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Dan Dick and me

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Daniel E. Dick (photo of painting by Wrona courtesy of Michael Boover)

A Remembrance and a Reflection

Daniel Eggleston Dick, a good old union man of 86 well lived years, died in the early afternoon of July 26 surrounded by his large family and a few close friends in Worcester, Mass. I was blessed to be among those gathered at Dan's bedside when he breathed his last.

I first met Dan in the summer of 1970 -- forty years ago this very summer. I had just graduated from a small Roman Catholic high school seminary in the foothills of the White Mountains in Enfield, N.H. I left there a decided conscientious objector to the Vietnam War and a budding Catholic hippie. Dan was leading an experimental summer class with the Rev. Carl Kline and others at the "Free University" being held at Worcester State College where I was taking up sociological studies in the fall and it was good to study with Dan that summer.

Dan was the reference librarian at the college who amply defied the typecast of the quiet or mousy academic. He was loud and jovial in a room full of books and he wed an appealing wit with the archival wisdom he dispensed in his research assisting role in the library. Dan would bob his interested head in confirmation of your particular scholarly pursuits all the while smoking his trademark pipe. There was no smoking ban then for Dan! By 1970, Dan had already been deeply involved in the civil rights and anti-war movements in Worcester. He had been a visionary leader at the Main Street storefront nexus of movement activities, The Phoenix. There he and wife Marjory Stephenson Dick worked alongside Abbie and Sheila Hoffman, civil rights priests Bernard E. Gilgun and Donald Gonyer and many others who were raising their voices in a concerted effort to put an end to Jim Crow and the Vietnam War. They were the local aspirants to an American cultural and political ideal that would, in a hoped-for cultural renaissance, secure social, economic and environmental justice, gender equality, cooperative social relations and interracial harmony. They would give proper attention to the needs of labor and promote a culture of celebration girded by a lively faith and an ecumenical sensibility. The vision was shining.

When I arrived in Worcester, I was an innocent who yet presented with some sagacious Shaker (our seminary had once been a Shaker village) and hippie instincts as a Roman Catholic. I wore a yellow seersucker jacket with jeans to Dan's workshop and sported short hair as I joined a new circle of spiritual seekers: beautiful,

barefoot or sandaled, long-haired hippies and activists. My rare college education was beginning in earnest and in that circle we spoke of prospects for a new day in America. Teacher Dan was unforgettable, a singular character who, by the way, did wear shoes to class.

Tall of stature, with sandy, wispy hair, Dan bore chiseled features that included an aquiline nose and a sturdy chin. He carried himself with all the dignified demeanor of an ancient Greek philosopher. Dan was a thinker who smoked his pipe with poise and intent which at the time gave him the air of being another Paul Goodman, the celebrated pipe-toting intellectual/poet/architect of the Sixties counterculture. Dan had something Goodman-like about him that made him a similar guide for Worcester's questioning young. He supported our civil disobedience in Washington, D.C. as we brought the air war home to the doorsteps of Richard Nixon's White House in a Quaker-sponsored die-in and then again as some of us began a bold Catholic Worker venture, "The Mustard Seed," in downtown Worcester where we tried to supplant the "works of war" with the "works of mercy," attempting to make of our lives a non-symbolic protest against war and a robust assistance to the lives of the city's poor.

At the time of Dan's passing, wife Marjory spoke tenderly of God's and our care and lovingly caressed Dan. She led the adult children and the grandchildren who had gathered around their beloved father and grandfather into a reverent and attentive circle. An "Our Father" and a "Hail Mary" were said. A beautiful poem/hymn, "Pie Jesu," that included a prayer to the Trinity at its heart, had been composed by Marjory and sung by her to her own piano accompaniment. It had been pre-taped and was ready for us to hear at just this moment. The song was played on a small tape recorder as Dan let go of his earthly existence at this center of gathered intimates. Here the love of loved ones loving Dan and he us as he passed was palpably felt in a spiritually charged and graced environment -- what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called the "Divine Milieu."

Tears rolled down the cheeks of the adults present as well as the children as beautiful musical notes ascended in praise of the Creator and for godspeed as Dan departed his physical body. This traditional expression of Catholic familial piety might seem to carry a bit of irony for those whose only knowledge or image of Dan was that of the fierce local scorer of the failures of Catholics to reform the church. This image of Dan does hold up and relays an essential truth about him. He did not suffer ecclesial inanities (as he saw them) gladly. He especially and rightly took on hierarchs these last decades regarding the gross mishandling of clerical sexual abuse.

