

Remembering Ralph

This afternoon, February 1st, I got a call from Ruth Benn that Ralph DiGia, 93, had died at St. Vincent's here in New York City. I had visited him this past Saturday and sensed he was losing his battle - he had fallen and broken a hip about two weeks ago, got an infection in the hospital (hospitals in the US are notoriously dangerous places for the sick and wounded to go!), and despite rallying several times, died.

One of the posts I have gotten on email was from a Muslim who had met Ralph when he was, with his wife, Karin, doing some relief work in Bosnia. In the post the writer referred to Ralph as a "hidden saint" - a term which would have bothered Ralph, but to which there is more than a germ of truth.

Ralph DiGia was of an Italian family, a second generation Italian anarchist. His father was a friend of Carlo Tresca. When the Second World War came, Ralph refused military service and was imprisoned, taking part during that time in the hunger strikes that desegregated federal prisons. Very soon after his release from prison, Ralph, along with Dave Dellinger, Roy Finch, Roy Kepler, and a handful of others who had been in prison or alternative service camps, took over the War Resisters League as a kind of band of "young Turks", seeking to explore Gandhian nonviolence, and to deepen the program of WRL from resisting war to changing the society that produced war.

It is not a surprise that Ralph was drawn to WRL, which, because it was a secular pacifist organization, had become a home for young anarchists and socialists. Ralph was a qualified accountant and became the "financial guy" for all the various groups that formed, keeping track of the money. If the term "hidden saint" has a certain truth it was because Ralph did the scut work of the organization. He was not the speaker, not the writer, but always at the center of the work of WRL, a kind of radical conscience for it, a man who hated internal conflicts, faction fights, who wanted, above all else, to make sure the daily work of the organization got done.

In 1951, Ralph, along with Dave Dellinger and several others, tried to ride their bicycles across Europe, from France through the "Iron Curtain", to Moscow. They failed to make it through the "Iron Curtain" but it was one of the early efforts, internationally, to use the methods of Gandhi to question the insanity of the Cold War.

In 1955, in the first protest against the Civil Defense Drills by which the government hoped to give the public some confidence they could survive a nuclear war, Ralph was among those arrested, along with A. J. Muste, Dorothy Day, Bayard Rustin, and a number of others, for refusing to take shelter in City Hall Park.

When I came to New York from Los Angeles in 1956 there were just two people full time on the WRL staff, Bayard Rustin and Ralph DiGia. Jim Peck acted as a part time volunteer. The small staff worked from a single office at Beekman Street, across from City Hall.

I was to join the WRL staff in 1960, but I had already gotten to know Ralph from the weekly meetings of Liberation magazine, which had offices in Greenwich Village. I was something of a “gofer” for the editors (technically the editorial secretary) and saw Ralph during the meetings that included the editors (Bayard Rustin, Dave Dellinger, A.J. Muste and Roy Finch). Ralph kept the books for the magazine, as he did for WRL.

Ralph left the drama of the movement to others - something he shared in common with the late Norma Becker, who was so important to the Vietnam Peace movement, but so little known. He felt that stuffing envelopes was as important as speaking to college students. Keeping the books made the organization go around. There were times when, I know, he felt impatient at this. In 1961 he and Jim Peck and I took part in the Civil Defense Drill protest in City Hall Park. The three of us were arrested and jailed for 25 days (poor planning on our part - it meant the entire staff was in jail for nearly a month, not the sort of thing Ralph approved of!). In 1964 he joined the Quebec to Guantanamo Peace Walk, organized by the Committee for Nonviolent Action. This was long before Guantanamo would become infamous as an American site of torture. It was then a symbol of a US military base in Cuba, a country which had become the target of wrath for the American establishment because it had had a revolution which wouldn't go away. Ralph never got close to Cuba - the team of walkers, which included the late Barbara Deming, was arrested in Albany, Georgia, beaten, and held for, I think, a month, during which time they took part in a serious and prolonged hunger strike.

I remember those nervous days as Dick Gilpin and I, working from the office at 5 Beekman, busily phoned contacts all over the world to bring pressure on the officials in Georgia (and on the State Department) to get our friends released before they died. It was a rough experience for the marchers, an inter-racial team in a state that was fiercely resisting challenges to Jim Crow. Ralph came back to the office and returned to the routine of keeping the books and, of course, of counseling draft resisters.

Last year there was one of the large demonstrations in Washington DC against the war. Ralph was determined to go down there and asked if I would go with him, which I did. At 92 he covered almost all the march, before we finally headed back to Manhattan.

