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A Tribute to Peter M. Cicchino

TRIBUTES

A TRIBUTE TO PETER M. CICCHINO

ANNA J. BROWN*

Because the story of our life
Becomes our life
Because each of us tells
The same story
But tells it differently
And none of us tells it
The same way twice¹

Upon being asked to write a tribute about the life of my friend, Peter M. Cicchino, the poem fragment from Liesel Mueller's, "Why We Tell Stories," came to mind instantly. More specifically, I realized that while many have been asked to write about Peter and the remarkable life he lived, each will "tell it differently" and none will write it "the same way twice." Knowing this, I am able to endure what is a time marked by intense grieving and loss. I am able to endure because I sense deeply that, on some level, Peter is alive and well in the stories that we tell about him.

To say that Peter is alive and well in the stories that we tell about him is not, of course, to deny the crushing blow of his death. It is to say that in the telling of his life, it is almost impossible not to be deeply marked and moved by it. When we are marked and moved in this way, there is the opportunity for each of us to embody the gift of

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1. Liesel Mueller, *Why We Tell Stories?*, in *ALIVE TOGETHER: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS* 150-51 (2000).

his life. When we embody the gift of his life there are both the reality of renewal and the recognition of responsibility. I am renewed each day when I contemplate the gift of Peter's friendship and offer gratitude for it. At the same time, however, I recognize the responsibility of such a gift—to carry forth Peter's work of justice, affirmation and the sharing of all that I have with those who simply do not have. What I intend to do in my tribute to Peter are both to remember his life and to focus upon this question: how does a friend of Peter's carry forth his work in the remaining days of my life?

I. REMEMBERING A LIFE WELL LIVED

Socrates makes his soul move with the natural motion of the common people: thus speaks a peasant; thus speaks a woman . . . His inductions and comparisons are drawn from the most ordinary and best known of men's activities; anyone can understand him. Under so common a form today we would never have discerned the nobility and splendor of his astonishing concepts; we who judge any which are not swollen up by erudition to be base and commonplace and who are never aware of riches except when they are pompously paraded.²

In this passage, Alain de Botton, in *The Consolations of Philosophy*, is citing Michel de Montaigne's description of Socrates and his way of life. Montaigne, in this passage, is going after the false and bloated scholarship that so often passes for "the real thing" in our academies. De Botton introduces this passage of Montaigne's by noting that "writing with simplicity requires courage, for there is a danger that one will be overlooked, dismissed as simpleminded by those with a tenacious belief that impassable prose is the hallmark of intelligence."³ I will venture to say that those of us who read these passages of Montaigne and De Botton will break into a smile of recognition for they recall the Peter we knew and loved.

I happened to be reading this particular section of the book while proctoring the final exam I was giving in my Ancient and Medieval Political Thought class during the fall semester of 2000. When I finished reading it, my first inclination was to call Peter, the one who was brilliant but who had the courage to speak, teach and write with utter simplicity. I suspect that he would have given me a perfectly clear and cogent twenty-minute analysis of the academy's downfall in this regard, even though he would not have had any prior warning of

2. Alain De Botton, *THE CONSOLATIONS OF PHILOSOPHY* 159 (2000).

3. *Id.*

my call! Given that I am no longer able to call Peter, I wrote the following on the margin of the page from which I was reading: "Peter, this is you! Thank you for the gift of your Socratic mind and heart."

I chose this particular passage from the work of de Botton, and ultimately of Montaigne, because it is a precise and succinct depiction of Peter's genius. Further, my brief notation to him in the margin of the page speaks to the same genius. Allow me to flesh this out more adequately. Upon first meeting Peter, like many, I was dazzled by his intelligence. As my friendship with him deepened, what I came to appreciate even more than his intelligence was the magnanimous nature of his character. In short, Peter was one of the most generous and loving persons that I have ever met. Though hard to believe, given the depth of his intelligence, the most pronounced characteristic of Peter was the depth of his heart.

Like Socrates, Peter listened to all people but he listened most attentively to the lowly. Further, though he shared his great gifts with all and for the common good, he devoted himself with particular urgency and steadfast courage to making sure that those who had been struck down by acts of injustice were uplifted and affirmed. It is this quality, coupled with his ever-present humor and deeply resonant laughter, that accounts for a life shot through with a sheer and luminous radiance.

There is one story from my experience of Peter that I will share to illustrate the point I am making. This story concerns the writing and defense of my doctoral dissertation and Peter's assistance with that effort. Though the telling of a personal story runs the risk of excluding those who did not share the same experience, the security that I have in sharing it stems from the consistency of Peter's actions. Quite simply, he was devoted wholeheartedly to affirming and uplifting other people. Therefore, while we each have our own experience of Peter, what binds the stories together is a common recognition of Peter's generosity and selflessness. How fortunate we are, in fact, to have come upon the same experience of Peter in a multitude of different forms.

