

Ned Stuckey-French

Brevity is one of the salient characteristics of Ned's chosen focus, the essay. It is also the soul of wit. Sadly, I am not witty enough to properly and sufficiently sing the praises of my fifty-year friend in a few minutes. But I shall nonetheless essay that song.

Virum Indianaque cano. I sing of the man and Indiana. With apologies to all the Tallahasseeans, Indiana was Ned's home: where he was born and raised, where he met the transformative Ms. Elizabeth Stuckey. That home of Indiana molded Ned. He was a Midwesterner, a Hoosier. He was not a Southerner; he was certainly not some coastal elite. Unlike Gertrude Stein's Oakland, there was a lot of "there" to Ned's "There." He was present, solid, count-on-able. (He once took five hours out of his day to help me put together two monstrous IKEA armoires for my daughter — I still have Allen wrench nightmares.)

Unlike yours truly who went to Harvard to brand himself as a Harvard man and to master the traditional liberal arts of ping pong, frisbee and pinball, Ned came to Harvard to get an education. He actually read the books on the syllabus. Harvard didn't really change him, except perhaps in one way. With something of a dispassionate social scientist's eye, he observed his privileged colleagues and classmates, and it created or deepened a determination to champion the less privileged. That determination led to his interrupting his graduate education to spend TEN years working as a janitor at Mass General in an effort to organize and unionize the hospital workers. I'm a former union president, but I stand in awe of that commitment.

I don't mean to paint Ned as some sort of super-studious stick-in-the-mud Joe Hill. We goofed off plenty. We smoked dope, we smoked pipes (pretentiously practicing for a future in academia,) we drank beer and scotch, we even dropped acid once (memorably touring the "frozen food section of life" around Fresh Pond in north Cambridge.). We played pinball & frisbee, and one time, in a freakish two-foot snowfall, tackle football. We listened to rock, folk, rhythm & blues, and Firesign Theatre. We solved the world's problems in late-night bull sessions.

Through it all and through the rest of the fifty years I knew him, Ned was Ned (or as Gertrude would have it, Ned was Ned was Ned.). He was himself, comfortable in his shoes, secure enough in who he was to be there for others: for his wife, for his daughters, for his friends, for his students, for his fellow human beings.

Being there for others. Ned was good at staying connected: all those postcards filled to the edges with his tight script; the occasional solicitous phone call; in later years, e-mails and Facebook comments and posts. Ned's Facebook was Facebook at its best: not a cesspool of self-aggrandizement and polemical trolling, but a place where Ned applauded, congratulated and acknowledged others, where his connections included friends and acquaintances with an astonishing breadth of political views. He often disputed or refuted some of these views, but he was never self-righteously dismissive; and I applaud him for not hiding away in a self-reinforcing, solipsistic social media bubble. Ned was there. In my memory at least, Ned will always be there.

Another Harvard man Richard Alpert, aka Ram Dass, says that in this life, "We're all just walking each other home." Tennessee Williams (not a Harvard man) wrote "I've walked a long and rocky road; and what really mattered, what should matter most to you is the rare and gorgeous experience of reaching out through your work and your actions and connecting to others. A message in the bottle thrown toward ... a recently dejected man who can't see his way home. We get people home; we let them know that we're here for them. That is what art can do. That is what matters, baby. Bringing people home." Ned worked to bring people

home. He brought them home to their proper selves; he brought them home to their creative center; and he brought them his home, his stalwart Midwestern decency.

One of my favorite memories of Ned was his demonstrating in the Leverett House dining room how, by placing your mouth directly above a slab of jello on a plate and inhaling sharply, you could induce the jello to shake and then leap into your mouth. He performed this trick on some strawberry jello, and it was hilarious. We laughed so hard that we made Ned laugh until the strawberry jello came out his nose.

I don't know about the afterlife — what this home is we are all walking toward — but whatever “there” there is, I hope Ned is there, demonstrating how to suck up jello.