



## Message from the NSTF Executive Director

### Tribute to my husband, Lionel Murcott (December 1947 – June 2021)

This month, I am doing something unusual – I am writing a very personal article, a tribute to my dear husband Lionel Murcott, who succumbed to COVID-19 on 23 June 2021. I'm devastated. He was taken suddenly: 12 days of battling the illness, stumbling under its whip and getting up repeatedly, and then, in the end, he slipped away. Our GP says it probably was his heart that gave in. Before those fateful two weeks, he was healthy and active, and had no life-threatening condition. He was an artist, and a good one, for 50 years of his 73-year old life. He painted or drew every single day. Creativity was the breath that gave him life.

In this, the United Nations' [International Year of the Creative Economy for Sustainable Development](#), my tribute is laden with irony. At NSTF we have seldom had such an unusual theme that doesn't have an immediately apparent link to science and technology. I had planned to write about this theme this month, and I now find to my immense surprise that this most personal of events, though uppermost in my mind and heart, finds a thematic link with the International Year and the NSTF theme for the year.

#### About Lionel

Lionel tried hard to be a scientist. He did science at school, and when he left school, he went to work at an AECI laboratory to gain practical experience. At the end of that year he was advised against going into science, as his interest was not serious enough. He kept a novel hidden in a drawer, and read that instead of scientific journal articles. He went to university and studied English literature. It took time, but Lionel eventually realised that he had a deep need to create, to think not only with his mind, but with his hands and his whole physical being. Over the years, he found ways of depicting the invisible, the almost imperceptible characteristics of people, and the interactions between people, in his art. He also wrote reams of poetry – exploring words that conjure up images, and likewise were about people and human experience.

There is currently more recognition of the importance of creativity in science and technology. Innovation is the key word in government policy related to science and technology. It is hoped that innovation will unlock the potential of South Africa to be globally competitive, grow the knowledge economy, benefit from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and to generate business initiatives. So there are high expectations embedded in that single word – innovation.

#### Innovation

But what does it take to be innovative, and how do we create an environment that is conducive to innovation?

It takes independent thought. People cannot innovate if they always follow instructions slavishly.

They cannot be innovative if they are inhibited and censor themselves before they even start. We cannot innovate if we are fearful and dare not take risks. What Lionel has taught me through his example over the years, is that one should develop and push the boundaries – of what you are supposedly ‘allowed’ by conventions, and of what you can currently do, to grow and challenge yourself. To have the guiding star within you, not only held up by others.

Innovation requires lateral thinking, the unfettered search for new perspectives and ideas, the flexibility to deal with risk and uncertainty. In short, it requires creativity. Our ‘new way of life’ under the yoke of the pandemic requires adaptability, agility and creativity. It is the agile that will be the fittest who have a chance to survive mentally, economically and emotionally (having survived or avoided the physical effects of COVID-19). Lionel survived lockdown last year because he continued pursuing his life’s mission, but also because he challenged himself during those months to develop new ways of making art. His art group went ‘online’, using the new medium to connect artists and allowing them to share their work with one another. Agility.

So it is with innovation in science, engineering and technology, and in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects studied at school. A growing number of voices are calling for the arts to be integrated with the STEM subjects at school level, the new acronym being STEAM. It is recognised that if our senses are activated, and our hands are involved, our minds work better.

An environment that is conducive to innovation is one where individuals are free to explore ideas and experiment with them, and develop them into useful processes and products. In a productive team of researchers, I expect that such an environment will be created by the interactions themselves. However, do the managers of research teams and development understand this? Are they able to support such collaborative, essentially creative problem solving? Or do the administrative requirements force productive activities into a mould too soon, discouraging wider exploration before committing to a particular plan?

**Us**



We were blessed with a good relationship, Lionel and I. With his wide interests, including what science has uncovered (/is uncovering), plants and animals, and my love of art, we could share in each other’s worlds. We also shared a passionate love of books, including literature and non-fiction. His art and poetry spoke (still speak) to my heart, and he sometimes benefitted from my analytical approach to things.

***Jansie Niehaus and Lionel Murcott***

## **What about the creative ECONOMY?**

The 'creative economy' is of course a broader concept than creativity. It is the potential of creative activity to generate economic value. Sustainability is given more detailed expression in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include eradicating poverty and growing economies. The concept is therefore not only related to environmental sustainability. The connection between creative economic activities and science and technology, is multi-faceted. The most obvious connection for me, is creative activities in the digital space, which requires some technical knowledge and skills, and is enabled by digital technology, itself an ever-changing and developing creative space.

### **Environmental sustainability**

Nevertheless, environmental sustainability is an important part of the SDGs. What then, are creative activities that relate to environmental sustainability?

Among others, there is a growing trend in the arts to express revulsion at the destruction and abuse of nature, climate change and the mountains of waste generated by economic activity and a consumerist society. Artworks including sculptures and installations are built with waste materials, sometimes quite beautiful works resulting from the process, for example the golden seal statue built with coffee capsules: [Cape Town artist creates statue by recycling used coffee capsules \(thesouthafrican.com\)](http://thesouthafrican.com).

See also [12 Inspiring Works of Art on Plastic Pollution — Plastic Pollution Coalition](#). One of the inspiring works is the Bristol Whales which is a massive sculpture, made of steel, willow and plastic bottles. See the video for the construction challenge, the willow growing and weaving and collaboration with a marine biologist.

### **Returning to my tribute**

Lionel made some collages over the years, from scrap material – whatever was handy, found objects and some scraps that were significant in meaning. Long before we got together, decades ago, he made a collage to honour me when I came out of prison, using the gift wrap in which I had given him his birthday present. We were not even in love then, but he had a strong impulse to build artworks out of recycled objects, giving them meaning in the process.

Lionel was a teacher for about 30 years. He devised art projects with the children that were exciting and collaborative, and included scrap materials. The last one before he retired was an installation and dramatization of Pablo Picasso's famous painting, Guernica. He devised masks and objects based on the figures in the painting, and the children made them, and then enacted the drama. It was, in effect, a protest against war and violence.

Lionel trod lightly on the earth. He grew vegetables and herbs in our garden, was very particular and disciplined about recycling and he mourned the destruction of nature happening on a massive scale. He never indulged in the acquisition of material things for their own sake. His respect for life – including plants and animals – was profound.

I am not suggesting that art should always be at the service of any cause, including that of environmental sustainability. But it is interesting to increasingly see works of art that express awareness of and sensitivity to the urgent need to take care of the natural environment and adapt our ways of life to 'tread lightly'.

I will miss my Lionel dearly, and daily. I am so grateful for the support and encouragement he gave me in challenging times, and the ways in which he enriched my life for the 17 years we were together.

***The opinions expressed above are those of the Executive Director, Ms Jansie Niehaus, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the [Executive Committee](#) or [members](#) of the NSTF.***