Look for the Lift: A Biographical Essay of Gerhart Niemeyer

The bare-bone facts of Gerhart Niemeyer's life have been chronicled:

Born February 15, 1907, in Essen, Germany, Gerhart Niemeyer was educated at Cambridge (1925-1926), Munich (1926-1927) and Kiel (1927-1930), where he received a J.U.D. in 1932. He left Germany in 1933 and joined friend and mentor Hermann Heller in Madrid, Spain. His career as a teacher began as a lecturer at the University of Madrid in 1933-1934, and assistant professor at the Institute for International and Economic Studies in Madrid in 1934-1936. In 1936, he left Madrid for what was to be a brief vacation. A week later the Spanish Civil War erupted, preventing his return to the Institute. He emigrated to the United States in 1937, becoming a citizen in 1943, and began teaching at Princeton (until 1944) and Oglethorpe (1944-1950). He served as visiting professor at Yale (1942, 1946, 1954-1955), Columbia (1952), Vanderbilt (1962-1966), Maximilian University in Munich (1963), Japan National Defense Academy (1980), and as distinguished visiting professor at Hillsdale College (1976-1992). From 1950 to 1953 he served at the State Department on the planning staff in the Office of United Nations Affairs. It was during this time that he began his long association with William F. Buckley, Jr. Then he served as a research analyst with the Council on Foreign Relations in New York (1953-1955) and taught for a year (1958-1959) at the National War College. In 1955 he began his long connection with the University of Notre Dame, becoming emeritus in 1976. He served in 1964 as foreign policy advisor for presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. From 1965 to 1968 he was a member of the Republican National
Committee's Task Force on Foreign Policy, and in 1981 President Reagan appointed him to the Board of Foreign Scholarships, which elected him chairman.


In 1973, he was ordained a deacon in the Episcopal Church, and in 1980, when he was 73, a priest, devoting his work predominantly to hospice care (he was a founder of the Hospice of Saint Joseph County). He was named canon in the Episcopal Church in 1987. In 1993 he became a Roman Catholic.

He married the former Lucie Lenzner in 1931. She died in 1987. They raised five children-Hermann, Lucian, Paul, Lisa, and Christian—and at his death from cancer on June 23, 1997, at his apartment in Greenwich, Connecticut, he was survived, in addition, by eleven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. He was 90.

But the bare-bones facts are skeletal, merely supporting the flesh that is the true man. A skeleton remains after the flesh has melted away, but as Christians we are promised that the flesh will rise again and live. For the present, we who have memory yet will remember the flesh and the man who so affected our lives.

My memory of Gerhart Niemeyer dates from the late 1960s to the end of his life. Others will have different dates and different stories, but all will be essentially true, truer perhaps than the bare-bones facts, because they are of the flesh.

It's a look on his face that I chiefly remember, as of someone trying politely to leave a conversation—and a room—with a mouthful of spoiled porridge. I had asked my first question of Gerhart Niemeyer, "Do you teach Ayn Rand at Notre Dame?" In those halcyon days of 1968, Ayn Rand was the salvation of modern political philosophy for me. (Father, forgive me.) In his decorous, friendly
reply that, no, Ayn Rand wasn't in the curriculum, there was nothing of the supercilious, nothing to indicate that one of the foremost political philosophers of the age was wasting his time speaking to a nitwit.

That question was posed after I heard Gerhart Niemeyer for the first time, at an ISI summer school at Georgetown. After that lecture, I knew I would apply to Notre Dame, though I honestly didn't know what state it was in. My first class at Notre Dame was in his course, "The Concept of Nature and Political Order." I was new to campus and the only residuum left of my Judaism was being late. When I slid in and sat down, the students were discussing Aristotle's *Physics*, and for the life of me, I could understand no more than if it had been in Greek. I realized at that moment that all my previous education had served only one purpose—to get me into that classroom with that man. I would have to start over.

