

THANKSGIVING DINNER, 1976

For Edye

Cooking smells embraced me as I unlocked the front door to 1422 Floyd Avenue, Richmond, Virginia, and entered into the environment of The Daily Planet. It was about noon as I made my way through the narrow hallway into the middle room and then back into the kitchen. The little guy was standing against the table, whistling as he cut up what looked to me like a really big turnip. He glanced at me, smiled, whistled and then chirped a "Hi, Jim." Food was everywhere, pots were boiling, crates of vegetables were on the floor. The kitchen was a small space, and Henry had it bursting with food.

So, this was The Daily Planet, an alternative community mental health center, meaning that our funding solely consisted of an outreach grant provided by the state's Department of Mental Health, to work with folks who could not or would not avail themselves of the more traditional mental health system. We were housed in the midst of a block of traditional row houses on one of the boundary street of the "Fan" section, adjacent to Virginia Commonwealth University.

Four months earlier, I had been lured there by my mentor, a professor at the graduate school, who convinced me to return to Richmond and become The Daily Planet's first Executive Director. Four months ago, it had been a pretty quiet place. That wasn't true any longer, and a lot of it was due to the arrival of Henry 77, the guy who was so busy preparing the meal that we would serve later that Thanksgiving Day.

About two months into my gig there, Henry chanced by. I was sitting on the porch in the late afternoon, and this little guy with long, black and gray hair and a big beard, wearing a raincoat, carrying several bags, on a hot summer day, came wandering down the Floyd Avenue. In response to my "Hey man, how are you today?", smiled, reached in and flipped me a bag of potato chips. "Thanks," was my reply, as he kept going.

Right after that chance encounter, small parcels of food began showing up on the doorstep. In 1976, we didn't open the place until 3:00 p.m. and kept it open till 11:00. Part of it being an alternative, you know.

After about a week or so of these little presents, and after Marshall attached a note to the food, saying, "We're not sure where it really comes from, so we think it's OK, but take it at your own risk," the little guy introduced himself to us by going upstairs into one of the offices and typing out a message on a typewriter. It turns out he called himself Henry 77. He was on a voice fast. He was on a money fast. He didn't talk or touch money. He lived off the discards from an affluent society and he himself had never been sick from any of these discards. The only time he had been sick since he adopted this lifestyle was when he ate stuff out of a friend's refrigerator, bought from a grocery store.

The message and his pantomiming conveyed that he would like to become our caretaker there at The Daily Planet. In exchange for a place to live, he would provide a nightly free meal to the folks who happened by. Marshall and I looked at each other, smiled and said, "Hey, why not? Sounds like a great deal." So Henry took up residence in the basement. 1422 Floyd Avenue was a typical row house, the downstairs consisting of a long living room, middle room, kitchen, and four various sized rooms on the second floor. The downstairs was supposed to be a community living room. The upstairs was supposed to be for counseling and groups. That's how the deal and the agency was designed. I say "agency," but that's a slight exaggeration. Two staff. A month or two before meeting Henry I'd chanced into Marshall, remembered her from a graduate class I spoke at facilitated by my mentor. She had just finished up her MSW, and was looking for a job. She became The Daily Planet's therapist. That chance meeting was fortuitous. Marshall was such a warm and generous spirit, in addition to being a right-on therapist.

So, we also found out that Henry wasn't a solo act. When he arrived and started setting up in the basement, he brought along his companion, a young art student at VCU. Now, remember, I just met the dude, and there he was, moving in, cooking a meal. At first there were 8, then there were 10, then there were 15 people, then there were 25 people showing up and sitting around a couple of long

folding tables, sharing food. Later that number would continue to grow. But, by this first Thanksgiving, he was probably feeding 25 people a night, and afterwards, wandering through the living room, giving folks cookies and other baked treats, whatever he had chanced upon earlier that day.

Who came? Who wandered through the doors of The Daily Planet? Remember, in 1976 there weren't many homeless folks around. This was a time before all the SRO rooms got obliterated by urban renewal and gentrification. In 1976, you could still get a cheap room. 1976 was a time when you could still sell your blood and pay for your room. In, 1976 the "Fan" was a place where, if you were grappling with demons, or just plain lost, you could pass unnoticeable amidst all the college kids and hangers-on. If Richmond, Virginia had anything that smacked a little bit of Bohemia, it was only in the "Fan."

Today, all these folks would be living in shelters, or maybe now that the system has changed a bit, they would have their own place and we'd call it "Housing First." Back then, many of them lived in little rooms in the dingy boarding houses that were scattered on the edge of the "Fan district." These folks began to find their way to The Daily Planet, especially when they heard that they could get a warm meal and a smile for free.

