

Traveling Companion: Don, Our Danny Boy

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Don McCarthy just died and a part of me died with him. I had known Don for sixteen years. He had a special place in my life and in my family in Ireland. He and members of his family had visited my family more than six times in Ireland. The visits were eagerly anticipated; the Irish Coffee flowed freely; the sing-songs lasted into the dawning of another day. In anticipation of such visits, Don prepared himself, polishing off a brogue; adjusting his Irish peaked cap; organizing his song books and turning up the decibel level of his excitement and anticipation. He approached each trip with reckless abandonment, ready to milk every moment and savor the experience. In 2000, his family jetted to Ireland to celebrate his 40th wedding anniversary to his sweetheart, Mary. In his own words, “a grand time was had by all.” I, as well, as my family, were privileged to be part of such a “grand” celebration. In the company of his daughter, Cathy, he visited Ireland and my family for the last time in May.

While on vacation, I got that dreaded phone call from his family indicating the Don had brain cancer. My family was devastated. They kept in touch for updates and hopeful good news. The prognosis: without radiation and chemotherapy, he would live for two months; with both, he had a chance to live for year. Obviously, even with the beginnings of radiation, he only lived six weeks after the surgery.

When I returned from vacation, I went to see Don in Hattiesburg. Recovering from the brain surgery and anticipating both radiation and chemotherapy, he spoke in measured tones, conscious of the exertion demanded.

During our conversation he said, “You think you are in control; that you have everything figured out and then something like this happens and you realize you don’t. It makes you realize that you can never take anything for granted. You have to take each day at it comes and make the best of it.”

I have thought a lot about Don’s words since. They remind me of a powerhouse of faith and trust in God. There was no anger in his voice; no questioning of God; no “why me?” mentality. At the time, he was his wife, Mary’s caretaker, in her own illness. He never asked why was God doing this to him when his sweetheart needed him to take care of her.

I have had some time to reflect on the richness of Don’s life. He lived his marriage vows “in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

In his professional life, he towered above many in his commitment to his managerial responsibilities, not counting the cost; going the extra mile for his customers; always troubleshooting problems, soothing angry feelings and quelling fires before they began to blaze. The stature of the man became obvious to me when upper management at the company pushed him aside into retirement, unceremoniously. There were no bitter words, no angry outbursts, no vindictive threats; just a man who held his head high

In his faith, he was a powerhouse of trust, faith, hope, love for his God and his church; sharing his gifts and talents to empower others. In his church, he enriched it, not through a seeking for power or status, but carefully and unobtrusively, working behind the scenes without any fanfare or demand for recognition. His love of and gift of music helped countless people touch the sublime in the God they worshipped.

In his family, he was a king, seated on the throne of his own commitment and dedication to their welfare; sharing love, often tough love, especially by example. He loved his sweetheart wife, Mary. He was proud of his entrepreneurial son, Paul’s achievements; his daughter Eileen, his “Queen;” his high-flying Kathy, his “Kitty,” the Flight Attendant and Malia, the teacher, following in her mother’s footsteps.

After every dinner, he would say, “that was the best meal I’ve had today.” He shared many of them and was nourished especially by the Eucharistic meal. I’m sure our modern day Danny Boy who, sadly, did not come back from the cancer war, will be saying to the Lord today, “That was the best meal I’ve had today.”