Ralph was a kind of “non-denominational” radical, who kept on good terms with a range of folks in the midst of the ideological wars of the left. But he was not without clear opinions on key issues. In 1965 when there was the first major student demonstration against the Vietnam War, organized by the Students for a Democratic Society, Bayard Rustin was alarmed that SDS had accepted the endorsement of the Communist Party's youth group and had called a meeting of a small group of us - A. J. Muste, Ralph, Bayard, Charles Bloomstein, myself, Robert Gilmore - at Gilmore's home, to see if we could agree on a statement warning SDS against a “united front” with the Communists. A. J. did sign, under pressure from Bayard. I didn't sign, less because I favored united fronts (my views were to change, but not yet) than because the statement wasn't clear that we demanded unconditional US withdrawal from Vietnam. Ralph also didn't sign - one of the few occasions when he quietly broke with Bayard and A.J.

Ralph was one of the few people who could “morally intimidate” Bayard Rustin. Once, I think the occasion was Ralph’s birthday, some of us plotted to get him a stereo set. I was the chief organizer of the plot, the event was to be at Norma Becker’s apartment in Greenwich Village. We used the excuse that Bill Sutherland, a man WRL had sent to Africa in 1953 to help train people there in nonviolence, was in town and we should have a reception for him. A ploy Bill was happy to go along with. But as Ralph began to find out about the list of people I was inviting he got furious with me, saying “David, half of these folks don’t even know Bill - you are screwing up the event”. I kept my peace and kept on. I phoned Bayard, who by then had broken politically with WRL, and told him we wanted a contribution for the stereo set and wanted him present. Bayard said of course he would send a check but he wasn’t sure he would be free. I said “Bayard, this isn’t for WRL - it is for Ralph, and if you aren’t there none of us will speak to you again”. Bayard showed up. And Ralph forgave me for the duplicity of my invitation list.

Ralph loved baseball. Ruth Benn and Ed Hedemann used to take Ralph with them to the ball games - up to the end of last year’s season. Ralph loved beer. He could get high on two bottles of beer, his whole personality changing and expanding, as the worries of the ever-present deficits faded, and a party blossomed. He was popular with women and in this I felt he had to carry an unfair burden because of those of us in leadership posts at WRL. For a time we had three homosexuals in key posts - Bayard Rustin, the Executive Secretary, Igal Roodenko, the Chair, and myself, the Field Secretary. It was a matter of accident, not a gay plot, that briefly led to the straight man - Ralph - being so outnumbered. He bore that problem with dignity.

There were occasional political struggles in which, in my view, Ralph took the right side. In the 1960's WRL voted to fund WIN magazine, a nonviolent “hippy” publication that had been started by a group of young New York pacifists. The Executive Committee was very skeptical about a group of pot-smoking, free-loving youth running our magazine. But Ralph and I were able to carry the day - though at least two members of the Executive Committee quietly resigned.

And on the matter of “united fronts”, as the Vietnam War went on Ralph and I felt that WRL should take a role in the broad coalitions which included the Communists and Trotskyists. Again there were some tense moments by older members who thought we were giving up our nonviolence. In large part because of Ralph, WRL went on to play a central role in all of the Vietnam peace coalitions and Ralph, along with Grace Paley, was arrested on the first day of the 1971 Maydays in Washington DC, a time when over 15,000 people, most of them very young, were arrested in a three day period, while the smell of tear gas wafted over the capital, including Georgetown.

Ralph used to work at the office each day long after the rest of the staff had left. He came in on weekends to make sure mailings go out. He was the “boss” of the loose group of us who made up the staff, but a “boss” in such an indirect and gentle way that he held his authority over the rest of us simply by working harder than any of us, and shaming those, including me, who hated the routine work of stuffing envelopes.

Some of us are pacifists and nonviolent in theory - we can talk a good game. But one afternoon,

as I looked out my window at 339 Lafayette, where the League had moved, I saw a gang of youth approaching a man, clearly fearful and backing away, as the gang swung clubs. "What", I thought, "would be the right pacifist response - after all, here we are, the national office of a pacifist organization". While I was pondering the theoretical question, I saw that Peter Kiger and Ralph DiGia had rushed out from our building and were putting themselves between that single frightened man and the mob.

When the A.J. Muste Memorial Institute was set up, Ralph was one of a handful of people who were crucial to getting it under way. I remember - and it is a good example of how complex our society is - when Bernice Lanning had got Ralph and me an appointment with a tax lawyer who had offered to help us pro bono. The attorney worked for the firm of Mudge, Rose and Guthrie, with which President Richard Nixon and Attorney General Mitchell were affiliated. It was a huge large firm down on Wall Street - the sort that had its own private bank of elevators. But it was there, working with Bernice's friend, that we got the papers drawn up for the Muste Institute's tax exempt status.

Fairly late in life he met and married Karin, and became a family man, trimming his time in the office to a more reasonable burden. When I saw him in the office three weeks ago (and he was still coming in almost every day) I asked how he was doing. "David, I feel so tired. And my memory - it's lousy". Shortly after that he fell and broke his hip, entered the hospital and is now gone.

There will be a memorial -though when I do not know. I do know that a great spirit has moved on. One without pretensions, one who wore his radicalism in his life, not on his sleeve. I am among the hundreds - if not thousands - of people who are lucky enough to say we knew Ralph DiGia.

David McReynolds, 2/2/08