A Letter to Help the Year End

Over my desk at Bridge the Gap hangs an oil portrait painted last year by Dr. Betty Bradow, the wife of Dr. Bennett Ramberg, Bridge the Gap's research director. A few months ago, Betty died of multiple myeloma, a virulent cancer of the bone marrow with an extremely poor prognosis. She was courageous and cheerful to the end.

Bennett and Betty were in their forties when they married. They had both searched a long time to find each other. Bennett in particular had had a rough life, a lot of bad breaks, and all who knew him were so glad that at last his luck seemed to be turning around, the happiness he so clearly deserved was now his.

The day after the wedding, on the honeymoon, at the very start of what should have been a lifetime of happiness for both of them, Betty began to experience pain in her back. Upon their return to Los Angeles, an array of medical tests couldn't at first identify the cause, until finally the doctors gave the verdict: multiple myeloma, which had spread to the bone, causing microfractures that were the source of the original back pain. From then on, an unwelcome companion was with them always: cancer. Cancer, and pain, and dread, and constant tests and treatments at the hands of the medical system. They had such a short time together, and yet they did not even have that, as the cancer crowded out the times that should have been theirs, like a child screaming for attention when the parents want to be alone.

For those of us who cared for both of them, it was a very sad time. Betty maintained her perpetual cheerful and optimistic attitude, while Bennett scoured the medical literature, contacting ever more doctors, trying to find some ray of hope. Betty sought out an experimental treatment, involving a bone marrow transplant. To get her ready for the intense chemotherapy that would accompany it, the doctors emplaced a catheter in her chest; in the process, they punctured a lung and partially paralyzed her diaphragm. They then told her she was no longer a candidate for the special treatment that held out the last shred of hope for her, disqualified because of the impaired lung capacity they themselves had caused in their effort to get her ready for the treatment.

She took it all with courage and cheerfulness, a real trooper. And Bennett did everything humanly possible to prevent the inevitable. But inevitable it was and come it did. Betty eventually weakened so much that she had to be hospitalized, fell into a coma, and died. Now the really tough part begins, Bennett learning to live with the loss, with a large part of his insides carved out. He is doing it well, diligently and bravely, but it is very, very tough.

They had less than two years of married life together, not a day of it without the cancer crowding in. They were young, with what should have been a long life together still ahead of them. It was not to be.

In recent years, I have lost a lot of friends, young friends, to cancer, and I'm getting sick of it. If cancer were just an inevitable part of living, something unrelated to what we as human beings have done to the environment, it might be easier to accept, perhaps. But some significant fraction of cancers are due to the radiation we released into the atmosphere from nuclear weapons testing, or into air, water, soil, and food from the nuclear fuel cycle associated with reactors; to chemicals from leaking toxic waste dumps; from pesticides sprayed on food; and from all the other toxic insults we have imposed upon the environment. We are only beginning to comprehend the damage done.

I am coming to dread the calls. The parents of a friend from my confirmation class, Jonathan Giesberg, called a couple of years ago to tell me Jonathan had cancer, and that he was coming back to LA for a visit and they were throwing a party for his friends, would I come? Without explicitly being said, we all knew it was a goodbye party. When I arrived, his father graciously welcomed me in and directed me to another room and diplomatically pointed Jonathan out to me. Without that direction I would not have recognized him, because the chemo or radiation therapy had made him completely bald. He was the same person, gentle, caring, decent, and he was soon to die, long before his time.

Jonathan had spent much of his time working in the U.S. to generate assistance for Ethiopian Jews. He was a warm, generous, and righteous human being. And the ancient question reverberates in my mind: Why must the good die young?

Sanno Keeler was a former girlfriend of mine. It didn't work out with us, and I was very glad when she met Jim Spickard, a marvelous man who was just right for her. They had two children, fixed up an old house to make it work using passive solar, and opened it up for regular holiday celebrations of kids jumping on a trampoline and the older types listening to hammer dulcimer music in front of a warm fire. Sanno dedicated her life to the education of the children of migrant farmworkers, the offspring of those who stoop all day to pick our crops to put food on our tables, but are often too poor to afford to feed their own families. She loved these children, understood and prized their language and culture, helped them grow.

In her early teens, Sanno lost both of her parents. Sent to a Quaker boarding school in Canada, and thereafter enrolling in a Quaker college that involved spending each year in a different part of the world (Africa with Jane Goodall, India working in Vinoba Bhave's land redistribution campaigns), she yearned for nothing so much as a stable family. Fortune seemed to have smiled on her when she married Jim and they were blessed with children. And just as she yearned for a stable family, there was nothing she feared more than that her children would lose a parent at an early age, as she had. She did everything she could to prevent that, eating very healthily, even to the point of care about the kind of cooking utensils used. Just when everything seemed to be going so well, a sabbatical beginning after many long years of teaching, a family whole and happy, then arrived what she had most feared.

