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The readers of this newsletter may know that Stafford Beer (1926–2002) pioneered the application of cybernetics to the problems of organisational management and was the founding practitioner of viable system modelling. The editors of this newsletter have requested that I pen a few recollections of him as a teacher and friend.

I first met Stafford in 1998. He had accepted an invitation to attend a lecture on managerial cybernetics that was to be given at the Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University. Our lecturer was also a guest: Professor Alfredo Moscardini of Sunderland University. At that time Stafford was rather poorly but he lent his full support, from the floor of the lecture theatre, to Alfredo's expansive introduction to the origin of cybernetics and its application to the problems of management. In a style that was to become familiar, Stafford asked everyone present to close their eyes for one minute and to contemplate the complexity of a national economic system. He then requested that we contrast the product of our thoughts with what came to mind at his mentioning of the Treasury model of the UK economy. I still wonder as to whether the many people present fully understood his point.

In the years between 1998 and 2001, Stafford made many visits to Northumbria University to teach in his Socratic mode. This mode of inquiry was based on the questioning method that Socrates practised in Plato's dialogues. In Stafford's version it required participants to study some part of his writings - including his poetry - and to ask him a single question. Stafford's approach was to offer thoughts on each of the questions and then to demonstrate his holistic philosophy by somehow connecting each of the questions together. He was not always very successful in doing this, but that was part of the charm. At that time in his life, success had no more importance than failure, so long as both offered a bit of fun and entertainment.

The Socratic symposia attracted participants from both within and outside the university. Whilst the categories that Stafford used to discuss organisations had little resonance with business school academics, the breadth of his

knowledge and learning made it perfectly feasible to advertise his sessions across all of the faculties of the university. This was in accord with his view that all divisions in the universe of knowledge are arbitrary. Indeed, he would identify such divisions with what he called 'reductionist thinking' .

Conducting those Socratic symposia formed a part of Stafford's formal obligations, as a Visiting Professor, to the university. But he was usually keen to make himself available to people for most of the duration of his visits. On a morning he would enjoy some time to himself to meditate and read the Guardian newspaper, but from the afternoon until the early hours of the following morning he liked convivially to meet people of all ages and all backgrounds, especially if they had an interest in science, politics, philosophy or simply having a laugh over some joke or other. As is well known, Stafford liked to situate himself in a comfy chair, glass in hand, and recount his memories of the pioneers of cybernetics, for instance, Warren McCulloch, Ross Ashby and Gordon Pask. Stafford was anxious that our generation read their works and celebrate their memory, but equally perhaps he could see how the developments unfolding in higher education and on the Internet made this prospect unlikely.

I was always surprised at how little inclined Stafford was toward discussing his own works such as the Viable System Model. "It is all in the books" he used to say. Indeed, he could be quite brutal with people who expected him to compress his work into a few strap lines. Contemporary events were what he liked to make sense of. Looking back, from the distance of a decade, I now realise that he had a keen and prescient sense of what were to become the major problems for Great Britain in the first decade of the twenty-first century: the foreign policy of the Blair government, its relaxed attitude to an unregulated capitalism, and declining standards in public life and institutional management. Yet, at that moment in time, the course of history was only beginning to be shaped by political and managerial decision-making. Stafford did not live to observe the full horror of its outcomes.

Overall, my own memory of Stafford Beer is best

summarised by a tribute paid to him by his friend and colleague, Professor David Weir, shortly after Stafford's death. It read: "As a person and a scholar, he was a great, shaggy inspiration; the sort of person you hope to encounter when you enter academic life and, of course, rarely do" .