I don't know why, but Henry and Pam were so exotic to me, even then in the latter stages of the hippie-dippy-beatnik-whatever era that was shutting down by 1976. They were exotic, even after more than a decade of weirdness. I think I imagined Henry and his girlfriend Pam as a latter-day Ken Kesey and "Mountain Girl." I think I put all of us into a novel I was so enamored of, Another Roadside Attraction (Tom Robbins). Henry was John Paul Ziller. Pam was Amanda, and I could fantasize myself as Plucky Purcell. All I knew is that his taking on the kitchen and Pam wandering through and occasionally engaging somebody in an art discussion or a yoga exercise, provided a gentle vibe to the place with a group of folks who generally had tough time connecting with others.

I don't know why we decided to do that first Thanksgiving on the actual day. We just probably said, "Hey, let's do it." Everything was so new. "Let just do it. Let's bring everybody together. Nobody's got anything else to do.

Let's just hang out together on Thanksgiving." Marshall got a turkey. I think one of my graduate school students brought some desserts. Henry had foraged so much food it was popping out everywhere. People started wandering in around 2:00 p.m. Stuart, Roy, Dutch, Dave Innings, Ronnie, Debbie, Sam and his girlfriend and Sue Pentangle. They all started just showing up and saying hi, sitting around. A spade game started. Everybody just hanging out, waiting for Henry to cook and serve the dinner.

A smattering of images pass through my mind when I talk about The Daily Planet's first Thanksgiving meal, and the initial phase of Henry's and my relationship. One stands out in particular. As I wandered through the place and wandered back into the kitchen, Henry was hunkered down over a gigantic pot of soup, as he was picking things off the table that he had cut up and was putting in the pot. He spotted me, looked at me, gave me a twinkle, picked up a Snickers bar, and fired it into the cauldron. His face crinkled up, and we both burst out laughing. That moment will stay with me forever.

In the helping world, we all learn. Sometimes we learn in the most unusual ways. Here's what I learned from that really brief moment. I learned that compassion is best when marbled with humor. I learned that compassion was at its fullest and most complete and shared when it has a streak of irreverence running right through it. Yeah, that's what I learned. That one momentary action taught me something, and it also probably cemented a friendship that lasted until Henry passed away nearly two years ago at the age of 84, after a period of declining health.

Just a short digression here. If I painted the place in hazy, glowing tones, that's not the full picture. Things could always get a little weird. Even on that first Thanksgiving Day. Sue Pentland's estranged husband showed up looking for her (she had "escaped" from him a couple of months earlier to live a hippie life). The husband was, unfortunately, packing a gun and Henry and I had to talk him down. Roy and Dutch got in each other's faces verbally and Pam needed to distract them. Sam, just back after a stint at Eastern State Hospital, started to freak out (decompensate, I believe, is the clinical term), so I walked him back to his room and watched him eat his meal while we both listened to Jimi Hendrix. To this day, I

must admit I have trouble listening to his version of "All Along the Watchtower."

The Daily Planet gig lasted another four years for both of us, but our relationship continued, as Henry followed me, first to Northampton, and then to Framingham. That first Thanksgiving was the start of many adventures that we shared. It wasn't even the most memorable Thanksgiving meal he served. That happened a couple of years later when a group of bikers suddenly showed up when we were getting ready to serve the meal, decked out in their full leathers, took one look at the scene, walked into the kitchen, and said to me and Henno, "How can we help?," proceeded to serve the meal, clean it up, pat us on the back, and go on their way.

As we spent all this time together, we obviously got to know each other better, and I got a better sense of where Henry was at and where he came from, and the changes he had gone through, and some of the people, especially his family, that he had hurt by his life choices.

One of the people I met during our Planet years together was his youngest daughter, Edye. We had come north and Henry sought her out. I witnessed an interchange between the two of them sitting on the floor of a library in Belmont or Lexington or somewhere. I can't even remember. Edye was still a high school student. I didn't know what to make of the scene.

What can you say about a lifelong friendship? Especially a lifelong friendship with such a unique individual. Somebody who was a saint and a sinner, somebody who was a charlatan, somebody who was a misfit, somebody who was a visionary, somebody who was so full of compassion, yet so full of anger, and so twisted in knots all at the same time.

So, now it's Thanksgiving, 2012. And I have a lot of things to be thankful for in my life. But the two I want to mention now are, first, that I'm so thankful for my friendship with Henry, an enduring bond that began with the flip of a candy bar into a cauldron of soup. The second is that his youngest daughter, Edye, consciously decided to re-enter Henry's life when he was getting ready to walk off the stage. She came back into my friend's life when she had every reason to turn her back.

So, as much as I remember that act of compassion of serving a Thanksgiving meal with irreverence and humor, I am also so grateful to have watched a daughter who was pushed away during childhood care for her father at the end of his life, especially a father who was as challenging as my friend Henry 77.

Jim Cuddy
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