MANNA in the wilderness

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Proclaiming A Spirit of Personalism

by Julia Occhiogrosso

A longtime guest in our hospitality house suffered a stroke. He was put on life support and was in a coma for a few weeks. Then one day as we came into the room his eyes were open. As I write this reflection, he is still hospitalized. He breathes with support through a tracheal tube and has a feeding tube connected to his stomach. He is awake and can make eye contact, but cannot speak and moves only his arms, slowly.

At the hospital he was listed as a John Doe because he had no photo identification. Using the information that he had provided for us when he moved in, they searched without success for clues to his identity. We told them that he had never mentioned any family and we believed that if he had family they would be back in Columbia where he was born.

We know him as Eddie. Finding Christ in the stranger requires a different kind of identity search. It requires a capacity to recognize a person beyond the limited criteria of social constructs. It entails seeing the fullness of their humanity and dignity without defaulting to categorical labels of racial, ethnic or national categories.

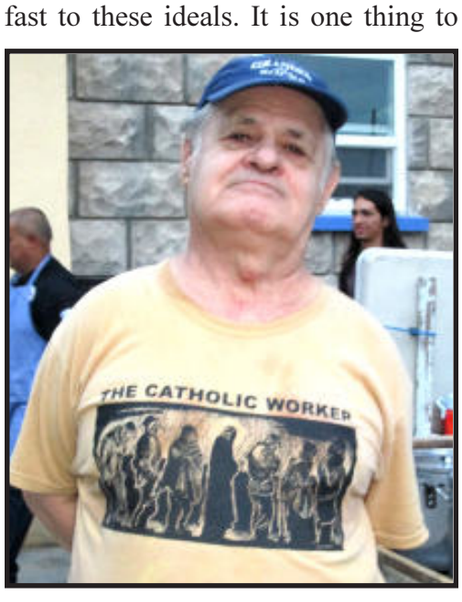
We came to know him in the breaking of the bread on our food line. He was always well groomed with hair slicked back and tidy attire. A respectful and charming conversationalist, he would express his gratitude for the meal, "Thanks for the banquet!" In stature short and stout, he moved with a determined gait into the mystery of his life.

Fifteen years ago, when we invited Eddie to come live with us at the Catholic Worker, we were practicing the longstanding tradition of personalism in the Catholic Worker movement. Personalism recognizes the primacy and sacredness of the person based on the belief in the presence of the divine in every human being. Given this, a personalist is compelled to act directly and personally on behalf of the person in need before them. Catholic Worker personalism believes that Christian love in action cannot be relegated to institutions but can only take place in relationships between persons. The Catholic Worker imagines the potential impact personalism could have as a guiding principle for social, political and economic decisions. Hospitality Houses for the Catholic Worker are the place where this utopian idea is put to the test.

Gary Cavalier (left) with Eddie and his famous "Eddie Coffee"

Living with Eddie has had its challenges. He compulsively locked doors and I learned to keep my keys with me so as to not get locked out. He took food from refrigerators labeled "food line only;" we created a locked refrigerator to resolve that issue. He enjoyed watching TV and because of his hearing loss he turned the volume on its loudest setting! When I tried to remedy this by turning down the volume a little, he became agitated and employed his typical angry response to any of us who challenged his behavior: "You are not the *real* Julia!" It was a handy strategy, since I could walk away and return later and all would be well again as I was now back to being seen by him as the *real* Julia.

This behavior was at times wearisome. I often wonder about my capacity to hold fast to these ideals. It is one thing to philosophize about these principles, it's another thing to attempt to embody them. In the process, I had to recognize my limitations. I have deep appreciation for the many who practice these principles of personalism by caring for family and friends with special needs.



Clearly, in Eddie's case these behaviors are relatively minor compared to his overall positive demeanor. I am charmed each morning with his expressions of exaggerated politeness, "May I have permission to say good morning to you?" followed by his daily reminder, "There is some nice hot coffeė made especially for you." He brings a smile to our faces when he enters the soup kitchen announcing his cheerful greeting, "Good morning everybody!" He takes his assigned tasks very seriously: breaking down the

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cardboard boxes, drying dishes and opening the #10 cans needed by the morning's cook. After turning 85, he began to move more precariously and resorted to using a walker in recent months. When Gary offered him an opportunity to retire and gifted him with a "gold" watch for all his years of service, Eddie slipped the watch on his wrist but was back in the kitchen the next morning, "I likes to work!" Indeed, if anyone tried to assist him, he was offended and scolded, "Stop doing *my* job, I have a system!" or "When you help me, I work twice as hard."

After fifteen years with the community, Eddie has gained the affection of the others in the house. They watch out for him and bring him sweet treats. They are good natured and listen patiently to his diatribes on the medicinal attributes of Coca-Cola. They are respectfully silent when he can be heard from the next room chanting in Spanish to what sounds like a litany of lament.

When Eddie first entered the hospital six weeks ago, his identity was in question by the hospital staff. The name, date of birth and social security number he gave us failed to match. I felt uncomfortable and defensive for apparently failing as "social workers" by not securing the correct paperwork. Oddly in response I felt compelled to convey the truth of his personhood. Yet what I knew about Eddie would not be easy to convey. It could only be understood within the context of a human encounter. His "real" name becomes tangential to the essence of who he is in God. This essence is what we caught a glimpse of in Eddie on our food line many years ago. This essence is what we were responding to when we decided to invite him to live with us. The practice of hospitality allows us to cast our wager and act upon our belief in the dignity and sacredness of the person. Despite the real and unsentimental realities, I am convinced that when we engage the world with a spirit of personalism, a mutual exchange occurs. By recognizing and responding to the dignity of the person before us, we discover anew our sacred humanity as well.

Henry Freeman (left) visiting Eddie in the hospital

As I sit by Eddies' bedside, I notice they have erased "John Doe" from the white board and replaced it with "Eddie" The hospital staff are taking good care of him. They know that even without a photo identification, there is a person before them who needs their compassion and care.

Julia Occhiogrosso (left) and Ray McCollum with a truck full of water bottles

Every Friday, Ray McCollum brings water bottles for us to refrigerate and bring to the homeless each morning at our food line. His wife Diane orders it and they get support from the Knights of Columbus at St. Anthony of Padua Roman Catholic Church. Ray then helps assemble the morning meals on Friday and drives his truck full of hot meals down to where we serve the homeless over 300 meals, 40 gallons of iced tea and cold water, and cold water bottles for folks to take for later.

We will be Closed
August 7-17
Nov. 27-30

PLEASE JOIN US

Volunteer Scheduling:
(702) 647-0728
or *mail@lvcw.org*

Thurs.-Sat., 6:00 a.m.
Morning prayer at Catholic Worker

Thurs.-Sat., 6:15 a.m.
Over 300 "To-go" hot meals served to the poor and homeless (6:15 a.m.: meal assembly, 7:00 - 7:30 a.m.: meal distribution)

Friday, 8-10 a.m.:
Clean the World Foundation shower trailer in our empty lot, up to 40 showers given. We provide clean clothing and hygiene supplies, Touro University students offer a monthly medical clinic.

Wednesday, 11:30 a.m.:
50 lunches taken to the homeless

Second Sat. of the month:
Knights of Columbus Pancake Breakfast for the homeless.

We are a Participating Member of:
Nevadans for the Common Good

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