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A leave-taking for us, a homecoming for him: a meditation on the death of a friend

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jun. 14, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side

"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?" the psalmist sang plaintively long centuries ago, raising a question that becomes our question, too, when a friend like famed Chicago lawyer Philip Corboy dies. The Old Testament bard answers his own question, and ours, before its echo dies away: "He that hath clean hands, and is pure of heart: who hath not lifted up his soul in vanity, nor sworn deceitfully."

Could words better than these be found to give us a feeling for Phil Corboy, who cleared the hill of the Lord this week after breaking time's hold on him? Finally free of its constraints, he entered the eternal field with which he was already so familiar that what seemed a leave-taking to us was a homecoming for him.

Indeed, those guarding this border waved Phil through, for he had nothing to declare and had made passage into the realm of the eternal often during his years in time. It was an easy transit for Phil because in his calling to serve the law and to love his family -- and the extended family that stretched out around him like the needy and sick at a shrine -- he forgot himself, because he was fully given to thinking of others.

Let me give you an illustration. One evening, my wife and I were dining with Phil and his wife, Mary Dempsey -- as well-matched a pair of precious stones as you could hope to see -- and he mentioned he had an appointment with Cardinal Joseph Bernardin the next day. He shrugged it off with a smile, no big deal. Cardinal Bernardin called me he next day to tell me Phil had given him a check for a million dollars that morning, a very large deal indeed.

Although Phil was famous as one of America's most distinguished trial lawyers and was legendary for his generosity, he did not lift up his soul in vanity but, because he focused on others and not on himself, everyone could see his hands were clean and his heart was pure.

But what is this transforming purity, a word that is used to measure many things in our culture, from the nature of soap to that of sin. Phil's purity resembled that which Katharine Hepburn found in Spencer Tracy's acting, "pure," she would say, "because there were no tricks, no artifice between him and the audience." And there was none between Phil and his friends or colleagues or, for that matter, strangers who stopped him on the street.

Phil had a face as Irish as the great actor's and eyes just as blue. By his example, he gave the same advice to those learning the law from him that Tracy gave to young actors: "Know your lines, be on time and don't bump into the furniture." Most important for Tracy and surely for Phil was a final injunction: "Speak the words as truthfully as you can."

That might have been the motto of the Corboys of Tipperary, whose coat of arms bears the symbol of knighthood. Phil shared the knight's calling to seek the Holy Grail. He did this in two senses, first and foremost as one who sought the Grail Cup as that of the Eucharist, of the Catholic faith to which he was so committed through all his days. Secondly, he sought the Grail as the destiny we fulfill by the courageous spending of all

our energies.

And Phil resembled those gallant knights who, on leaving on their missions from King Arthur's round table, were enjoined "to enter the forest at its darkest part." Each had to cut his own path through the overgrowth and could not follow one already cleared by another.

Phil blazed his own trail, one that would inspire many and perhaps be imitated by others. It could never, however, be duplicated. As the Lord said of Solomon after he had asked not for kingdoms or to conquer his enemies but for an understanding heart, "I give you a heart so wise and understanding that there has never been anyone like you up to now, and after you there will be none like you."

What's in a name, we ask, and in Phil's case we can answer, "Just about everything." *Phil* is Greek for *love*. The Celtic name -- *Corboy* -- has its own significance in that tongue, but it is clear enough in itself to reveal his remarkable character. *Cor* means "heart" in Latin, and that word *boy* speaks to us of wide-eyed innocence and playfulness of the Tom Sawyers and Huck Finns, with their fresh-faced joy in being alive and their readiness to exult in its challenges. Who gives more powerful witness to what Saul Bellow called our "universal eligibility to be noble" than a boy who, when asked if he did this or that, stands up straight, looks us in the eye, and says, "I did it."

That was the boy in Phil that filled the prefix *Cor*, heart, with such radiant and saving energy, that of a good boy grown to manhood and never spoiled by life. He was knowing about life and its triumphs and its tragedies, for he lost a son and a daughter in accidents that would overwhelm any but a man of faith as deep as his. Philip Corboy, indeed, a loving man of heart who never lost a boy's gift of wonder.

There is a verse plain as an old pillow that tells us that when we die, "the only things we can take with us are the things that we gave away." Philip Corboy, that loving man who never lost his good boy's heart, may be surprised by the amount of baggage that was checked in his name into eternity. But nobody blessed enough to know him will be surprised at all.

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