

Eulogy for Dennis Murphy

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Several years before I left the Congregational Church, Dennis discovered Greg Boyle.

Greg Boyle is a Roman Catholic priest who runs a ministry called Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. It's the largest gang intervention, rehabilitation, and reentry program in the world.

Dennis was always talking to me about Greg Boyle. Sending me Greg Boyle quotes, links to Greg Boyle talks on YouTube. When Greg Boyle came to Austin, Dennis wanted me to go hear him speak. I had a schedule conflict, so I couldn't go.

Dennis went, of course, and he bought me an autographed copy of his favorite Greg Boyle book, *Barking to the Choir, The Power of Radical Kinship*. He insisted I read it right away. Which I did. It's a wonderful book, written by a remarkable man.

Greg Boyle is a street-wise priest. Acutely perceptive, and down-to-earth humble, with a deep appreciation for the ironic, often unfair, and sometimes humorous sides of life.

But most of all, Greg Boyle embodies a profound depth of empathy and compassion, especially towards those who suffer from trauma in their lives, and who act out their pain in ways that produce even more pain, for themselves and others. Like gang members.

Greg Boyle is truly a Christ-like man, and after watching his talks on YouTube and reading his book, I understood why Dennis adopted him as a spiritual mentor. Dennis and Greg Boyle were kindred spirits. Soul mates. Both of them, authentic Christ-like men. Their radical treatment of all people as kin the source of their powerful spiritual presence.

I'd like to share with you a short Greg Boyle quote from the book that Dennis bought me. This quote holds up a mirror to the spiritual qualities that Dennis and Greg Boyle shared.

Boyle writes, "It would seem that, quite possibly, the ultimate measure of health in any community might well reside in our ability to stand in awe at what folks have to carry rather than in judgement at how they carry it."

To stand in awe at what folks have to carry rather than in judgement at how they carry it.

That describes Dennis. Dennis stood in awe at the burden, the weight, the stress, the trauma, the wound, the pain that people carried, rather than in judgment at how they carried it.

More than once, Dennis told me that his favorite quote was, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." Some attribute that quote to Plato, others to Socrates, others to Philo of Alexandria, others to the Scottish clergyman Ian MacLaren.

I attribute those words to Dennis Murphy.

I'll always remember that it was Dennis Murphy who told me to be kind, for everyone I meet is fighting a hard battle, everyone is struggling with something. And it was Dennis Murphy who showed me how to be kind, and understanding. He showed me by being a kind and understanding man.

In his home office, Dennis pinned up a quote by Mary Ann Evans. Pen name, George Eliot. "What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other."

What do we live *for*? To live *for* something is to find one's purpose in life. In our spiritual tradition, we recognize it as Christ-like when someone discerns in their heart that their purpose in life is to make life less difficult for others. To lighten their burden. To ease their suffering.

Again, Dennis was a Christ-like man.

I was repeatedly struck by awe to witness how Dennis was drawn to people for whom life was particularly difficult, people who carried a particularly heavy burden, especially the burden of society's harsh and unkind judgement. The burden of being branded unworthy, undeserving, unwanted. The burden of being poor, hungry, sick, homeless, vulnerable, lost, alone.

Dennis, like Greg Boyle, like Jesus Christ, was drawn to such people, with the aim of making their life less difficult.

Dennis served on the Board of Directors of Back Bay Mission, in Biloxi, Mississippi.

For a number of years, he ran the Congregational Church's Freeze Night Shelter for homeless youth.

He made and served countless sandwiches at our church's Front Porch Lunch Ministry.

He was part of the kitchen crew every year at our Christmas Open-Door Dinner.

He served most Sunday afternoons at the Micah 6 Homeless Drop-In Center at University Baptist Church.

He delivered Meals on Wheels dinners to elderly people. It was often their only meal, he told me.

At the Round Rock Serving Center, he served very low-income people who were shouldering very big burdens. He often lifted them up for prayer at worship during Joys and Concerns.

I had the opportunity to watch Dennis relate to people at Freeze Night Shelter, Front Porch Lunch, and the Micah 6 Drop-In. And that's exactly what Dennis did, he *related* to people, as if he were related to them. He'd sit with them, eat with them, and have long conversations with them, as if they were kin. Because to him, they were kin. *The Power of Radical Kinship*.

It was clear that people, especially people carrying heavy burdens, felt comfortable with Dennis. I think it's because Dennis was comfortable with them. Dennis had a comforting, approachable, non-threatening, welcoming energy and presence about him. An ease at relating that put other people at ease.

I felt it. He was like that with me. He put me at ease.

And I imagine that you felt it. That we all felt it.

His kindness. His empathy for us, his compassion towards us.

We all felt it. That's why we're here today.

There are so many things I could say about Dennis, because he had so many interests and pursuits.

Dennis was like a diamond. There were so many different sides to him. So many different skills, capacities, and hobbies. So many different people, and so many different *kinds* of people, with whom he related.

Dennis, a diamond with many sides.

I'll mention just one of those sides now: music. Because the very last interaction I had with Dennis was about music.

