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Sargent Shriver, a loved and loving man

by Colman McCarthy



Sargent Shriver is seen during the 2009 funeral Mass for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy at the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Boston. (CNS photo/Brian Snyder, Reuters)

One of the minor difficulties of traveling with Sargent Shriver was not knowing if you would ever arrive at your destination. Whether it was walking through airport concourses to reach departure gates or moving along city sidewalks, former Peace Corps volunteers would stop him to tell of their life-changing experiences in one Third World outpost or another.

They thanked him for starting the program in the early 1960s. Occasionally volunteers would recall the time that Shriver showed up in their remote village, whether in the highlands of the Ecuador interior or a river valley in northern Senegal. In his five years as the director of the Peace Corps, he traveled more than 300,000 miles on site visits.

I remember those stop-and-goes because for three years in the mid-1960s I was a traveling companion, speechwriter and cornerman for Sargent Shriver. I learned how deeply loved and loving he was.

There were countless other stoppers: people whose lives were changed because of their times in the anti-poverty programs that Mr. Shriver started in the Lyndon Johnson administration: Legal Services, Head Start, Job Corps, Community Action, VISTA, Upward Bound. Or it was parents of children in Special Olympics, the program that Mr. Shriver and his wife Eunice began in 1968 and which revolutionized and humanized the way we treat the mentally disabled.

Occasionally, too, it was someone from Massachusetts who voted for the McGovern-Shriver ticket in the 1972 presidential campaign -- Massachusetts and the District of Columbia being the only places they won while the rest of America, narcotized, was duped into backing the soon to be disgraced Nixon-Agnew ticket.

I must have seen hundreds of these random moments. Hale and always effulgent, Sarge gave full attention to each greeter. It was a style of honest generosity that came naturally, a pole removed from the rote grip-and-grin fakeries of American politics.

At his death on January 19 in Bethesda, Maryland after several years of Alzheimer's, it's beyond doubt that all those legions with whom Shriver had shared himself at airports, the sidewalks or wherever, were recalling those chance run-ins as encounters with grace.

It was certainly that way for me, as I unspool memories going back to first meeting the person who, outside of my family, would become my closest friend over four decades.

In the summer of 1966, penniless and jobless, I was roaming the country free-lance writing about the civil rights movement: a week in Cicero, Ill., where Martin Luther King, Jr., was trying to integrate housing, another week in Mound Bayou, Miss, an all-black Delta community barely getting by. I sold a story to the *National Catholic Reporter*, a liberal weekly then two years old but on its way to becoming, as it is today, a beacon of conscience-based journalism.

Sarge, an *NCR* subscriber, happened to read it. I had jabbed at one of his programs in Harlem. He tracked me down, not to jab back but to say that he had a staff opening for "a no man because I already have enough yes men." He was just getting up to speed running the newly created Office of Economic Opportunity and needed help with speeches. Come to Washington for an interview.

I thought my chances of hiring on were nil. Months before, I had just finished five years in prison. Well, not exactly prison. It was a Trappist monastery, in Georgia, where strictly cloistered priests and brothers were God's inmates.

Five years with no newspapers, magazines, television or other damnable frivolities, I'd been bricked out of secular society. Why would Shriver hire me?

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For the make-or-break interview, we went to dinner. For four hours, the talk was not about pending OEO legislation, Lyndon Johnson's White House or Republican attacks on the Peace Corps. Instead it was theology and spirituality, the turf on which I been trodding, however unsteadily.

Shriver, amazingly, wanted to talk about Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor, Hans Kung, Pope John XXIII, Leon Bloy, Teilhard de Chardin and others. He told of inviting Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker to speak at Yale during his student days in the late 1930s. A couple of times I couldn't keep up,

as when he riffed for about 20 minutes on the differences between the early, middle and late writings of St. Teresa of Avila. I thought to myself, this man is deep.

At dinner's end, Sarge Shriver hired me -- a flashpoint moment in my life. A spirited public orator, he needed a speechwriter like Stradivarius needed help stringing violins.

At work, I learned that I wasn't the only one with a background in religion. Shriver was hiring so many former nuns, priests and brothers that OEO might well have been the Office of Ecclesiastical Outcasts. Sarge's Catholicism ranged from ordinary pieties -- a rosary always in his pocket -- to mindfulness of the church's teachings on social justice and nonviolence.

It infused his thinking, as when he said in a 1981 speech at a 20th anniversary reunion of Peace Corps volunteers:

The cure is care. Caring for others is the practice of peace. Caring becomes as important as curing. Caring produces the cure, not the reverse. Caring about nuclear war and its victims is the beginning of a cure for our obsession with war. Peace does not come through strength. Quite the opposite. Strength comes through peace. The practices of peace strengthen us for every vicissitude. The task is immense!

I said goodbye to Sarge a few days ago during an afternoon visit at his apartment.

We sat together. He had difficulty speaking, so he communicated by reaching for my hand. He kissed it and held it for half an hour, without a word between us.

None was needed. He was saying that he loved me, the way he told all those people at the airports and byways that they were loveable.

[Colman McCarthy is an *NCR* columnist. A version of this article appeared today in *The Washington Post* .]

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