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Overhearing Joe Feuerherd

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jun. 2, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

In his last telephone call to me, Joe Feuerherd genially but deftly sought pertinent facts for my obituary for which he was better prepared than I. It was like him, of course, to anticipate things and to turn a potentially cold and unsettling inquiry into a warm and funny exchange.

It was, in fact, a miniature of Joe the Professional with his warm -- not to say twinkling but never deterred -- personality, a man in full possession of himself who was on easy terms with time and eternity and -- as I realize now -- so ready for and unafraid of the struggle with the angel of death that lay just beyond his gaze at the time.

I realized, when his colleagues at *NCR* told me of his death last week, that, although I felt that I knew him well, we had never met in person, that I had only talked to him on the phone, that I had, in a real sense, overheard him but nonetheless experienced his integrity that I might better describe as his wholeness. One sensed his single-eyed dedication to the truth and his immersion in the Mystery of Christian living that allowed him to take on life and death unblinkingly and gallantly.

Thornton Wilder observes through a character in his play, "Our Town," that we have "to overhear" everything that is important about each other in life. No wonder that Joe can be heard so clearly in the voices of those who now remember him. I overheard similar spontaneous themes and reactions from his colleagues at the paper. They seemed to be overhearing something in themselves: that they loved Joe more than they had known until they talked about him. In their pauses to find the right word, silence revealed itself as the true medium for the unforced responses of the heart.

This was not the oppressive "silence" that poet Emily Dickinson described as filling "a house on the morning after death," but an interlude crackling with electricity, seeking to ground itself to illuminate the depths of their freshly uncovered emotions. One could overhear their unwillingness to speak casually of their comrade and friend; they sounded as if they needed to step back to get a better perspective on a stature that they suddenly realized was greater than that whose shadow had fallen so gently over them and onto the crowds, like those on that Gospel hillside, hungry for nourishment.

One can overhear how Joe was as sensitively attuned as an artist to the world so that, far more and far earlier than those around him, he heard its cries and sensed its needs. Following these internal signals, he plunged into responding to such issues as housing and welfare reform, ceaselessly re-inventing himself. He did this as Picasso did by changing his viewpoint and his style to match the challenges before him. So Joe became a congressional aide, a reporter, *NCR* Washington bureau chief, a trained historian, and *NCR*'s publisher and editor in chief.

One overhears those who worked with him speaking not only of his "energy" but also of his "calm and kind demeanor" in the midst of breaking stories and trying times. Earlier in his career, he resigned rather than, as he was urged by the Board of Directors of the Montgomery County Housing Authority, agree to spread falsehoods about its director, Bernie Tetrault, who recalls Joe's loyalty when he was "unceremoniously fired."

One can overhear how deeply at heart Joe was indeed an artist, a man who was a committed observer and who could not, as an early colleague found out, be "moved to be an activist." That is why he was able to take so much in and to weigh its relevance with such accuracy.

"He was a centrist," we overhear one colleague say, "who heard everyone out," and *NCR* Board Member Patrick Whelan recalls that he "had that sparkle and smile with each new idea that pleased him and the passion to see them through from conception to reality."

"How," I ask in the words of poet Elizabeth Bishop, "had I come to be here ? and overhear a cry of pain that could have got loud but didn't?" For this is what we all overhear in the months in which, with his family, he faced with faith the advancing specter of cancer and did not cry out but lived as fully as he could until he remade himself once more on entering eternity.

We overhear all this in his name: Feuerherd in German means a "fireside," a "stove," a hearth that gives off light and warmth. A fireside is very welcoming to those who are cold and weary or worn down by life. Family and friends gather at such a hearth for its flames, like the breaking waves of an ocean that symbolize the deep mystery of existence.

No wonder we overhear Joe spoken of as at the center, of his being warm and giving light.

No wonder, now that he is at the center of Mystery itself, we gather around this place that gives us light and warms us and bears us into Mystery at the same time.

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