It is not unusual for someone to offer assistance to another in a time of need; what made Peter's efforts atypical is that he wanted to and was able to offer his assistance to what seemed to be hundreds of people at the same time. That this was Peter's way of life became abundantly clear to me when I went down to Washington to be with him during the final few weeks of his life. During that time, his house was opened to a constant stream of visitors and his answering

machine received the messages of a great many people. What left an indelible mark upon me was that so many had come to offer their gratitude for his assistance to them in the course of their lives. Further, I was struck by the difference of station and position among those who came to see him. His visitors ranged from a college dean to an abandoned child. That Peter's "soul moved with the natural motion of [all] people" was evident in the common appraisal of each of his visitors: each left feeling as though he or she had just said farewell to his or her *best* friend.

My sense is that we flocked to Peter not only because we had great faith in his ability to make things right but more so, perhaps, because when we encountered him, we encountered a deeply loving human being who treated each of us in a dignified and affirming way. When I had finally finished the first draft of my dissertation, it was Peter who read, line by line, this 400-page work, even though he had much of his own work to complete. Though his comments about the dissertation centered mostly upon the philosophical points brought forth in the work, what remained with me was the way he went about dealing with the more mundane tasks of correcting grammar and writing style. When it was obvious to Peter that I was not adept with the grammatical rules governing the use of the comma, he did not use this information to make me feel uneasy or lacking in talent. Instead, he said to me: "You have quite an idiosyncratic use of the comma." This, of course, had us both laughing uproariously which, in turn, enabled me to go back and make the corrections with a light heart. When my writing gave evidence of being stilted in manner, Peter—and here drawing upon his vast knowledge of popular culture—said to me, "You know, you sound like Yoda (of *Star Wars* fame) in this section." Again, it was only after I stopped laughing that I was able to go back and make the necessary corrections!

When it came time for me to defend my dissertation, it was Peter who asked the most difficult question during the period of examination. After my exam was over, I went up to him and asked him why he could not have asked me that question over our daily—and *private*—breakfasts together! Peter looked at me and said, "I asked you that question because I knew that you could answer it and I wanted everyone to see just how bright you are." I was stunned by his response. Here was someone who had more confidence in me than I had in myself, and I have never forgotten that moment. I have often pondered, in the days since his death, what a gift it was to have experienced the loyalty and love that Peter had for me as his friend.

II. HOW DO WE GO FORTH?

Within the Buddhist literature of the Mahayana tradition, there exists *The Platform Sutra* which is the teaching of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng. Hui-neng, in this Sutra, expounds upon the Great Perfection of Wisdom. For the purpose of this tribute to Peter, I will recount the scene of his death:

The Master, having finished his verse, then said to his disciples: "Good-by, all of you. I shall depart from you now. After I am gone, do not weep worldly tears, nor accept condolences, money, and silks from people, nor wear mourning garments. If you did so it would not be in accord with the sacred Dharma, nor would you be true disciples of mine. Be the same as you would if I were here, and sit all together in meditation. . . After I have gone just practice according to the Dharma in the same way that you did on the days that I was with you. Even though I were still to be in this world, if you went against the teachings, there would be no use in my having stayed here."⁴

My point in citing this passage from *The Platform Sutra* is to begin to answer the question that I raised previously in this tribute: how does a friend of Peter's carry forth the work he had begun in his own life? How do we live as though he was still present among us? Though I chuckle at the thought of asking for "money and silks" to help work through Peter's death, I don't think that kind of behavior is what he would want from me! Nor do I think that he would expect that we replicate him exactly in our own lives, as if that were even possible. What is possible, however, is that we reflect upon what he stood for and devoted his life to and then to live, in our own way, those principles and that way of being.

As far as I can tell, the following principles were axiomatic to Peter: justice, nonviolence, service to others, friendship, rightness and truthfulness, charity of heart and honesty both in word and deed. Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Peter was one who believed that the "arc of the universe was bent toward justice," and come what may, he was determined to live forth that promise. At the same time, Peter was not just a "principles man." What I mean to say here is that his uprightness in regard to these principles was woven within a constitution that was permeated by gentleness, kindness, humor, spiritual depth and a deep appreciation of life itself.

In regard to the latter quality, Peter's deep appreciation of life

4. THE PLATFORM SUTRA OF THE SIXTH PATRIARCH (Philip B. Yamplosky trans., Columbia, 1967).

itself, I recall the last New Year's Eve of his life. With the gracious consent of his beloved companion, Jonathan Springer, Peter invited me to spend New Year's Eve weekend of 1999 with them at their home in Washington. Though he was not feeling all that well and though he was entering into the last few months of his life, it was Peter who was the life of the party that evening. When it came time to pop open our sparkling cider, Peter had us gather around and shout, from the top of our lungs, "Happy New Year!" The next day, during a trip to Great Falls Park in Maryland, it was Peter who led the charge in a rock climbing expedition. It was he, of course, who comforted me as I was leaving that weekend. He told me that I must not worry about him for it was his sense that despite enduring a terrible illness, he had never been happier in his life. In fact, he felt that he could not be more grateful for what had been bestowed upon him: a beautiful and devoted companion, the opportunity to teach and engage in the intellectual work he so loved, and the support of his beloved family and network of friends who were so dear to him.