Dan also understood better than most men that women blatantly and subtly suffered under the dominative mantle of powerful and manipulative males. Tradition too often served as a cover for the agendas of unkind patriarchal and even misogynist elements in church and society. Compassionate solidarity made him the irrepressible decrier of the second-tier treatment of women and girls in the Catholic Church. Wife Marjory's experience of womanhood in church and society mightily informed Dan's advocacy and powerfully personalized it. It was part and parcel of their Christian marriage to struggle with the issue, yes, even the sin, of sexism. While Dan willingly embraced all of the aforementioned roles with the fiery vehemence of an old-time Hebrew prophet, he was also, if less publicly (and perhaps even purposely in secret), one who went about being and doing good some distance from limelight.

Dan also drew from Catholic wells that were countercultural in the secular world but cultural in the Catholic. Traditionalist opponents would not likely know that Dan credited Integrity magazine, a pre-Vatican II journal of Catholic thought written by Catholic Workers and other lay proponents of Catholic living, with allaying his fears about having so many children. "God would provide" the editors told and Dan and Marjory raised nine children on a lot of faith. He was a friend to the Paulsons of Upton, the Aristotelian and medievalist-influenced stained glass window artisans, whose circular hanging window portraits of the saints at manual labors bespoke a humble and non-triumphalist reading of the Catholic spirit that appealed to him and that he could subscribe to in good conscience.

Dan's spirituality was Franciscan. He prayed in wood lots, worshipped in a wood shop, prayed by sailing the boats he built with his own hands on the waters of revelation and simple trust. Dan was an early advocate of an environmentalist ethos. He was attracted to each and every clean-energy, safe-energy, energy-saving and energy-efficient device and gadget that he could reasonably install in his house and he pursued these enlightened environmental ways long before such efforts became popular. Daniel was a practical idealist who attended with care to his various solar powered systems, his several wood stoves, the raveling and unraveling of his unusual, innovative and home-made thermal curtains. His window insulation hung like drawbridges on the large southern windows of his wooden home which he viewed as his castle. He checked his sophisticated room temperature gauges as if he were a nineteenth century steam boat captain (another Mark Twain?) on the home banks of the equivalent of his own Mississippi River's edge- the high bluff on Iroquois height overlooking west Worcester's Coes Pond.

Dan did much in many groups to advocate for a more just and peaceful future. I was perhaps his most (or close to his most) theologically conservative friend and we differed about some matters of faith and church polity but always with a lot of mutual respect. I was more the French-Canadian and Irish immigrant Catholic who felt and still feels close to the old ways. Dan did, now and again, admit he was an old Yank, somewhat of a crank of a Catholic convert, an Amherst and Yale man. How could he not hone a critical edge with such a high brow pedigree and with also being drawn to the holy antics of his old friend, Abbie Hoffman? There is one particularly funny and telling story that must be told. When I was a young Catholic Worker who was simultaneously on the campus ministry staff at Worcester State College, Dan challenged my rather unyielding fidelity to the local Catholic hierarchy. He had enjoyed a good rapport with Bishop Bernard Flanagan but had found his communications with succeeding bishops going less famously. "I wouldn't bend my knee to those ecclesiastics," he chided me, so I got down on one knee in his direction with the rejoinder, "Yes, Uncle Dan!" He roared and slapped his knee with a knowing glee. "Now that's the Michael we want to see." Dan had a genuine appreciation for no-nonsense truth-telling even when it was directed to his own ironic pontificating on behalf of non-pontification!

There is a kind of rascality that is holy. It's right and real. I pray for Dan's wonderful and gifted family and have been blessed to know firsthand the great integrity that is his to bequeath to his large progeny and indeed to us all. What a treat it was to see Dan's artistry and newspaper articles about his social contributions set out on tables at the funeral home at his heavily attended wake. The latest boat he built, christened "Once in Awhile," was parked outside on a boat trailer where mourners and memorializers stopped by to take a look. The key to the city of Worcester had been given to Dan on the day he died by Mayor Joe O'Brien and was on proud display near the plain and beautiful wooden coffin that his son, John, had crafted for him in the spirit and tradition of his dad's manual work loves and ethic. The bright red mandala of the Holy Spirit, of the image of the Phoenix, designed by liturgical artist John Steczynski, was emblazoned on the casket cover and stunned us with its humble beauty. Days of wonder, reverence and prayer were Dan's parting gift to his many children.

The Mass of the Resurrection celebrated by Bruce Teague and other priest friends, the music, the spoken prayers and eulogies of Dan's children and grandchildren, made for a joyous celebration of Dan's life. Dan would have the children know that crickets, too, sing psalms and give God praise and that the solar electricity meters spin in holy song too. One wonders at such a one who threaded the gift of radical faith with faith in good work. Dan would have us sing an appropriate song of gratitude if still reminding us of how fitting it is to be raising laments in our time and place. There is hope, much hope. I loved and love Dan Dick as a son to a father. I will miss his being here with us on this plane so much.

[Michael Boover lives at Annunciation House in Worcester and teaches Religious Studies at Anna Maria College in Paxton. A full essay on Dan by Michael can be read on the Worcester blog, "pie and coffee [1]."]

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