Don Trudell 1940-2018

written by Kent Worcester | August 31, 2018

There is no way that I am qualified to write a proper obituary for Don Trudell, a longtime member of the British IS/SWP who taught history and media studies at the American School in London (ASL) when I was a student there. I do not know where he was born, or went to college, or even his full name. The last time we spoke was in the early 1980s, and the last time I spent any significant amount of time in his company was when I was still in high school. Although I dined at his house a couple of times, and chatted with him after class on innumerable occasions, I can't say that we ever became friends. But he was a singular individual and he left an indelible impression on how I think about the world.

I found out that "Trudell," which is what we all called him, had passed away when someone posted a link to his obituary in *Socialist Worker.* The obit offers useful information but only scratches the surface so far as conveying what an amazing teacher he was. There were a number of gifted educators wandering the halls of ASL in those days, such as Linda H. in English, whose love of poetry and literature was palpable, and Don J. in Studio Art and English, who turned me onto Philip K. Dick and who once threw a chair out the window. I should probably note that the window was already open, and that it faced a courtyard rather than a public thoroughfare. No one was hurt. But it was a different era and many of the teaching strategies that Don J. and others favored would probably get them canned in 2018.

The first time I met Trudell was when I attended an afterschool event designed to help prepare eighth graders for the rigors of high school. He had been charged with the task of leading a mock class, and there were parents in the room as well as rising ninth graders. His talk was on "Law and Power in Eighteenth-Century England" or something equally ornate. But at the outset he told us that he would prefer to pose one or two general questions and then see where the discussion took us. As it turned out, his approach was rather severe. When he smiled it was out of a sense of irony. He listened to what everyone had to say with a kind of intensity that I had never encountered before. He began by asking a deceptively simple question: who should write the law? I thought I knew something about the world and took the bait. "Experts," I said. "People who know what they are doing." He responded by asking how exactly I knew who was an expert and who was not. I tried to defend my ground but his Socratic methodology led me to realize that I had no idea what I was talking about and that I had to go back to square one.

Some students were put off by his interrogative style but as soon as I could I started signing up for his courses. In a session on the Industrial Revolution I remember watching a student race out of the room when she realized that her fervent defense of nineteenth century factory owners was not exactly airtight. ASL mostly attracted students from upper income backgrounds and she seemed to

believe that the powerful are always on the side of the angels. I also remember a substitute teacher who insisted we should memorize rather than deconstruct the assigned readings, and who refused to believe that our teacher took a different approach. “Why would he assign this material if he wanted you to criticize it?” he asked.

From the *SW* obituary I learned that Trudell relocated to London at the end of the sixties. If memory serves he initially planned on pursuing a PhD in history. He was fond of writers like Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and E.P. Thompson, but he was particularly keen on primary sources. He was the first teacher I encountered who assigned authors like Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx. I doubt whether I’ve ever met anyone who could dispatch a poorly constructed thesis as efficiently as Don Trudell. He was ruthless when it came to emphasizing the importance of clear terms, evidence, and logical argumentation, and he taught me to appreciate the value of close reading. He had a formidable intellect, as well as a sardonic sensibility, and I was by no means the only ASLer who found him hard to please.

His teaching style may have evolved over the years. *Socialist Worker* describes him as having a “warm and friendly manner,” which does not quite mesh with my own recollections. In my experience he could be extremely charming but mostly what I remember is his trying to get us to think harder and to move past our own blinders. I have no idea what he was like as a husband, parent, or party member. I suspect he enjoyed teaching but also found it draining. Like many of us he was a bit of a performer. Only now as I write this do I realize how much of my own pedagogy derives from what I learned in his classroom.

*Kent Worcester attended the American School in London from 1969-1977. His books include *C.L.R. James: A Political Biography* (1996), *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008; coedited with Jeet Heer), and *Silent Agitators: Cartoon Art from the Pages of New Politics* (2016).