Starting over seems to be a way of life for Niemeyer students. Over the years, many have voiced this notion to me—that his teaching was unique in their lives, forcing a rethinking in many, and for some, like me, simply forcing them to think clearly for the first time in their lives.

I knew at that first class that I was in the presence of the greatest mind I would ever encounter. But it took six more months past that September 1969 day, after I got to know him personally, to meet his saintly wife Lucie, to see them together and hear how each spoke to the other and how they treated each other and all around them—that I knew the greater truth: I was in the presence of the greatest man I would ever know.

Gerhart Niemeyer—student, teacher, author, public servant, warrior, priest—had a special insight into people and peoples. He once framed a discussion, uncharacteristically autobiographical in nature, on the "rootedness" (physical and spiritual) in man's nature with the question asked of "displaced persons" following World War I: "In what language do you count? In what language do you pray?"

For Gerhart Niemeyer, counting was always the 1-and-20, 2-and-20 formula of German, but praying was in English, for he came to Christ in America, and it was in English that he learned to pray.
He loved the liturgy of the Church of England throughout his life, from his conversion becoming a stalwart member of the Society for the Preservation of the Book of Common Prayer, reminding people that beauty in the liturgy is inextricably tied up with goodness and truth, too. Many have been drawn to the church through beauty, and we his students, who can be forgiven for associating him primarily with veritas or (for those fortunate enough to know him well) with bonum, would miss the real man without including a word about pulchrum.

Lucie danced ballet in Germany before they emigrated, and Gerhart came from a family of painters and musicians, played the piano, harpsichord, and recorder, and at an advanced age, took up the viola da gamba. He served as president of the American Recorder Society, and played chamber music with friends, once famously asking for a halt in their playing with, “Stop, stop, I'm lost.”

Beauty for him incorporated a classic sense of proportion that exhibited outwardly an inner strength and balance. At a reception for Eric Voegelin at Chris Manion's log cabin in the early 1970s, the tape playing was a Bach unaccompanied violin piece, and Niemeyer remarked, “See, Chris, it is impossible to smoke pot to such music.”

Once I remember a conversation in which was noted the seeming disparity of Beethoven's music and his behavior. Niemeyer demurred. No, the violence, haughtiness, bluster, and self-adulation were all there in the music. And so it is.

Music helped lead him to the Church and was to play its own small part in his career. Richard Bishirjian tells the story of how his contract with Princeton was not renewed when, in response to a colleague's playing the Internationale on the piano at a faculty party, he sat down and played the Star-Spangled Banner. Princeton has never been the same.

Actually, Princeton, after much delay, did renew his contract. But by that time he had committed himself to moving to Oglethorpe University in Atlanta and helping to construct a new, ambitious curriculum. (As things turned out, perhaps the curriculum was more ambitious than the student body of Oglethorpe could absorb.) But, says Paul Niemeyer, their third son, whatever the drawbacks, the
period Professor Niemeyer spent at Princeton and Oglethorpe was instrumental politically, artistically, and religiously for both Niemeyers. In Germany, the young Niemeyer couple was the contemporary equivalent of jet-setters, but there was a marked transition that had been completed by the late 1940s to reflective, committed, family-oriented Christians.

Both Niemeyers left Germany without religion, and even by the time of the Princeton period, Gerhart remained a socialist and atheist, while Lucie was an agnostic. He had the idea from Cambridge that religion was rather *declasse* for intellectuals. But he had taken a strong public stand against the Nazis all during the 1930s, even to the point of thinking it too dangerous for him to go to his sister Itta's wedding in 1939. Lucie went for him, but cut her trip short when he sent a cryptic telegram in August, speaking of an impending appendectomy (he had already, she knew, had his appendix taken out). She booked passage immediately on the *Bremen* and left for America on the 22nd, arriving on the 28th. It was the last transatlantic passenger ship to leave Germany. Poland was invaded a few days later.

