

In Memory of Vern Davidson

Knowing that my old friend Vern was ill and depressed, I began, last year, to write an account of his days as the campus radical at UCLA, hoping the article might cheer him up. Those notes like so many good intentions, were never finished in time to let Vern know how much he had meant to me, and to many of us.

In July of this year he died, in Spokane, Washington, where he had lived after retiring from the faculty of Gonzaga of the Law School there.

I have found it devilishly hard to write these notes, in part because it is also coming to terms with my own mortality. Somewhere in my apartment are two snap shots, separated by fifty years. The first shows Harvey Berman, Maggie Phair, myself, and Vern Davidson in my little beach shack in Ocean Park, probably in 1951. I don't know who took that shot of four young Bohemians, but fifty years later there was a reunion of the Ocean Park crowd and Harvey's partner, Danny Boyle, took a shot of the four of us, looking relaxed and cheerful - and fifty year older.

This spring Harvey Berman died. With the death of Vern, half of that happy quartet is gone. It is not with fear that one looks to the limits of life, but in realizing that the ending of music is at hand, the fabric of friends, the taste of chili and onions, the memory of amorous adventures, is near. One looks suddenly around the room, at the stacks of CD's, boxes of unsorted papers, unread books, thousands of negatives, and sees these will soon enough be a burden for others.

If there is a sadness it is for how much has been left undone, how cheaply I sold the time which, to quote Brecht, "on earth was given me". So to write about Vern is in part to write about a special time in history, the period soon after Hiroshima/Nagasaki, the start of McCarthyism, the painful dissolution of the great alliance that had fought the "Good War" (as if any war was good) into two coldly warring camps.

And it is to write about UCLA where the four of us, Maggie, Harvey, Vern, and I were students. I'm not sure when I was introduced into this cabal of radicalism. I do know that someone in the Westwood Socialist Club (a front group for the Socialist Party at UCLA) had the good sense to look up the names of students who wrote interesting articles in the *Daily Bruin*, the campus paper. I wrote, from time to time, voicing an almost innocent radicalism. I was at the time still in the Prohibition Party (too hard to explain here) and in fact in 1948, not long after starting UCLA, went out to Finney County, Kansas, to work for several months as an organizer for the Prohibition Party which had a candidate for State Assembly.

However it happened, I was tapped, on the basis of something I'd written, and asked if I wanted to join the weekly lunch on the campus grounds. Under an infamous (and probably unconstitutional) university "Regulation 17" no political or religious activity was permitted on campus - but a lunch meeting, while illegal, was also essentially invisible. I gradually met the campus socialists - Vern Davidson, the intellectual leader of the group, Maggie Phair, sort of the Mother Bloor of it, Rina Garst, Jerry and Johnny Blatt, Hilton Stanford, Ralph Shaeffer, others.

UCLA at that time was free of any tuition to students who were Californians. We had the last of a wave of GI bill students on campus - serious young men who had seen war. And significant

numbers of Japanese, and African American students. There were a large number of Jewish students and the general makeup of the campus was working and middle class.

I must have passed muster as a potential recruit because Maggie Phair invited me to a party being held in Ocean Park. I was lonely. Homosexual without yet able to deal with that, from a Christian background, but moving away from that. It took all my courage to drive my little old Model A Ford down to Ocean Park. I knocked at the door with a six pack of cokes in hand, certain the group would be heavily into drinking, and probably into sexual abandon I didn't share. But Maggie met me at the door, took the cokes from me, said she'd put them in the fridge but would I be so kind as to stand by the door and welcome new people who came in - some of them wouldn't know anyone. (As I said, she was the Mother Bloor of our group, putting me instantly at ease). It was a little beach house with three rooms. In one room some were dabbling in an adequate little red and learning how to dance the Hora, Israel then being the rage with everyone on the left. In the main room there was . . . unheard of to someone with my gentile background . . . conversation. In the last little room someone was playing records of Edith Piaf, the new sensation.

This became my social base - and far more exclusive than any fraternity. In 1950 or 1951 Vern Davidson approached me to say that the Westwood Socialist Club had to raise their budget and they felt the easiest way to raise it would be to recruit new members to the Socialist Party and they decided I should join. Which I did.

