I'm speaking today not as someone who was in Neil's inner circle. I wasn't - I was always on the periphery. I wonder if Neil would find it a bit strange to see me standing here - I can imagine him giving me a bemused look. But I think it's a testament to the strength of his personality that even someone as peripheral as me would feel compelled to share something.

I met Neil in high school; he was a grade older and part of a group of creative friends whose impact on the LHS performing arts department was palpable and rendered them all celebrities in my eyes. I got to know Neil better when we took a year long playwriting/directing class with Steve Bogart - a class that I think was pretty formative for both of us. That was Neil's senior year and after that he left for Oberlin and we lost touch.

The story I wanted to share involves the illustrious Fung Wah bus between New York and Boston - Chinatown to Chinatown for $10, in those days.

I think I was still in college at the time, and probably making a seasonal trip back to Lexington - maybe around thanksgiving? I had boarded the bus and planted myself in a window seat at the back. The seat next to me was empty and I found myself, as many of us do in this situation, willing no one to seat in that seat; I really wanted the extra space to myself. I must have been giving off some kind of vibe because amazingly the whole rest of the bus filled up - every single seat - but that one next to me stayed empty. The driver came on board, the doors closed; I sat back and breathed easy thinking I was home free. Then at the last possible second, nearly as the bus was pulling out, the doors opened again and this scrawny kid jumped in. He had on a disintegrating jeans jacket and an equally disintegrating backpack which kept bonking people's heads as he careened down the aisle looking every which way for a seat. I remember thinking, god he looks even more disheveled than me, please let there be
another seat for him, please don't let him find this one. But of course there were no other seats left. It wasn't until he'd sat down that we recognized each other - it was Neil.

We hadn't seen one another in several years - but we talked pretty much the whole 4 hours back. I don't remember what we talked about - I wish I did. At that time I remember still being somewhat intimidated by Neil. We shared some ambitions, writing being one, but he always seemed far more worldly, experienced, and cultured than our single year age difference should have allowed. I felt worried I would bore him. I remember he had with him a hopelessly tattered copy of the New Yorker. He also seemed full of adventure, excelling at many things I struggle with - being unselfconsciously oneself, following a thread, taking things as they come.

When we arrived back in Boston I took Neil up on his offer to come out to dinner with Derek and Suparna in Chinatown - in part probably to impress him with my own spirit of impulsiveness. Again, I don't remember what we talked about, but I remember feeling proud and a bit nervous to be included. I still sort of felt like I was hanging out with celebrities. I'm sure none of them were aware of that, they were too effortlessly cool to even consider that kind of thing.

Neil in particular had a really unaffected honesty - you knew that if he asked you to hang out it was genuine. He didn't have much patience for social convention, he seemed already beyond that even back then. He had about him the uncompromising air of someone who'd seen a lot, processed it all, and arrived at himself earlier than most. I think maybe this stemmed from a permeating self-awareness and extraordinarily keen power of observation; it's evident in his writing, it was evident just talking to him. You could watch him funneling experience into insight. He was sardonic but not jaded, deadpan but emotional. His sense of humor was self-deprecating, but he was aware of his talents and he was pursuing them. I noticed that in the 'About Me' section of Neil's facebook page he'd written only four words: ever tried ever failed - beside
them a smiley emoticon. That's a deceivingly self-effacing comment; it's a Samuel Beckett quotation, and the full line, as I'm sure Neil was aware, goes like this: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again, fail again, fail better." Neil's writing was amazing; vivid, unsentimental, relentlessly thoughtful - and as we heard in Fighting and Otherwise it was only getting better and better. I have no doubt that had he been allowed to he would have transformed even this experience into something funny, terrifyingly articulate, and quietly profound.

At 28 he was surely no where near done. But he wasn't sitting on his hands - he was consuming experiences and perpetually creating, propelled from within and full of ambition. The last time I saw him, a couple years ago, he told me about a screenplay he was working on. Someone else told me he just recently finished a new play. This on top of a full time job, mind you. When you talked to Neil you could always see the wheels turning; he had a restless mind full of ideas, and more impressively he followed through on them.

It's a terrible gift we've been dealt - it's not one Neil would have chosen to give, and it's not one any of us would have chosen to receive. But it seems to me a painful reminder than we don't get to choose. For myself, all I can hope for is to learn from someone like Neil who was making the most of his time here, realizing his potential day by day. That's something to aspire to. I'm proud and privileged to have known him.