Humanity as Method: A Tribute

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I was in the United States in late 2018 when Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne delivered his talk, "A Life After Death: Social Archaeology Beyond The Grave," before a conference on burial archaeology at the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology (PGIAR), University of Kelaniya, but he emailed me attaching a slide of his talk. "Here you are Bro," he wrote, quoting from a song by Pink Floyd, "wish you were here" (personal communication, December 18, 2018).

In the slide he pointed to "an urgent need for a paradigm shift reading the formative period, which entails 'humaniz(ing)' the study of the past through an application of scientific investigations" focused on "understanding social formation, material culture and cognitive values." He specified that this requires "redefining and situating the study of burial archaeology beyond mysticism, romanticism and parochialism…to situate the study of burial culture beyond the 'grave'."

I take that talk and his framing of it as my starting point because it allows me to highlight the profound humanity (humanitarianism, humanism, humaneness) — his *humanizing* of all people, past and present — which underlies Professor Seneviratne's vision.

ANCIENT LANKA

Ancient Lanka: Volume 4 (2025)
 https://doi.org/10.29173/anlk870

My understanding of that vision derives from more than two decades of friendship with my "bro." We addressed each other as *sahōdarayā* (brother), or by first name, at his insistence, as *humility* and *humble* are also etymological cousins of *humanity*. His offhand reference to the classic psychedelic rock band Pink Floyd likewise reveals aspects of his humanistic vision. It is not just that the title of their 1975 hit "Wish You Were Here" succinctly expresses his appreciation of interpersonal meeting; Pink Floyd held a special place in his heart. He shared links to virtuoso performances or quirky references to the band; he regularly alluded to their songs or quoted their lyrics; on at least one occasion, he told me, he used Pink Floyd to break through to a shy American student (personal communication, May 10, 2015). In addition to aesthetics, he admired the band's relentless championing of human rights and freedom; rejection of class, racial and ethnic divides; resistance to commodification and corporate brainwashing. As he commented while sharing an article marking the 77th birthday of activist and founder Roger Waters, "My kind of band and my kind of music!" (personal communication, September 5, 2020). He praised Waters' principled cancellation of a scheduled concert, commenting, "this is why Pink Floyd is my favorite band and consciousness-raising song makers" (Personal communication, December 9, 2018).

Like Waters, Professor Seneviratne continued to practice his art, and remained a *firebrand* into his seventies, using his vast understanding of the past to advocate for a better future. I was lucky to be on the BCC email list through which he regularly shared links to articles, websites and even songs that captured his interest in his voracious online reading; I have saved many of them. These sources reflect his bottomless curiosity about, and compassion for, every imaginable nook and cranny of human experience in the past and present, and his skill at retrieving otherwise obscure sources and stories, all befitting an archaeologist of his caliber. While these emails were often sent without comment, recurrent themes emerge out of their diversity, which together with the comments that he did sometimes provide, collectively detail how his humanity underlay not only his approach to the study and publication of the past, and his inimitable social grace no matter what the gathering, but too his stance as a global citizen: unswerving commitment to human rights and equality, support for the marginalized and oppressed, conserving natural as well as cultural-historical landmarks, anti-war activism, multiculturalism, and speaking truth to power. He called out injustice wherever he saw it, whether in some callous administrator's mistreatment of local staff members or in geopolitical atrocities like the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Concomitantly, he praised those who acted humanely, at whatever level, and especially praised those, like Waters, whose humanitarianism included courageously calling out injustice, through their actions as well as their productions.

I first met Professor Seneviratne in person during the fall of 2001, when I served as faculty director of the Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education (I.S.L.E.) Program, based at Peradeniya University. On his legendary "Northern Tour" he brought my group of American undergraduates to the gravestone cemetery (Galsohonkanatta) near

Pinwewa, whose excavation he had directed in 1997. The day before he had helped them shake off their shock over 9/11 at the *Udamāluwa,* assembling them to attend the evening *pūjā at* Śrī Mahābodhi in Anurādhapura, where he asked them to consider the teeming crowd's hopes and aspirations, grief and relief, reflected in the votive flags hanging everywhere there; as night fell, he led the barefooted group to the Ruvanvälisā̆ya stupa, where off to the side he asked everyone to just sit quietly and be comforted by the cool stone slabs, and by the beauty of the stupa, illumined in a rising new moon. No presentation could better have led them to understand the site's sacrality, and to benefit from it themselves.

On the way to Pinwewa the next day we stopped at the small village where I often stay when I am in Sri Lanka. The big group of American students provoked a predictable spectacle there, but it was Professor Seneviratne himself who created a lasting impression. Despite his stature, he fit right in, meeting and engaging with my village friends as equals, by which they felt greatly honored. He came to know some of them well over the years, and at least one villager's life was forever changed through his kind intervention. That anecdote, like the village visit, digresses from the movement to the Iron Age gravestone cemetery. But it helped to shape Professor Seneviratne's framing of that site. Through the everyday objects recovered in the excavations, he asked us to imagine a society of people as engaged and varied, as thrilled by life and devastated by death, as are we. He detailed the site's micro-geography and ecology, connections with nearby monastic settlements, local industries and longer-range supply-routes, social organization, daily life, and only after laying all that out —regularly referring to the village they had just visited, with which there are real continuities — he asked them to ask themselves why such care was taken to mark those graves, and thereby to realize for themselves the humanity they shared with those long-dead Sri Lankans.

Humanizing the past requires us to approach all sites as the remains of some group or groups of individual human beings, whose human-ness itself justifies learning what we can about their actual lives. Concomitantly, it requires us to understand that archaeological sites are not cordoned-off portals into the past exclusively for archaeologists, but rather are living institutions of the present. They employ real people, and exist in or near established communities of people, all of whom have important stakes in these sites. I was repeatedly struck during subsequent visits with him to the museums he spearheaded, in Anurādhapura, Galle, Sigiriya, Kataragama, and Gampaha, how kindly and humbly he introduced and referred to laborers and staff members there, often by name. He took great pride in the degree to which each involved members of the local community for design, management, and in at least one case, the very objects placed on display. And each museum in its way narrates the past to better the world, substituting scientific facts for mysticism, critical analysis for romanticism, and multiculturalism for parochialism. Through heritage conservation he sought to extend this message in time; leaning into tourism, he sought to extend it in space.

I will conclude this brief tribute where it began, with Professor Seneviratne's email about his "Beyond the Grave" talk at PGIAR. It was an offhand comment accompanying a single slide, a mere sliver even of the talk itself. That talk was but one among hundreds of formal talks, talks were but one part of his academic output, his academic output was but one dimension of his life as an educator, education writ large was but one form of activism he practiced. From that perspective, in and of itself, that email parallels the more or less fragmentary evidence with which archaeologists and historians must always content themselves. In the present case, because it still exists among thousands of additional emails, and a quarter century of memories, it can be unpacked to reveal the larger humanity it encapsulates. That is not always so easy when we try to understand excavated fragments from the ancient past, but the process is the same. If I have succeeded in modeling Professor Seneviratne's method for studying the past by bringing out some of his own humanity, then I hope that these words emulate the practical side of that method too, deploying that fragment to communicate the value of humanity not only as an enabling way to read the past, but also as the only way to meaningfully relate it to, and engage with the present.