I took an active part in the Socialist Party, which had shabby offices near downtown Los Angeles (with a lesbian bar around the corner - the SP members who occasionally stopped by for a beer - if they could pass muster as 21 - were fascinated not so much by the lesbians but by the men who came by, convinced that all a lesbian needed was a good man). The mimeo machine in the party office was very old. Normally one inked a mimeo by brushing ink on the inside of the drum, but this drum was ancient and clogged - we had to learn, Vern teaching us, how to lift the delicate stencil up and brush some ink directly onto the outside of the drum. Vern, a tall, slightly chubby, cheerful student, had surely read Mark Twain's example of how Tom Sawyer conned his friends into "helping" him white wash a fence - because Vern made the trip from Westwood to the dismal little office of the Socialist Party seem a grand adventure. He made it seem as if the greatest joy on earth on any given evening was to be found in getting black ink on your hands, running the mimeo machine.

We could get twenty five or so copies before we need to brush the ink once more, very carefully, under the stencil. With such great effort we produced *The Spark*, the campus paper of the Westwood Socialist Party. As scholars know, *The Spark* was the name of Lenin's paper before the revolution - but using the Russian word, Iskra. (The Westwood Socialist Club was not Leninist in any sense, but it was left wing, and we should not let history obscure the fact that, at the time it occurred, the Russian Revolution had almost total support from radicals and reformers of all kinds, with Eugene Debs, the great leader of the Socialist Party, declaring himself "A Bolshevik from the tip of my head to the tips of my toes").

The Spark was handed out at the student bus stop - distribution on campus would have been illegal - the infamous Regulation 17 at work. At some point (not even Wikipedia could provide

the date), we set up the Students Against Compulsory ROTC. I was made the Chair, as we needed a "public face" that wouldn't have made SACRO seem a radical front - I was a virtual unknown - but the brains behind the campaign were those of Vern Davidson. We were never able to recruit many students to membership in SACRO (in fact, the one public meeting we held on campus - for some technical reason SACRO, which had a faculty sponsor, escaped the dread Ref.17 - was so badly attended we never held another open meeting). It was a grand campaign. One of our student opponents was in touch with someone in the Defense Dept. and got some funds to oppose us. This was a "less than courageous" young man who sold me his collection of 78 records of Paul Robeson's album "Songs of a Free Man" because he sensed the time was coming when it would be unwise to have such an album in his possession.

We very nearly won the campaign, losing by less than 100 votes. It was during this campaign that I realized Vern could be a victim of moods, something of a mild manic/depressive. At one point we urgently needed to have a meeting of our people to decide how to run the campaign but Vern was in a depressed state and wouldn't call a meeting. Despite the fact Vern was the real leader, I did call a meeting - in the men's Co-op (Robeson Hall, just off campus), where Vern lived along with several other members of the Socialist Party and where, to help pay his way, he served as the cook). I got Jerry Blatt to agree to host a meeting in his room, I let our handful of activists know. Vern burst in, furious, saying "you can't meet here, this is my room". I said, "It is also Jerry Blatt's room and we have to have a meeting". Which we did, and in the end everyone calmed down.

The high point in Vern's time as the campus radical came in 1950. As part of the Cold War, which had begun (and would very soon get a powerful burst from the Korean War), Radio Free Europe - one of those front groups the CIA set up - was going to send a "Liberty Bell: to Berlin. This was a ten ton bell cast by the British foundry of Gillett and Johnston. The Bell was given a ticker tape parade in Manhattan, and sent off on a tour of 21 American cities before being shipped to Berlin (where, as I understand it, it is still in active use).

Clearly this was part of the war mood run by the US government, which, then as now, had no interest in freedom except as a useful tool. At that time, to refresh our memories, the "Free World" of Harry Truman and the Democratic Party included Franco's Spain, Salazar's Portugal, Chiang Kai-Shek's bloody rule in Taiwan, and a host of dictators elsewhere - including Batista in Cuba. As I write this there is understandable shock over the bloodshed in Syria, and outrage over the brutality of the Syrian dictator. But very little attention is being paid to the struggle for democracy in Bahrain, where an authoritarian government is propped up by the US because we have a naval base there - much more important than democracy.

(The Socialist Party in Los Angeles was considered a bastion of the Party's left wing. We viewed Norman Thomas with some reservations. The two figures who had helped shape the politics of the SP were Bill and Mae Briggs, wonderful people, who transmitted a sense of democratic socialism to Vern Davidson - and to all of us who got to know them. If I write about Vern, I must at least mention Bill and Mae, and others in that Local, such as Charles Curtiss, who had left the Trotskyists to join us. These were people whose sense of democracy and socialism came out of experience as well as books, and was something meant to be lived).