In an essay entitled, "Human Personality," the Jewish mystic, scholar and activist Simone Weil tells us that it is the life of wisdom and compassion that bears the mark of true genius.⁵ A genius in the way that she understands it is one who loves the truth but who is imbued deeply with a sense of humility. It is only when both wisdom and compassion are present that we are able to reach out to those who are afflicted. Further, in *The Need for Roots*, Weil calls for a reconfiguration of how we understand what is typically called "patriotism." She suggests that the virtue of compassion and not national pride must be preeminent in political lives. In writing about compassion on this level, she notes that compassion is a "spiritualization of the sufferings being undergone; it is able to transfigure even the most purely physical sufferings, such as cold and hunger" and that "a patriotism inspired by compassion gives the poorest part of the population a privileged moral position."⁶

My sense of Peter, both in terms of the principles that he acted upon and in his relatedness to others, is that he bore the mark of the genius that Weil describes. In short, his life was the way of compassion. Further, I will suggest that if there were but one of his teachings that he would wish for us to embody it would be for us to bear witness to and work for such compassion in both our private *and our public* lives. We are quite familiar, of course, with the sentiments

5. Simone Weil, *Human Personality*, in THE SIMONE WEIL READER 328-29 (George A. Panichas ed., 1977).

6. Simone Weil, THE NEED FOR ROOTS (Arthur Wills trans., Octagon, 1979).

he expressed in this regard: that “what makes a good and happy life” is, in large part, “struggling to secure conditions for a decent human life for others.” That Peter chose these sentiments to be printed on a card given out at his funeral serves to demonstrate what was fundamental to him.

I am not in a position, of course, to determine how each of us will carry forth the work he began—that will come out in the different stories that each of us tell about him. I am struck, however, by two challenges that now present themselves to me in the wake of Peter’s death. The first challenge is to return the loyalty and love that Peter extended to me and the second challenge is to live my life in a way that bears witness to the fact that his teachings are of great importance. Though the latter of these two challenges is daunting, i.e., to fill Peter’s shoes requires the efforts of not just one person but of a whole community of persons acting in concert, what lightens the load is the foundation of the first challenge. That is to say, the gift of friendship that Peter and I shared.

There has been much ink spilled in writing about the virtue of friendship. There is, however, an essay of recent vintage that bears the mark of particularly fine ink. The essay that I am referring to has been written by Francine du Plessix Gray and, as the subject matter suggests, is entitled “On Friendship.”⁷ What is distinctive about du Plessix Gray’s essay is that it both surveys classic writings on friendship and calls for a retrieval of its virtue in an age that misappropriates any kind of affection for the other through the matrix of a hyper-sexed commercial industry. What brings me to mention her essay at this point in my tribute to Peter is her citation of Aristotle and C.S. Lewis’ thoughts on the virtue of friendship. More specifically, through the insights of du Plessix Gray, Aristotle and Lewis, I realize that I am better able to meet the challenge of adhering to what Peter taught because I was first granted the gift of his friendship.

When du Plessix Gray makes use of Aristotle’s thoughts about friendship, she emphasizes the fact that for him, friendship “is the foundation of the state.”⁸ In short, its regard was held higher than that of the virtue of justice. This kind of regard does not suggest that justice is not a cardinal virtue but rather that the work of justice flows from the hands of a community of friends. While those of us who live in an age wise to the perils of racism, sexism, and classism will certainly expand the boundaries of the ancient’s rather exclusive

7. Francine du Plessix Gray, *On Friendship*, in ADAM & EVE AND THE CITY: SELECTED NONFICTION (1987).

8. *Id.*

notion of right friendship, still the essential point remains: the affection and virtue that we cultivate through personal relatedness issues forth in our public work of justice.

Bringing us to contemporary times, du Plessix Gray gives the following account of C.S. Lewis' thought on friendship: "Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself (since God did not *need* to create). It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that gives value to survival."⁹ I suppose that I have included this sentiment of Lewis' for the plain fact that have been certain days since Peter's death when the idea of going forth without his friendship in my life, not to mention bearing witness to his teachings, seemed to be utterly impossible.

In coming upon what Lewis has to say, however, I find that a measure of consolation is offered. The implied point that Lewis is making in his rather astute use of paradox strikes me as being essentially this: life is nothing other than a gift. Whether or not we are willing to receive that gift graciously and unconditionally—while knowing full well the often bone-crushing conditions of life itself—is what will test the strength of our resolve and the depth of our heart. Is it possible, then, to bear witness to the teachings of Peter despite his absence? Yes, of course it is possible. It is nothing other than an expression of gratitude for the gift of Peter and for that of his friendship.

9. *Id.*