became clear; many farmers were valuing their discretionary time in ways that the economic models had difficulty accommodating. I vividly remember one case where the shift to grain had much to do with a son's desire to be more closely involved with raising his young children after many years observing how his father's time had been thoroughly monopolized by the tasks of caring for a prize herd of 100 milk cows. In the son's judgment, though crops might not yield the same profits, they also didn't need such investments in labor or such continuing and intensive surveillance.

My second observation is about Gilbert's methods of instruction. Many people have pointed out his preference for a Socratic style that involved posing penetrating questions rather than supplying ready answers, but his teaching was also marked by other tropes. One of these was the rarity with which he quoted intellectual luminaries; this was not through any lack of respect for their work but more because he didn't want his audience to confuse personalities with ideas or to be seduced by dazzling wordplay. However when he did employ quotations it was worth paying very close attention. This was the case when Gilbert recounted the Nobel Prize winning physicist Lord Rutherford's terse report to his research team at the time they were informed their budget had been slashed: "There is no money; we shall have to think". That statement epitomized Gilbert's highest priority. First and foremost comes the hard work of thinking; all other considerations are secondary and none of them should stand in the way of engaging with a problem. Moreover, he was particularly conscious about the risks and responsibilities that attend thinking, especially when linking research with public policy; in a letter sent to me when I was a newly minted professor he described this as "the hazardous business of advising others".

Now let me turn to Gilbert's skills as an enabler. Wherever he went Gilbert specialized in dissolving the social distance between people, whether they were students on field trips or in classroom discussions, fellow internees during World War II, or contending parties to public issues. He did this by encouraging interactions that gave individuals a definite stake in outcomes and involved some form of reciprocity or collaboration. Initially, newly arrived male students at the UC field camp in northern Indiana were invited to share the modest privations of an early morning cold-water shave with Gilbert in front of a mottled old mirror in the drafty tin-roofed hut that served as a bath-room. In later years, if you ate at his home in the upper reaches of Sunshine Canyon you were expected not just to wash the dishes afterwards, but also to do so in a manner that conserved precious water supplies. When he offered me his mountain cabin as a vacation retreat it was with the understanding that while there I would clear the brush from near the building as a responsible act of fire hazard management. You never escaped such obligations even when you were the one providing the service; I remember picking him up one day at Philadelphia airport for a meeting in New Jersey during which - without actually saying as much - he very gently let it be known that my lack of a good map that he could investigate as we drove along, was letting down the side. Similarly, everyone who took part in large or small conferences and workshops under White's aegis was invested in the process. Typically one was asked to make a pithy self-introduction and then take on a task as session convener, chair, panelist, rapporteur, or designated questioner. No one was willingly permitted to avoid those duties. These events were crash courses in getting to know each other; when combined with Gilbert's genius for populating the meetings with stimulating people, the results were frequently revelatory. By the time Gilbert took the floor in the final plenary session to verbalize what Quakers refer to as "the sense of the meeting" the participants generally recognized that they had done more than learn from each other; their own ideas had been sharpened and deepened, the producers of knowledge had become sensitized to the needs of users, and the whole group had moved matters closer to productive ends, even on those occasions when there was not yet unanimity about a precise course of action. You got the sense that this intensely modest man actually knew more than anyone else in the room but that he was optimistic about the capacity of others to be enlightened. There was a remarkable feeling of being taken out of oneself and shown how to be a better human being.

Gilbert always offered a helping hand to those in need of assistance. His work with the American Friends Service Committee during World War II is well known but he was also generous in many lesser ways. Sometimes this might be as simple as loaning his

hotel room to an un-housed colleague who had arrived at a distant conference site after a long and sleepless overnight flight. Or he might assist the development of students by finding money not just to provide them with annual fellowships but also to enrich their learning with short study visits to places and people where they might gain benefits not available at the University of Chicago. Such visits often had unexpected ancillary outcomes, that validated Gilbert's recognition of the important role that serendipity and luck could play in human experience. (As a result of one such week long visit to Louisiana State University I not only came to understand the importance of micro-scale relief features for the human use of floodplains but also gained an unexpected appreciation of the Japanese tea ceremony while seated on the floor of a distinguished natural scientist who coincidentally imparted the value of maintaining a secondary intellectual interest on the back burner, ready to be brought forward later in life.)

Though you would be hard put to detect Gilbert's political opinions from his writings or in his public speeches, it was occasionally possible to glimpse some of his views. On one occasion during the early years of the Carter Presidency, I remarked on the disdain with which many mass media commentators referred to the man from Plains; Gilbert's response was instantaneous and highly favorable to Mr. Carter, whom he regarded as a person motivated by strong positive ethical principles.

Success usually attended Gilbert's endeavors, but there were also some disappointments. During the 1980s, and under the umbrella of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, we both worked toward the creation of an ambitious international initiative for reducing the impact of disasters worldwide. Despite White's support for a draft plan that focused on making better use of existing scientific information, the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (1990-1999) that finally emerged, proceeded in a different direction which emphasized the need for basic scientific research. Though a prominent Member of the Academy with many achievements to his credit, from that point onwards, Gilbert was no longer called upon to formally take a lead in NAS affairs. This was a snub that he attributed to his stance in favor of a more socially responsible science-based program that foregrounded the needs of non-expert information users, an orientation that has since gathered widespread support among scientists and hazard managers alike.

Finally, I want to underline Gilbert's stance towards novelty, innovation and the future. He was very comfortable with the notion that we live in a non-deterministic world, to which humans adapt even as they also change it. For him this was an emergent process and he had few expectations that human institutions needed to be permanent; rather he saw them as having shelf lives with end dates that should be kept under review via periodic assessments and be subject to retirement when they had served their purpose. In other words, he was not mired in fealty to the past. The final words of the last letter that I received from him, when he was already almost 90, might stand as his epitaph as well as a guideline for comporting ourselves in a world that continues to demonstrate enormous capacity for shaking up taken-for-granted knowledge and preconceptions: "(I am) always on the lookout for new perspectives." (August 20, 2000)

The Gilbert White that I knew had many admirable qualities that served to buttress his scientific work. Though he would probably not have codified them himself, for me the ones that stand out might be summarized as follows: Think big; be open to new ideas; take your responsibilities seriously; try to solve problems; be generous; speak concisely and plainly; act morally; treat people with respect; engage them in collaborative action; and help them to show their best sides.