It was inevitable that when news came that the Liberty Bell was due to arrive in Los Angeles the socialists at UCLA would do their best to oppose it. The student government had arranged a special "card display" for the Freedom Bell at a football game. Vern and a few others from the Westwood Socialist Club had gone to the game, gotten into the card section, and "became confused" when the Freedom Bell card display came up. (Folks will realize that these dramatic displays from a "card section" depend on the students following the instructions with precision).

There was to be another Freedom Bell card display at the next football game, but Vern came to the Student Council and in his most earnest voice said (and I quote loosely from memory) "We have lots of differences on campus, and here in this room. Some of you support Radio Free Europe, and some of us do not. But the great thing about football is that it unites all of us, whether we are from fraternities and sororities or are campus independents, whether we are conservative or liberal or radical. Football is the time when we can put our differences behind us. Last week during the card display, some of us in the card section were confused when the Freedom Bell display was called for, and our cards were held the wrong way. We are fans of football, and we will be there for this next game, and many of our people have signed up for the card section. We do not want to be confused if there is another Liberty Bell display. We ask you not to make these games a political football, but leave them as an event which keeps us united."

Vern never used a threatening tone as he issued this threat. He sounded like the most sincere football fan in school. After discussion, the Student Council decided to skip the Freedom Bell display. (I, personally, have no interest at all in football, but one year UCLA won against USC. Normally we lost - USC could afford to hire football players, and UCLA couldn't. We were always overwhelmed in the games. The year we won, students began to pour off campus, down the streets toward the main intersection of Westwood and Wilshire Blvd. I followed along, joining in the massive student sit down at the intersection, blocking traffic. One of my fraternity friends, seeing me sitting down, said "David, I thought you didn't like football." I said "I don't. But in my life this may be the only chance I have to see the masses in action - if you think I'm going to miss it you are crazy").

The political climate grew much more serious with the Korean War. The Communist Party, which had been able to maintain an active group on campus, vanished underground. (They were still there, but their front group, the Labor Youth League, folded. Relations between the CP group and the socialists were cold. We would turn up at their public events to ask embarrassing questions. And they were convinced that we had to be government agents. One of their members stopped me one day and said "We know you are an agent - you say much more radical things than we do, but none of you have been arrested". (The Smith Act trials had begun).

For our part we were convinced we would enter a period of right wing dictatorship. We knew the Smith Act arrests would not be limited to the Communists - already a number of young pacifists were being jailed for draft resistance. We called a meeting one night at my beach shack - 132 1/2 Ashland Ave. - to discuss what to do. We thought one of those present was with the FBI so we waited until he left, around midnight. Then we had a very serious discussion of leaving for Costa Rica. One of our group was learning to fly a small plane, We discussed flying down, one or two at a time, to the safety of Costa Rica. In the end the majority voted against it - feeling that as good revolutionaries we could not run from the danger but remain and face it. If

this sounds melodramatic, it is because we have forgotten what the McCarthy period was like. People had a hard time holding onto jobs. Vern and I, both having graduated, worked as meter readers for the gas and electric company, and both of us were fired. I was later fired from a job working in the photo department of a firm that was seeking military contracts - I will always be grateful that the head of the department called me in to let me know that, while he wasn't supposed to let me know, I was being terminated because the FBI had been around.

The draft was now confronting us. Vern refused induction and was arrested. He was given a three year prison term. I was arrested not too long after that but because of a technicality in the government's case, the case was dismissed.

It was around this time - perhaps 1954 - that the leader of the Communist Party in Southern California - Dorothy Healey - asked for a meeting with some of the young pacifists. I represented us at the meeting, with Harper Paulson, editor of the People's Daily World, speaking for their side. We met in Pasadena, in a basement, with about 15 people on each side. Harper gave a standard CP position, which boiled down to peace and friendship, and avoided any discussion of problems with the Soviet Union, or the CP's internal policy of democratic centralism.

A few days later Harper called me, to say "We didn't know you believed in the things you said" (It had been essentially a standard A.J. Muste Third Camp position). He said they wanted to have another meeting. I said "You didn't really say anything - let's have another meeting with just a few of us on both sides to see where we can go". He agreed, then added, before going up, "You know, it is very hard for us to trust you". Those were haunting words, reminding me of the fears "of the other" we all have. We did meet. Dorothy Healey and Harper Paulson were there, Maggie Phair and myself from the Socialist Party, Bob Vogel from the Quakers, and a friend, Ted Yudkoff, from the "modified Trotskyist" group, the Independent Socialist League. As we talked about civil liberties - of central importance to the Socialist Party - Dorothy turned to Ted Yudkoff and said with some anger "Ted, I understand why these people (meaning Maggie and myself) believe in civil liberties - they are bourgeois - but you claim to be a Marxist and you know we can't permit civil liberties for the fascists". It was at that point, ironically, that my friendship with Dorothy began - hers had been the first clear honest words I'd heard from someone in the CP. I got to know her well, met her mother, who had been a founding member of the Communist Party. Dorothy eventually left the CP.