But even getting to Notre Dame was fraught with intrigue. He was invited by the head of the Government and International Relations Department, Father Stanley Parry, C.S.C. Father Parry knew the resistance that the invitation to Niemeyer—an inimitable cold warrior—would muster in the administration. The departmental committee and full department were enthusiastic, but still no offer was forthcoming from under the Golden Dome. So Father Parry gathered over a dozen wholehearted references for Professor Niemeyer and sent them down to Father Hesburgh—one each day for over two weeks. With the last one, Father Parry penned a note to Notre Dame's president, asking whether he would need to get a reference from the Holy Spirit to appoint Gerhart Niemeyer to a faculty position at Notre Dame. He was appointed forthwith, without divine intervention.

For Niemeyer language also was a carrier of beauty, as well as of truth and goodness, and the teacher's job was to use language to build with this "troika," as his students soon learned. He was careful
with both praise and critique, choosing his words thoughtfully and artfully. In so whispering, he taught us to listen.

This careful balance was never so gently accomplished as at his going-away party at Saint James (Episcopal) Cathedral in early 1993. After years of inner (and sometimes outer) turmoil, he decided to leave the Episcopal Church and enter the Roman Catholic Church. The path to Rome is often strewn with crosses, and for Gerhart Niemeyer it meant leaving the church of his conversion, the seat of liturgical beauty, the enormous number of friends he had made there, and perhaps most of all, the priesthood. He bore the cross lightly, and the people of Saint James, in loving honor, gave him a big party. A party for his departure. In his short talk, he expressed his unreserved love for each and every person attending, saying (ominously for some) that no length of absence can change that. But he made it clear that "our very existence as human beings [is] that we refuse to give honor except to our Savior Lord," and ended thus:

I shall miss . . . your charity, your laughter, your singing, your ready cooperation. And I shall never forget you, and the years I spent in your midst. Let me part from you with an old blessing: THE LORD WATCH BETWEEN ME AND THEE WHILE WE ARE ABSENT ONE FROM THE OTHER.

After his leaving the Episcopal Church for Rome, he purposely cut himself off from the companionship of Episcopal friends for a year, so as not to undermine their own attachment to their church and their faith, or to encourage a cult of personality. No man was less eager for disciples than Gerhart Niemeyer.

But how could a man like this fail to have disciples? For those of us fortunate enough to know intimately this formal man who hugged, the hundred-and-one kindnesses and "epiphanies" sweep across the mind's memory:

- Nixon’s ordering the incursion into Cambodia was greeted by campus demonstrations and "teach-ins" that eventuated in the campus being officially closed. Niemeyer’s graduate students came to school anyway and stayed in the library (since classrooms were closed) as a way of showing support for our country. I remember
vividly the excitement when one of our number discovered that the professor had put up an American flag in front of his home. Here was a man who had gone out of his way not to indoctrinate his students making a small gesture for his beloved adopted home. The news of this extraordinary event spread among his students instantly and counteracted the madness that was going on around us.

• After Lucie’s death in 1987 and continuing until his health could afford it no longer, Professor Niemeyer held a memorial birthday party for her each year. The choice of food, the manner of its serving, the small details of the party itself exuded the kind of care that Mrs. Niemeyer habitually lavished on her guests; she seemed to be in the room with us.

• Details in small things were the hallmark of his personality and his relationships: the look of regret on his face when, in his eighties, he had to give up his two-man “Puffer” sailboat, which, until then he had handled completely by himself; taking the time to teach a waitress that one should never bring a teabag to hot water; the pride and happiness he derived from a fountain we built in his back garden (he dubbed the little pond "Fingerhut Lake").

