

WHY I WENT TO CHURCH ON SHABBOS

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Shabbat is holy time – a time of repose and reflection, study and community. It is holy because we make it holy – we elevate the time over the work-a-day week. We choose to make it holy to imitate the Holy One, who paused during the work of creation. So, instead of going to shul on this Shabbat, I went to the Church of the Resurrection in East Harlem for the “home-going” celebration of a role-model and teacher – Reverend Norman C. Eddy --who, more than most, taught me about the obligations we have to God’s creation.

In 1982 I was fortunate to serve as Rabbinic Intern for the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues, while attending the recently opened new campus of the Hebrew Union College in Greenwich Village. Each day on my way to school I would see the many homeless. On my way to HUC from the subway, I would see people huddled over subway grates, or in doorways of abandoned buildings, seeking shelter. On the days that I would drive in to school, I would encounter men who cleaned windshields of stopped cars on the Bowery in the hopes of some spare change. Several of the New York City synagogues began to wrestle with the issues of the homeless and hungry, but didn’t know how to help. On behalf of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues I started to investigate the organizations that aided the homeless, and looked for ways to bring the Jewish community of New York City into this critical work.

On Friday mornings, concerned religious leaders of every Christian denomination and a couple of “others” (including a few Jewish leaders) gathered at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine to discuss ways of mobilizing the religious leadership to take on the Koch administration and to demand better services for the homeless and hungry. It was at these meetings I had the fortune to meet Norman Eddy. Norman was instantly recognizable from even across a crowded room thanks to his shock of white hair. But Norman was also instantly recognizable as a passionate advocate for social justice and as a teacher, eager to share his knowledge with a relative newcomer to like me. I would always look for an opportunity to sidle up next to him, to learn and to listen, and to try to feel comfort speaking his language – which was almost always the language of “let’s pray together” (something a Jewish kid from Yonkers was not accustomed to doing).

Norman Eddy, born into privilege, could not understand why some were forced to live in poverty – and spent the better part of his life fighting against the ravages of poverty and the indignities suffered by those in need. Between high school and college, he traveled in Europe and learned about Nazi Germany. While a student at Yale, the Second World War started, and though he was an avowed pacifist, he found a way to serve. Norman Eddy first volunteered with the American Friends

Service Committee and lived in Cuba with 50 Jewish refugees, teaching them English and helping them obtain visas to the US. Later, he served with the American Field Services in the ambulance corps. It was during this time that he had a spiritual experience – literally “on the road to Damascus” (a story he told countless times) – and entered Union Theological Seminary to become a Congregational minister. There, he met his beloved Peg (Margaret Ruth), also a minister, married and together embarked upon a ministry in East Harlem.

The Eddys began a store-front church on East 100th Street and lived down the block in a typical New York tenement. Later that church merged with several other churches in the neighborhood to become the Church of the Resurrection, a powerful institution that took on the challenges of life in the 1960’s – racism, the scourge of drugs, gangs, families with members incarcerated in upstate prisons and deteriorating buildings and public services. Norman took on each of these issues – always first praying about the issue, and then setting to work, clip-board in hand, making his contribution to repairing the world. As Norman worked, he gathered disciples in his wake – me among them.

Rev. Eddy founded one organization after another – each with a defined mission and purpose – and each successful in accomplishing its goals (he was a stickler for taking minutes to ensure that what was discussed became action items). One of the organizations he helped to found was the Interfaith Assembly on Homelessness and Housing – and I was honored to serve as its first Chairperson. Together with religious leaders and those “guided by the spirit” we protested NYC’s unfair laws and practices concerning the homeless. We spent many nights camped out in City Hall Park during the debates over the city budget, singing, praying, studying, discussing, strategizing and commiserating. Norman would often suggest that we study the Bible together – to see if we could tease out ways of coping with our current situation – he loved the prophetic literature. Some of the most intriguing discussions I ever had about the prophets of Israel, were in the company of Norman Eddy. His gentle spirit turned every conflicting reading into an opportunity to learn and discover.

And so, this morning, instead of heading to shul, I trekked to East Harlem, and joined in the congregation that venerated the lessons that Norman Eddy taught. I, too, shouted out AMEN when challenged to take on the work he left unfinished.

In Jewish tradition, the coffin is always closed as the mourners should remember the deceased as they were in life, and not in death. As Norman’s coffin was open, it was impossible to not see him there in repose – but I think that even Norman would agree that it was the most unnatural way to see him. During his life, his spirit was never in repose – he never rested. He knew that God began the work of creation – and it was our responsibility to help finish that work. The message of Shabbat is just that – we imitate God, by resting – to gather the strength necessary to complete the work that lies ahead. While Norman’s body can now rest – it is his

spirit that will continue to be a goad to us all. In our Jewish tradition we say “Zecher tzaddik livracha” - the memory of the righteous is a blessing. The memory of Rev. Norman C. Eddy should continue to inspire us all.