I mention these discussions because they had a very serious impact on Vern Davidson. I wrote him a letter about the first discussion - a brief report - saying I would write more unless I heard otherwise. Two weeks or so later, not having heard from him, I wrote a full report about the smaller, more frank meeting. Within the week I had a letter back from Vern saying "David, please do not write any more about this. Your second letter arrived yesterday. Your first letter, written two weeks earlier, arrived today - clearly they were sent to Washington".

And yes, certainly they had gone to the FBI. Vern did not get the standard parole after one year, but had to serve two full years of his three year term - thanks to how naive I was to have written so openly.

There is a kind of p.s. to this. In 1954 Maggie Phair and I were stenciling "Send Dulles Not Troops to Indochina" on the sidewalks in Ocean Park. This was at the moment when the French were losing in Indochina and Nixon wanted Eisenhower to use the atom bomb. It was night, the board walk was pretty empty. I had with me a thin manila folder which had the mailing list of the Westwood Socialist Club, some personal photos, and a "camera ready" page on the Vern Davidson case (an effort to rally support, in opposition to his being jailed). At some point I walked a bit too far from the bench where I had left the folder - when I went back to look for it, it was gone.

The next day I called the FBI (in what must surely have seemed to them a bizarre call) to say that someone had picked up a folder of mine and if they were patriotic they would turn it over to the FBI, and if they did, could they give me a call so I could at least get the photos. They were not able to help at all, but a year later the photos, and nothing else, were mailed to my parents house. Their address had not been in the folder.

When Vern was released, he came back to UCLA and enrolled in the Law School. The university told him that, as a felon, he couldn't become a lawyer so there was no reason to enroll in Law School. Vern replied that if he failed, the matter would be moot, but if he graduated, the matter could be taken up then.

He made Law Review, was an honor student, graduated easily and applied to take the bar exam. He was told that there was no point in his taking the bar exam, since as a felon, he could never be admitted to the bar. Vern said "let's find out - if I fail the bar exam, the matter will be moot - and if I pass it, we can see."

He passed with flying colors and in the end a special sub-committee of the State Legislature met and agreed to admit him to the bar. This was 1962, and we had lost touch, as I'd gone to New York in 1956. He came to teach at Colombia, and we saw each other, then he left to teach law in Ghana and in Malawi before taking a position on the faculty of the law school at Gonzaga, in Spokane, Washington.

Our last meeting was at the 50th year reunion of the Ocean Park crowd, at Bobby Blatt's house. Vern was in fine form. He had not remained in the Socialist party and in fact I think he had given up those hopes - something I didn't try to discuss. It seemed to me far more important to remain friends than to remain in agreement on all matters. I prefer to think back not only to his good humor, but to the occasional jokes reality played on him. At one point in our student days the biggest book store in Westwood had a contest to award \$25 to the student who brought in the best book collection. Now, probably because we had been unduly influenced by the French film "Infants of Paradise", our group had informally insisted everyone needed to steal something from the bookstore. With great reluctance I stole a thin volume of the art work of the British artist, Ben Nicolson (I still have that book). Vern had stolen a most excellent collection. When the contest was announced, Vern put the lot in his little Hillman Minx and drove down to the book store where his collection won the first prize. Alas, the Gods, ever watchful, caused the stack of books to spill as Vern drove up the hill, his car hit something, and his prize money was forfeit.

(Closing notes: after my friend, Bruce Cronin, entered the text on EdgeLeft, I wanted to add two obvious additions. One was to note that Vern served as the National Secretary of the Young Peoples Socialist League in, I think, 1952, working in New York. He had been briefly married to Maggie Phair and the two of them lived in New York during that time. Vern met Michael Harrington, who was then at the Catholic Worker, and it is my impression that Vern helped persuade him to join the Socialist Party. The other is simply to note that Vern paid me a great personal tribute by flying out to my retirement from the staff of War Resisters League in 1999).