

REFLECTIONS

December 18, 2006

For the past several weeks, I have felt the need to write an essay marking the holidays and the start of the new year. This odd sense of urgency is in marked contrast to the process my writing usually takes. For me, the writing process usually begins with a trickle or torrent of words, sometimes in the form of a "riff," announcing themselves most often in the middle of the night, waking me, or during a swim when I am attempting to empty my mind of interior dialogue. A door opens, a guest enters, remaining until I put words on paper.

So I found myself consciously sorting through themes and a narrative vehicle to deliver them. Generally, I write about acts of compassion, helping others gain an understanding of what the agency does. Sometimes I write about personal freedom or collective and individual responsibility. Occasionally, I confine myself to observations. Somewhere along the way I became convinced that the negative climate and hostile reception to the Agency's plans to help the most disadvantaged members of our society attain self-sufficiency was driving my need to write.

At our November Board meeting, two days before Thanksgiving, "Holly" gave a reading from the SMOC history project he's diligently working on. While he spoke I thought about a lunch we shared several months earlier. During lunch Holly actively attempted to engage me in sharing personal reflections on my motivation, values and experiences connected to "How I did it?" I stonewalled him that afternoon, refusing to share on the level he was looking for.

What follows is what I could have and probably should have shared that day with my friend Holly.

Twenty-six years ago, on this date, I journeyed up the Atlantic seaboard to spend the holidays with my parents, who lived outside Providence, Rhode Island. I was living in a winterized fishing cottage on Hick's Island, a small tidal creek island formed by a tributary of the Chickahominy River approximately 40 miles southeast of Richmond, Virginia. I'd recently left the job I held for the previous 4½ years directing an alternative community mental health center located in the university section of downtown Richmond, and hadn't begun the active process of searching for what I would do next.

I'd been spending my time hanging out with friends in the abandoned nursing home complex that we'd turned into an artist's collective/commune, fantasizing about emigrating to New Zealand and entertaining notions about writing a book.

Traveling with me that day was my friend Dennis, whom I had known since adolescence, when he moved into a foster home located in the neighborhood. Fifteen months ago, on my last trip back home, Dennis had become a significant part of my life. Let me explain how.

A decade earlier, Dennis had returned from Viet Nam with a creased hand from a machete wound, a heroin habit and a major mental illness, all acquired walking point in a rifle platoon in the Central Highlands. He had done fairly well over the years, but when I returned that summer, he was in tough shape. A dispute with a landlord had convinced Dennis that the world had turned on him once again. He had converted his garden apartment into a bunker, was smoking a prodigious amount of dope, and was hunkered down waiting for the inevitable attack from the landlord and his phantom army of jackbooted accomplices. I convinced Dennis that a more prudent path would be to return to Virginia with me while things quieted down. For the past 15 months, he had been working as a job foreman in the agency's work experience program. He was doing well and, even though I had left the agency, he was still there and he had succeeded in placing, at least for the time being, many of his demons in one of the locked rooms of his mind.

When we arrived in Rhode Island late that afternoon, my mom informed me that my dad was in the hospital undergoing his latest and, what turned out to be his last, round of chemotherapy. So Dennis and I headed over to Rhode Island Hospital to pay him a visit. My folks never talked much about my dad's illness, so I just assumed that this was simply the latest chapter in a saga that had started twelve years before, when the cancer first attacked his larynx, then several years later morphed into his face, requiring extensive plastic surgery, and finally had migrated to his lungs.

The father I found lying in bed attached to IV's was different than the one I pictured in my mind's eye. His ongoing battle had weakened and physically diminished him. He welcomed Dennis and me from his bed and with good humor engaged us in conversation, the focus being on us - what we were doing, how we were doing and how life was for us. The visit was a short one. He told us he needed some rest and would see us when they released him in the next day or so. Dad did get released from the hospital the following day and I was able to spend some time with him.

He died three months later.

As Dennis and I sat in the hospital room with my father that pre-holiday early evening, part of me recognized that my life was about to change. At that moment, on some fundamental level I realized that the life I was living needed to change. That moment marked the start of a process where the decisions I made led me to the place I am at today. Frankly, despite the current stress, turmoil and challenges, it is a "place" I am thankful for being at every single day.

My father was a highly educated, intelligent and down-to-earth guy who got along with everybody and believed in a "live and let live" philosophy. There were only two important elements in his life: his family and his work. His values were clear to the point where they never needed to be directly communicated. He believed in playing with the cards you've been dealt and dealing with adversity head-on, with humor and grace. He was an outstanding athlete who never sought to live vicariously through me or my brothers' athletic endeavors. He fought for his country in Europe as part of the 82nd Airborne but never insisted on "chest puffing" patriotism or displays of fake bravado. I never saw him feel sorry for himself or wallow in self-pity. He always faced the next difficulty or battle head-on regardless of the odds, and kept fighting until his body could fight no more. Even though his body weakened, his spirit never did. I would like to believe that the majority of the decisions I have made in my personal and professional life are based on the values and lessons that I learned from he and my mom.

On that day twenty-six years ago that I visited my father in the hospital, he was exactly the same age that I am today.

James T. Cuddy
December 18, 2006

- Dennis settled in Virginia and married. He and his wife live on a small farm outside of Charlottesville. The years have been mixed for my friend. He and his wife live on a 100% service connected disability from the VA.
- My mom, now 84, lives independently in the same house Dennis and I arrived at, that long ago afternoon.
- The Book, about my experiences trying to stop emotional, physical and sexual child abuse at a public institution, consists of 30-35 unedited chapters. Unfinished and unattended to.