

Steve Kindred (1944-2013) and University of Chicago Students for a Democratic Society

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Steve Kindred, my friend, brilliant Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) leader, organizer with Teamsters for a Democratic Union, activist in the struggle to keep the Stella d'Oro plant in the Bronx open, campaigner against a lockout of workers by Sotheby's auction house—all this, and a thousand other causes. Steve is, for lack of a better word, “gone,” in a New York hospital, suffering from abdominal cancer, which has spread. Having been close to Steve and having admired and loved him now for 50 years, I am very sad. Other people's deaths have reminded me of my own mortality. This one focuses me on what we have all lost with Steve gone, and what new movements might learn from him.[1]

Two clichés about Steve and me come to mind. First, his death violates the laws of nature that say that teachers should die before their students. This applies: I was Steve's teacher at the University of Chicago in the mid-1960s. The other cliché, that teachers often learn from students, also applies: Steve was my student, and contributed to an electric classroom atmosphere which took me from class to typewriter to write “Jack Tar in the Streets” and “The American Revolution Seen from the Bottom Up.” I had grown up left, but Steve was my instructor (along with Chris Hobson) in the first larger struggle that I experienced in the 1960s in which we had to anguish over programs, directions, and strategies—more complicated than just offering my body for arrest in the civil rights and anti-war protests that I had participated in but that were planned and led by others.

In the early 1960s, the University of Chicago (U of C) was trying to remodel itself as less Jewish, more sports-oriented, and less left. Director of Admissions Charles O'Connell interviewed and rejected a long-haired applicant: O'Connell's report described the candidate as “fingering his long tresses.” The student described himself as the son of a victim of McCarthyism: “you can see what kind of a family he comes from,” said O'Connell. “We have enough kids here who cause trouble ... Better let him go to Reed or Berkeley.” My students sat in on the 50-yard line, perceptively understanding what the return of football—President Robert Maynard Hutchins had dropped football in 1939—would do to the place. I had warned students of the horrors of becoming like Yale. In my first ecstasies at finally coming “home” to the U of C after 10 years at Yale, I taught while dancing barefoot around the Cobb Hall seminar tables. As for the Jews: the typical undergraduate was exemplified in the invented character of “Aristotle Schwartz.” To cure this condition, the U of C instituted a euphemistically named “Small Town Talent Search”—perhaps a local version of the Ivies' prior quest for “geographical diversity,” that is, in translation, fewer New York Jews. Steve Kindred seemed to fit: the son of a Methodist minister in Iowa and at the time in so many ways a seeming *ur-goy*. U of C had not understood its capacity, under the control of an alliance of Hutchinsonians and Straussians, to make radicals out of sons of ministers. (Perhaps Steve, with a passionate and principled father, was already on his way there.) With the draft and the Vietnam war, U of C SDS looked for an approach that would address these issues in ways that meshed with the highly intellectual undergraduate culture. In this quest, Steve was a central thinker. Chicago had never compiled class ranks; now Selective Service wanted them to do so, and to hand over to the Feds what amounted to a kind of a death list. U of C SDS brought out the many ways in which this was a corruption of the educational process, at odds with the College's often repeated shibboleth, “the life of the mind.” (Wittily, Chris Hobson gave SDS's campus newsletter that name.) Certainly, I found SDS's argument compelling: why should I, as faculty, decide who will live and who will die? As in so much of Steve's politics, this focus addressed a passionate belief in learning held by U of C

students, and connected that belief to the war as well as to the life of the university. This minority strain within the New Left gives us a vantage point from which to re-examine the larger Movement and to ponder what might have been had this kind of course been followed. A different SDS was possible, and U of C offers a concrete example of an alternative.

For several days in the spring of 1966 we occupied the Administration Building: During the sit-in, Staughton Lynd and I taught “history from the bottom up”; Naomi Weisstein and Heather Tobis Booth taught Women’s Liberation. It was a memorable and ecstatic time, with volunteer elevator operators crying out, “Second floor—sleeping, Third floor—studying.” The entire sit-in debated strategies and directions in long meetings of the hundreds present, brilliantly chaired by Jackie Goldberg (just out of Berkeley and the Free Speech Movement, and later a state legislator in California). Noted professors came to the building to tell us that we reminded them of Nazi storm troopers. (Hannah Arendt had earlier responded to my public question in Mandel Hall, saying to a large undergraduate audience that she would not state a position on the war.) Responding to such attacks, I said, in words that turned out to be prophetic, that I would feel myself more honorably treated were I employed by the people in the sit-in rather than by the administration whose building we were occupying. This moment of unexpected faculty solidarity with students, after a parade of accusations, produced a scene that I will always remember: I worried lest the standing ovation might disrupt the sit-in.

