

John Shields: An Appreciation

At John Shields' memorial service on April 9, 2017, Penny Allport, the Life Cycle Celebrant, adroitly observed that John had walked a mystical path wearing very practical shoes.

“When I was a baby, my grandfather held me in his outstretched arms and proclaimed that I would be the first American Pope.”¹ This is the first sentence of John's book, *The Priest Who Left His Religion: In Pursuit of Cosmic Spirituality*.

The years when John was studying for the priesthood were an extraordinary time in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Much of it occurred during the papacy of John XXIII and the Vatican Ecumenical Council he established in early 1959, soon after becoming Pope. “Almost all [of John's excellent Jesuit] teachers had been students of the leading experts who were drafting the Council documents for the bishops.” John “felt privileged to be reviewing the same documents that the bishops were debating.” He felt he “had a front row seat in [the] making of history.... [and that] a new dawn was breaking.”²

One of John's teachers was Father Daniel Berrigan, who became “the leading Catholic critic of the war in Viet Nam” and the founder of Plough Shares.³ Father Berrigan introduced John to social action and to a “program called the Sodality, which was based on the principles of... *see, judge, act*[--a] method of approaching and assessing situations.” John applied these principles when he examined conditions at New York City's Bedford-Stuyvesant housing project.⁴

Ordained as a priest on May 8, 1965,⁵ when he was twenty-six, John was assigned “to teach the new Vatican Council theology.” He did this for two years until Paul VI, John XXIII's successor, reversed course and stymied such activity. Paul VI's *Credo of the People of God* “rejected every insight that had emerged at the Council.”⁶ Deeply disheartened, John walked away from the priesthood four years after his ordination. He did this to preserve his “mental health and

¹ John Shields, *The Priest Who Left His Religion: In Pursuit of Cosmic Spirituality*, Influence Publishing, 2011, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, 11 (excellent Jesuit teachers), 26-28, 29, 30 (privileged, front row seat), 35 (new dawn).

³ *Ibid.*, 11, 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

integrity.”⁷ That summer he joined the Victoria Family and Children’s Service as a social worker.⁸

I met John in early 1994 when he was more than half-way through his fourteen year tenure as president of the British Columbia Government Employees Union. The union had just undertaken a partnership initiative with the B.C. government to “renew” the public service. I was a member of the government’s small Renewal Team, which included a GEU representative. I got to know John more deeply during the early 2000s when I joined the Men’s Spirituality Circle he and counsellor Darrell Pacini established in early 2000.

It was during Circle sessions that I first heard John speak of a number of the key turning-points in his life, which he later wrote about in his book. About 2008, he granted me the privilege of reading an early and quite different version of what eventually became *The Priest Who Left His Religion*.

My sense of John is that, in some ways, he never got over his loss of the church. “Up to that point, religion had been my whole life,” he said.⁹ His calling was still there, as was the defining expectation of his grandfather’s proclamation. John channeled his dedication and devotion, his intellect and passion for a new dawn, into a life of service and accomplishment—as a social worker and union leader, as an activist and champion of progressive causes, and as a spiritual searcher and mentor to many. He repeatedly achieved his goal of influencing “the world for the better,” which had been inspired by Father Berrigan, John and Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Tommy Douglas, and David Suzuki—and he did this in very practical ways, indeed, providing clear-eyed support to common folk, the commonwealth, and to the Earth that sustains them both.¹⁰

John was a highly literate man who appreciated the poetry of Mary Oliver, Rainer Maria Rilke, and others. Eight days after his death, *The Globe and Mail* published the obituary of another man, which resonated for me in the context of John’s passing. This other man, who I didn’t know, was Brett Allan Enemark. His older brother, Tex, had been a deputy minister in the B.C.

⁷ Ibid., 70 (integrity), 71 (walked away), 77 (May 1969).

⁸ Ibid., 81-82.

⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰ Ibid., 14, 118-119, 124.

government in the late 1970s. Brett's obituary tells us he was a poet and a "Renaissance Man" who died on World Poetry Day, March 21, and that: "Always a 'leftie,' Brett did his time as a somewhat reluctant steward in the BCGEU." His last fifteen years were complicated by brain tumours, "six recurrent brain operations, and the development of a seizure disorder," but "he never let the challenge of [all this] slow him down."

Brett, like John, was undaunted. Emphasizing this quality, Brett's obituary concludes by quoting Rilke's mystical prose on loss: "One must never despair when something is lost: a person or a joy or a blessing; everything returns with a magnificence even greater. What must fall off, falls away; that which belongs to us, stays with us, for everything proceeds according to its own laws which surpass our understanding, and with which we merely appear to be in discord. One must live within oneself and think upon all of life, all of its millions of possibilities, distances and futures, against which nothing shall prevail that is either past or lost."

"One of the biggest steps on my way to spirituality," John wrote in his book, "was the recognition that the inner world creates the outer and that there is energy in the synchronization of the two.... While there is a great deal of chance [in the universe], there is no sense of accident. The universe is directing evolution. I ask myself, why am I in this moment? Everything I do comes from how I understand the answer."¹¹

¹¹ Ibid., 204, 144.