NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The quiet moments

Joe Ferullo | Jun. 22, 2009 NCR Today

My father could be an angry man, angry and loud. When he passed away last August, I worried those loud chapters of our family history would stay with me, haunt me. But this weekend, the first Father?s Day since he died, I realized it has been the quiet moments I remember most.

Dad?s childhood was the kind that could most almost anyone angry: a dark world of base survival through the depths of the Depression. Starting at age 11, he was pulled out of school on a regular basis to help his father run the family bakery. By 13, he was driving a small truck, making bread deliveries to home and stores.

He worked hard his whole life and brought home with him many nights that anger about the limited choices that life gave him. As he got older, he mellowed some - but his volcanic nature was always just below the surface.

Still, I think more often now about all the things he did not scream about, and how those shaped my life. He was not a religious man ? in fact, he evolved into a pretty anti-religious person as the years went by. But he never shoved that outlook on me or anyone else. He?d talk about it if I asked him, but only reluctantly. I think he respected that I came from a very different place; he didn?t want to challenge that. His stance was his decision, and he kept it private.

If my father had lived his life in a Western, the mild-mannered townspeople would?ve referred to him as a man who had a ?code.? He believed in hard work and providing for a family, and he valued anyone he met who lived by the code ? no matter who.

In any era of casual racism, my Dad rarely fell for the tribalism that struck so many New York neighborhoods: Irish versus Italians versus Poles ? with all of the above pitted against Hispanics, African-Americans or Asians. He muttered racial epithets when someone crossed him and his anger rushed forth ? but mostly he took people as they came.

When I was in college, my Dad sold the bakery, and my parents left The Bronx for a small town in central Connecticut ? a culture clash if ever there was one. People were very white; even those with Italian last names didn?t know a word of the native tongue, and spoke the flat, plain English of, well, New England.

As a remedy, Dad sought out different people where he could find them ? and enjoyed their company. One winter weekend, I took the train up there for a visit from Manhattan ? my father stopped at a tiny Chinese take-out place on the way home. Inside, there were two or three small tables. At the counter, a woman stood taking orders by phone and in person. In the dimly-lit kitchen, her husband worked the woks, as a young daughter and son helped chop the food and clean the utensils.

Everyone else inside stood sullenly along a wall, waiting for his or her food under fluorescent lights, next to a window covered in evening frost. But my Dad walked in with a big hello for the woman at the counter ? her husband looked up and smiled from the kitchen, put down what he was doing and came over to shake hands. Their children stepped out from the shadows in back and nodded a respectful greeting. Dad introduced me and

we chatted for a few moments until the Chinese family had to get back to the sizzling woks and ringing phones.

My father and I stepped aside to let someone else up to the counter to order. He leaned over to me and said: ?Hard-working family. Good people.? Then he looked toward the kitchen. ?See the boy there? He?s just thirteen. He?s here every night, but the father makes sure he does his homework in the back before they lock up. He gets all A?s.? He told me their story not only because it reflected on his own (with improvements) ? but also because he respected them enough to ask them about their lives, and to listen when they replied. They weren?t no-name people who just handed out food in white cartons, not to him.

This story with him came to mind during Mass this weekend ? at first I wasn?t sure why. Still not sure, really -- except as I write this I wonder if it?s all tied together by the small, quiet moments: whether with your father or with your faith, those understated glimpses often reveal more, and stay with you longer.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/10/2013 - 08:31*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/quiet-moments