Thus came the cancer and the hard fight against it. When, still in her early forties, the battle was lost, then commenced the next struggle, the effort by Jim and the children to deal with the loss and get on with their lives. Unlike the old adage, it ain't over when it's over. As anyone who has experienced the loss of a loved one knows, the immensity of the loss continues long thereafter, carving huge holes out of the lives of those left behind. She was in her early forties, lived right, dedicated her life to the education of the poor, and is gone. It ain't fair. Why must the good die young?

Peter Weber was perhaps my closest friend. Sent out to Bridge the Gap by Dan Berrigan in the mid-seventies to work with us and the United Farm Workers, we became very close. After leaving LA, he spent a long time doing civil disobedience on the tracks outside the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons Plant and then in jail for his crime of resistance of the arms race. When released, he returned to Detroit to set up a Catholic Worker soup kitchen and house of hospitality. His whole life was spent on behalf of the poor and the pursuit of justice; a gentler soul never beat in the human breast.

A life dedicated to social change is often a lonely life. This I know well. I was therefore happy beyond measure when Peter told me he had met Barbara Sales, the love of his life. They married, and his long loneliness seemed over and the future looked bright.

Shortly after the wedding, Peter noticed a lump in his arm. It was biopsied and was found to be malignant. He underwent surgery, removing a lot of muscle from the upper arm. So as to not lose the use of his arm, muscles from his upper back were brought over and reattached to his arm to substitute for the muscles in the arm that had to be removed. His arm had to be kept tied up, elevated for days after the surgery. This was the most physically painful experience of his life to that point, Peter later told me, with a certain rare pride that he had been able to withstand it. But, alas, the effort to save the use of his arm was all to naught. The cancer returned to the arm, and the surgeons had to remove it. Peter gamely tried to learn how to write with his other hand, and to deal with the phantom pain that amputees often experience. But hopefully the loss of the arm would be the end, the cancer cured.

This too was not to be. The cancer returned, this time in the chest. The tumor was large and getting larger, and the doctors said there was nothing left to do. And so I got another one of those calls I have come to hate. Peter called to say he and his family were coming out to California, wanting me to meet his new wife and his young son, David Isaiah, then about a year old. But I knew the real purpose of the trip: Peter was coming out to say goodbye, goodbye forever.

We pretended it was one of those normal visits of friends. I was then living on a small ranch then outside Santa Cruz. We showed David Isaiah the farm animals, the horses and sheep and goats and chickens. We walked along the beach; we picnicked by the banks of the San Lorenzo River. Peter and I talked and talked. But always present was the fact that this would be our last time together.

I took Peter, Barbara, and David Isaiah to the San Francisco Airport to catch their flight back to Detroit. One memory is carved indelibly in my mind. I am sitting at the airport, with young David Isaiah sitting next to me, while his parents are at the ticket counter trying to take care of boarding arrangements. I am writing a letter to David Isaiah, who is at that moment still in diapers, unable, of course, to read whatever I write, let alone comprehend the pending loss of his father. I am writing thus to David Isaiah in the future, when he is twenty, trying to tell him how to get in touch with me then, so that I can tell him about the father he never will get to know. I stumble with the letter, not merely because it is, of course, no easy matter to predict how you can be reached twenty years hence. But what do you say to a child who will never get to know his father, let alone a father of the depth and gentleness and commitment to fighting injustice that so characterized Peter? I give the letter to Barbara, and ask her to keep it and give it to David Isaiah when he is twenty. I hope I'll still be around when he gets it, so I can tell him tales of his gentle peacemaker of a father.

Peter died a few months later. The pain became so intense that he fasted the last 36 days of his life, one day for his year of his short life, trying to speed up the final ending of the suffering. His wife had to watch, not just her loss, but the pain of the one she loved.

I flew to the funeral in Detroit, not in particularly good shape myself, having recently lost the woman I loved. Peter's memorial service was filled with friends and coworkers, from the Catholic Worker soup kitchen, Amnesty International chapter, and local peace movement he had helped establish. I sat in the front with Peter's widow and young son, thinking how little of all this David Isaiah could understand, thinking how little of all this I comprehended. Peter had lived a life for others--for the farmworkers, for the poor, for political prisoners, for an end to the arms race. He was 36 years old, had a young wife and year-old son--what sense was there in a world that would steal away such as this? Like Bennett and Betty, the married life of Peter and Barbara was short and further impinged upon by the constant unwanted companion, Peter's

cancer and his fight against it. It ain't fair, comes the voice, followed by the perpetual refrain: why must the good die young?

At the funeral, friends of Peter's spoke about the political prisoners that had been freed by the Amnesty International chapter Peter had helped founded. They spoke of the hungry that had been fed and the homeless that had been housed by the Catholic Worker community he had helped establish. And they spoke of the peace work against the arms race that had been accomplished by the Detroit Peace Movement Peter had been instrumental in. He wasn't dead; he lived on.