We texted each fairly regularly, and just a few days before he died, he texted me about an Irish rock band we both liked, The Pogues, and their singer, Shane MacGowan, who's led a very rough life due to his alcoholism. Dennis texted me, "Shane MacGowan is in terrible shape now but have you seen *Crock of Gold: A Few Rounds with Shane MacGowan?* One of the best music documentaries I've ever seen. It tells the story of Shane's life from his childhood on and includes a lot of music luminaries."

OK, I'm mentioning two of Dennis's sides now, music and film.

I'll talk music first, then film.

Nodie could say more about this, but Dennis' tastes in music ranged all over the place, from classical to Randy Newman, from Renaissance Choral to Tom Waits, from Irish rock to Americana. I remember the year the soundtrack to *Brother Where Art Thou* came out. He went crazy over it. He bought me a copy.

The year Alan Coe and I rode our bikes from Austin to Biloxi, Mississippi, as a fundraiser for Back Bay Mission, Dennis drove his van as a support vehicle for us, which was very nice of him to do. When we drove back home to Austin from Biloxi, Dennis played Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, in its entirety, more than once. And it was clear, no one in the van was to talk as we listened to *Dark Side of the Moon*. Dennis took his music seriously. He turned me on to the Nigerian singer, Fela Kuti, and I turned him on to the Austin band, Del Castillo.

As for film, Dennis was always doing to me what he did in that text. He'd ask me, have you seen the film...? And then he'd name some obscure black and white film shot in Poland in the early 1950s by some Polish director. He knew damn well I'd never seen that film. And then he'd produce a copy and say, "here, I think you'll like it." I still have a collection of films that he gave me.

I tried doing the same to him, asking him if he'd seen such and such a movie, hoping he'd say no, so I could spring a copy on him. But he'd always seen everything. Except for one. I asked him if he'd seen Ang Lee's film *Smoke*, with Harvey Keitel and Forrest Whittaker. I knew Dennis was a big Forrest Whittaker fan. And he hadn't seen it. So he invited me to bring it over to his house, where we drank a few beers and watched it together. When the movie was over, this is what he said. And I'll never forget it. He said, "that movie does for ontology what *Reservoir Dogs* does for epistemology."

What? Who says stuff like that? Dennis Murphy, that's who. And of course, he was right. It was a brilliant observation. *Smoke* does do for ontology what Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* does for epistemology.

That's what I miss so much. Dennis is the only person I've ever known who would say something like that. Dennis was a diamond, a real gem.

I could go on and on about other sides to Dennis.

Literature and poetry. Again the breadth and depth of his knowledge were astounding.
Ham Radio.

Racism Dialogue Group.

Landscaper and gardener.

Photographer.

Writer. Editor.

Cat lover.

Beer snob. Which is a good thing, trust me. I'm one.

Business owner. Consultant.

Husband. Father. Grandfather.

Cycling fan. Dennis was a huge pro-cycling fan, as am I, and for many years he recorded every single pro-cycling race for me. European coverage, and sometimes, Australian. The really good stuff. But he did say more than once, don't ask me where I'm getting this or how I'm recording it. The whole thing had a slight whiff of crafty deviousness to it.

Like I said, Dennis had many sides.

How about all the ways he contributed to the church.

Pastoral Search Committee. Deacon. Financial Secretary.

Mission Outreach Board. Homeless Ministry.

Choir. Liturgist.

Book Club.

Vision Task Force.

Ginger Snap Cookies. Remember them? Man, his ginger snap cookies were good.

Dennis gave so much to me by being my friend. I loved being his friend, not only because he was so interesting, and so kind, and so smart, and so approachable, and so funny, and so good-natured, but because I knew he loved me. I knew, without any doubt, that Dennis Murphy loved me. That he cared about me. And that meant more to me than I can express in words.

When you know, without any doubt, that someone loves you, that's special. You know that you're in the presence of a Christ-like person. And you miss that person when they're gone.

I loved Dennis, and I love him still. Up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where I now live, I think of Dennis often.

That diamond of a man sparkling light in so many directions to so many people.

And at his very core, in his heart of hearts, a living fountain of kindness. Dennis refreshed us all with his kindness. And for that, we are all grateful.

I'll end by sharing an excerpt from a prayer that Dennis kept in his collection of prayers, quotes, and hymns. It was written by the 18th century play-write, Elizabeth, Countess of Craven.

I thank Thee, God, that I have lived
In the great world and known its many joys;
The song of the birds...
Cooling breezes...flaming sunsets...
Hills, and the lonely heather covered moors...
Music...and treasured books...
The love of kin and fellowship of friends,
And all that makes life dear and beautiful...
I thank Thee, too, that there has come to me
A little sorrow and sometimes defeat,
A little heartache and the loneliness
That comes with parting, and the word. "Goodbye."...
Because of these and other blessings poured
Unasked upon my wondering head,
I thank Thee that I have lived.

It's with more than a little heartache that I say, goodbye Dennis. I too thank God that you lived. We all do.