

# Richard Sipe – My Father

By Walter Sipe

To the very end, my father was a writer and a seeker. In his last days of life, I heard him express only one regret: that he still had poems inside him that he wished to write. So much feeling looking for just the right words...

He also insisted that I search his computer for a small essay he was writing about the impact that anthropologist Margaret Mead had on his development. He credited her personal encouragement to study celibacy ethnographically—as a unique culture—that made all the difference to him and his work.

It was not long after—in a moment of synchronicity—that I came across this quote by Margaret Mead:

***“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”***

That we are now witnessing change of a historic nature is readily apparent. And my father was one of those thoughtful, committed difference-makers that contributed profoundly—so too are many of you sitting in front of me. Some of you were even there when he opened a talk to a meeting of survivors of clergy sexual abuse over 25 years ago by saying, “My friends, welcome to Wittenburg.” That declaration now seems less like a historical reference to the Reformation, than it does a prophetic statement.

But as monumental as history may judge the difference made by my father and his work, a life is also comprised of many small differences made. These are often subtle, or serendipitous, or hidden from public view, but no less profound for those of us graced by these gifts.

For if the Mind of Richard Sipe will live on his books, articles, interviews and legal testimony, his Heart will be preserved in the embodied memory of these smaller, more personal moments that we all carry.

I was so powerfully reminded of this after receiving a message from a childhood friend who I have seen only rarely in my adult years.

*“Your dad was always so warm and welcoming and generous to me. He had a great laugh and a big smile, and he LOVED a good story and a funny joke. When you had me over for dinner, we had such smart and spirited conversations. After some particularly humorous moment, I can remember your Dad laughing so hard he was shaking, and his face turned red and he may even have shed a tear. It was amazing.*

*This is all to say that he may have gone on to accomplish great things professionally, achieve a well-deserved level of fame and success, and made a huge impact for so many people who so desperately needed his help and benefited from his*

*research, but for me he was just Dick Sipe, an intelligent and inspiring Dad to one of my best friends, who treated me with kindness and respect and love. I have no doubt that I am a better person for having known him as a boy and young man.”*

What’s so remarkable about this sentiment is that it was entirely typical of the reminiscences by those who knew my Dad; I have been blessed to have had these shared with me.

I venture to say that—even as we honor the world changing difference that Richard Sipe has made (and will continue to do so)—it is the more private and personal moments of connection that have drawn us here and fuels the ache in our hearts.

You may prefer to keep some of these moments private, and that is to be honored. But I also invite you to look for yourself and see— as we move to the reception and beyond—what of your experiences with Richard (or Fr. Aquinas or Dick) want to be shared. Because it is in the SHARING ALOUD of these moments that the richness of Richard Sipe’s life—and all the ways he made a difference—will be preserved.

I will say that there are few relationships where the impact is more profound—and more complicated—as that between father and son.

He deeply valued contemplation, education, and the power of the written word. From the first, he encouraged—insisted on, really—my developing intellectual and spiritual freedom. For that I am profoundly grateful.

I KNEW my father loved me—but I so often longed to FEEL it (or any emotion, for that matter) more fully. So many times, I experienced the authentic exchange of feeling and raw emotion deflated by a platitude, depersonalized by a literary reference, or deflected by a comment one might hear on the psychoanalyst’s couch.

I loved my father deeply. (Even in death I am discovering that more and more). So deeply that I longed for more of his heart than he was usually willing to expose.

Those of us closest to him, I believe, felt this pang of longing the most.

But this was no easy feat for a man who suffered his own childhood adversity—who had learned of the terrible danger of unchecked emotions to a young child: whether that that lay at other end of a belt buckle swung in anger; or the profound confusion that comes from an adult relating to a child as the target of their unconscious impulses rather than as a precious soul to be nurtured.

But what is courage, truly, but the transformation of fear into meaningful action? There is no courage without fear—and my father knew both in outsized proportions.

He found comfort and strength in literature. As child he became engrossed in the detective novels featuring Fr. Brown, the priest who solves mysteries and crimes using his intuition and keen understanding of human nature. He found comfort in the reassuring symbols of the church, and then the methods of psychoanalysis. These were the tools by which a child overwhelmed and frightened by a chaotic world came to become intellectual giant—bringing

great comfort to others by penetrating and revealing Secret Worlds (whether those be institutional or of a single psyche).

But if the mastery of words and his contemplative nature were some of my father's greatest gifts, I came to understand they could also be an armor protecting the oldest of his childhood wounds.

So the moment—the frame—that sticks out for me the most occurred just months before he died, just after one of his many hospitalizations. We were talking on the phone, and he said, "I think something happened to brain last night, I am having a hard time finding words." And yet no conversation felt clearer to me.

As he was reviewing his own life, his development, and our relationship, I could feel him as I never had before. At every moment I was anticipating a deflection or an intellectual comment, he dove deeper in the simple language of immediate emotions.

As the conversation progressed, tears began to replace words for both of us. What a gift that was to me! The armor had fallen away. In that moment of courage for my father—being willing to feel fully without having the words to explain it—I got to discover and trust the depth of my own loving nature.

By the end of the conversation, words had failed him—but it was replaced with something more fundamental. A simple, innocent, passionate, full-throated: "I love you, I Love You, I LOVE YOU!"

Posterity will undoubtedly preserve the significance of his works.

These were the words that made the difference for me.

**~ Eulogy by Walter Sipe, son of Richard, on Sep 22, 2018**