I couldn't help thinking of my last view of Peter when he left the Bridge the Gap office twenty years ago on his way back to Detroit. His little red VW bug was jam-packed with literature I had given him--on how to set up an Amnesty International chapter (I was on AI staff at the time), on the Catholic Worker that I had introduced him to in LA. When he arrived back in Detroit he helped set up both there. A little bit of me perhaps lived on in Peter while he was in Detroit, and a lot of Peter lives on in the good he did in Detroit. People *can* touch others' lives for the better. Just as the evil that people do lives on long after them, so too does the good. Peter may be dead, but so too is the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility which he worked so hard to shut.

We'll never know what caused the cancers that killed Betty, Jonathan, Sanno, Peter, and so many others. Certainly a large number of cancers come from carcinogens that are naturally present and about which we can do little if anything. But it is equally clear that a significant number of cancers are caused by radiation and chemical contamination that human activity has injected into the environment. Betty's cancer may be unrelated to the radioactive fallout dispersed throughout the world by atmospheric nuclear weapons testing. Jonathan's cancer may be unconnected to his exposure to pesticides during a summer spent working with farmworkers. Sanno's death may not be attributable to her years living in agricultural communities educating the children of migrants where the same pesticides are heavily present. And the loss of Peter may have nothing to do with his months on the tracks outside the Rocky Flats Nuclear Weapons plant, from which large amounts of plutonium were released over the years and can be found in the soil surrounding the plant for quite some distance. We'll never know.

But this I do know: millions of people have died and will keep on dying from fallout from nuclear weapons tests and from other radioactive and chemical pollution produced in the last half century of human irresponsibility. Many millions of additional cancers result as well, for which people are treated and cured, but none left untouched by the experience.

Of the original ten or so founding members of the Rocketdyne Cleanup Coalition, the group with which we have closely worked in the successful effort to stop nuclear work at Rocketdyne's Santa Susana nuclear facility, three who lived nearby have come down with cancer in the last three years. If they had cancer and got involved in the fight to shut the facility thereafter, that might be one thing, but their activism on this issue predates their cancers. We may never know if there is a link, but two of the three live right below the facility, in its shadow, as it were. The government is now conducting an epidemiological study of the Rocketdyne workers, to see if measurable health impacts can be attributed to radiation or chemical exposures associated with the facility.

There is no escaping the environmental sins of our culture. I have friends who are monks at a monastery located in virtual wilderness. Far from cities, their air and water are far purer than what we urban dwellers get, and the food they eat they grow themselves organically, without pesticides. Yet two of the twelve monks have in the last year come down with cancer. Both are

young, in their forties. They are doing well after treatment, thank God, but it seems clear no one is safe, there is no escape. Much pollution today is global, from fallout to ozone depletion, and exposures to carcinogens in our youth can come back to haunt us later, no matter how we live as adults.

Our society calls someone who kills during a liquor store robbery a murderer. A serial killing involving half a dozen victims is considered mass murder and the perpetrator considered one of the most deranged criminals of our time. But the murder of thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions of people in our time is not called murder or mass murder--it is called an "acceptable risk." Acceptable to whom? Not to me. The perpetrators of such wholesale killing are not considered murderers, let alone mass murderers; they are "captains of industry" or "government leaders." They are not punished; they are, in fact, rewarded with wealth and power.

I used to work for Amnesty International, the human rights organization. Day after day I had to deal with reports of prisoners who were tortured, often in front of loved ones. At times physicians were brought in, to make sure the prisoner didn't die too soon, did not expire early and thus miss any of the humiliation and pain being imposed. We as a society cringe at the thought of such inhumane treatment, to which hundreds or thousands of people are subject each year.

And yet, to officials of companies making, using, or disposing of radioactive and toxic carcinogens, and the government officials working on their behalf, it is an "acceptable risk" that tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people will contract cancer from these carcinogens released into the environment. Great pain is involved for many of those dying of cancer. Doctors, because of archaic rules, often elongate the painful ending. Families must watch as the loved one goes through the terrible pain and eventually dies. Is not this legal torture, state-sanctioned murder? Those responsible, rather than being punished, are rewarded with positions of great wealth and power. The world is upside down. The good, they die young. Those who kill them, become officials of governmental agencies and private business. Penny ante murderers go to the death chamber; people responsible for thousands of deaths get rich and powerful.

Yet, when I go to meet my Maker, I would far prefer to be a Betty Bradow, a Jonathan Giesberg, a Sanno Keeler, a Peter Weber rather than a member of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission who had helped pave the way for dangerous nuclear installations or an official of a nuclear waste company responsible for a string of contaminated waste sites. Society may provide transient honors of wealth and power to those whose actions will result in lots of lives lost and families devastated, but the truly rich life, the truly powerful life, is that which was lived by those who stood by the poor, who fed the hungry, who worked to end war, who cared for the stranger in our land, who protected the environment, who tried to defend Life. As brief as may have been the candles of their lives, as much as we may curse the darkness we feel left behind by their loss, the lives of the righteous brightened, and enriched, and ennobled our world. It is to them, at the end of the day, that true praise is due.

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