His students came to study with him to learn how to think, not what to think. I remember how he praised Eric Voegelin for his willingness to redo his work, to adjust his theory in the light of more evidence. Voegelin was a genuine empiricist and loved truth more than his own version of the truth. He was, to use a Niemeyer formula, following Robert Musil, interested in real possibilities, not possible realities. Niemeyer students knew to read the primary sources, always. No one I have ever met inspired more people to love the truth than Gerhart Niemeyer, and yet I think for him truth, beauty, and goodness were one.

As an illustration, consider the young Gerhart Niemeyer, having left Germany for Spain, coming back to his native land for a short visit, renting rooms with a local family in a small village, and going to the local tavern, only to be met by all as he entered with a salute and “Heil, Hitler.” He gave the porridge smile and a small wave with his “good morning” response. This had happened for several days
when he noticed the agitation of his landlady, who answered his inquiry about the cause of her anxiety by saying that his failure to salute was the talk of the village. He knew that he would move on, but she would stay to live with these people and their talk. He resolved to cut his vacation short and return to Spain. But before he did, he returned once more to the tavern and responded to their ubiquitous greeting with his own salute and "Heil, Hitler." Then he left Hitler's Germany for good (his next visit would be in 1954). The greater good was served by her safety than by his purity. He once explained to me the basic difference between the Old and New Testaments in terms of the highest character they each sought to cultivate in man, as going from righteousness to love. Nothing better illustrates the difference than Gerhart Niemeyer's self-effacement to an alien ideology for the sake of an old woman whom he would never see again.

The story of Gerhart Niemeyer's conversion involves a "turning around" without a Road to Damascus encounter. The years following his arrival in America saw a gradual softening of the atheist convictions and a gradual opening to new revelations. On his way back from a trip to New Hampshire in 1942 he read Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, and the experience proved central to his life. As Brooks Colburn recalls it, Professor Niemeyer said that he realized he was in the presence of an intellect vastly superior to his own. He finished the work on that bus and later told Colburn, "When I got on that bus, I was an atheist. When I stepped off, I was a Christian."

Yet the experience, judging from his subsequent actions, was more an opening to God (or maybe it is fairer to say a closing of the barriers to God) than a full acceptance. In fine Niemeyer style, he went to Lucie, saying that they needed to look into "this Christianity problem." Lucie, of course, had already been thinking much the same thing. They read through the night, reading the Bible and other works. They there began the search that ended, in the spring of 1943, in her baptism (he had been baptized in Germany) and that of their two oldest children, Hermann and Lucian. So their conversion dated from late 1942 or early 1943. They went from church to church during the two remaining years at Princeton, but it was in
Atlanta that they settled on the Episcopal Church for their Christian home, attracted by the beauty of the liturgy and the music and the solemnity of the service.

His last years were plagued with cancer, and as always, he persevered with grace and good humor, dressing impeccably, speaking with concern and interest. During the Christmas season in 1995, I visited him with my son Benjamin in his Greenwich apartment. He was the perfect host, serving us drinks, asking after family and friends, making a fuss over a small present we had brought. When we left, I could barely sustain my composure in front of my son, saying that the way he looked, he would not last much beyond the New Year. But that same week, he demanded to be taken off radiation, immediately improved, and lived for another year and a half, enough time to go to Germany to visit his sister, and take a last, no-doubt harrowing, drive through the continent.

In 1972, the editor of Notre Dame Magazine invited several faculty members to write their own epitaphs. Professor Niemeyer's cryptic submission read: “Brief span the Gift. Cool bed the dot. Struggle for the lot. Look for the Lift.” The marker on his gravestone at Cedar Grove Cemetery has no epitaph. It marks only the dates of his life and the life of his beloved Lucie, wife and friend forever, who lies beside him.

He always exhorted his students to look at people from within the age they lived, to try to understand them in context. He would ask, “What was the central, formative event in this person's life.” For example, we might take G. W. F. Hegel's need to see Napoleon at the Battle of Jena. He never suspected, I daresay, that for many of his students, the central event in our lives was Gerhart Niemeyer.

Bruce Fingerhut
St. Augustine's Press