The time came when it looked as if Mayor Daley’s brutal Chicago police would arrest and evict us if we stayed in the building longer. Steve, Chris, and the others wanted to stay in. But we were losing our constituency. Left faculty members came before us with the “you’ve made your point, now go home” speech. A revered dean wept crocodile tears, expressing his love of students. Always seeking to lead their constituency in more radical directions, but also always seeking to stay with them, we came to the difficult decision to leave. We had been outvoted, and we obeyed. Today the building is called Edward H. Levi Hall. It was Provost Levi, later Nixon’s Attorney General, who had told our little faculty group that he could not resist the government’s demands for class ranks because of what he saw to be the “unlovely” consequences of having, perhaps, to receive a subpoena—as if nobody had ever challenged a subpoena.

I write all this from memory, having run up against a stone wall in seeking to get the U of C library to establish an archive on student protest parallel to the Berkeley Bancroft Library Free Speech Movement (FSM) Archives. FSM and U of C SDS had much in common. They avoided the parochialisms of a narrow and depoliticized student power, while also avoiding the other end of the spectrum: the Third-World vanguardism—and the attendant implied unworthiness of mere student rights—which was to contribute so much to the death of the student movement. U of C, and its present College Dean (an ethically challenged historian and adversary of protest), want to erase all positive memory of that time. Students were so badly treated—40 or 50 were thrown out in 1969, many on the basis not of their actions but rather on the basis of political beliefs. (After the protests of that year, the disciplinary committee asked such general and self-incriminating questions as, “What is your conception of the university?”) U of C’s memories of mistreatment of students are so strong that the Alumni Office refers to the classes of 1964–74 as the “lost classes.” No wonder. The outside world knows the place as the home of rotten and barbaric economic theories (consider the barbarities of the Milton Friedman- influenced Chilean “Chicago Boys”); I know it as a place where the Straussians who ruled the introductory required social sciences courses—“Sosh I” and “Sosh II”—applied their retrograde views to the snippets of US history that the remnants of Hutchins presented in such weighty but lightweight compendia as *The People Shall Judge*. When I was fired, before the customary second term renewal as assistant professor, it came about through a coalition of the Straussians, who despised me for having sought to teach history and historical context, and the History Department, ruled by the hideous right-winger Daniel Boorstin, and by chair William

Hardy McNeill, who contributed to the political neutrality of the place by running an on-campus military intelligence unit. “Your convictions,” McNeill told me when he fired me, “interfered with your scholarship.”

(Chris Hobson recalls that at one point, Steve—near to graduation and not wanting to risk expulsion—formed with others a “Chickenshit Liberation Brigade,” which would undertake a university office occupation through the standard three warnings and then “throw themselves on their faces and back out of the office chanting, ‘Grovel, grovel, who are we to challenge power?’”)

For a time, Naomi and I lived in close quarters with Steve, Chris, Jonathan Kaplan, Ron Tabor, and the others resident or hanging out next door to our 5331 South Dorchester apartment. What a time it was! This was the closest that Naomi and I were to come to communal living until her illness brought nurses into the house 24/7 in the 1980s and since. After Chicago, when we lived in a Buffalo suburb, Steve would appear without notice (this was before cell phones) in seemingly block-long trucks that he was driving across the country. He would signal his presence with what sounded like a tugboat horn, resonating through lawns and hedges, even startling the squirrels away from their birdfeed feasts. From an enormous treasury of memories from 1966, another one stands out. In the spring, I handed over my car to Steve for protest preparations and distribution of literature. It was a Saab, which made a distinctive noise—a kind of high-pitched whine. (And it was the first stick-shift that fellow anti-rank activist Miles Mogulescu had ever driven.) While these things were going on in the streets and quadrangle outside, I presented to a History Department seminar in the Faculty Club the paper that I had just presented at the Organization of American Historians (“Jack Tar in the Streets”); it was on its way to being published as a pioneering positive study of the mob in Revolutionary America amidst a history profession that was at that time generally hostile to people in the streets. Boorstin responded, “Jess, those are nice sea stories, but why do you have to talk about class?” At that moment, outside, Steve drove past in my Saab. Hearing the Saab from the streets and Boorstin from inside at the same time, I had no doubt about which side I was on.

What explains Steve’s radicalism? Was he his father’s son, a Methodist preacher of the next generation, perhaps a lay preacher? (Hutchins had also been a preacher’s son.) But Steve was also deeply a rationalist, and the combination contributed to the making of a distinctive SDS chapter. Steve’s rationalism contributed to the strength of his analyses, but also sometimes led him into *culs de sac*. In thinking about Steve, I often come back to E.L. Doctorow’s depiction of a Julius Rosenberg-like character in his *Book of Daniel*. It’s 1949, and a dangerous mob of American Legionnaires are attacking the New York leftists who have come up to Peekskill to hear Paul Robeson sing at a rally. In Doctorow’s telling, as the bus driver tries to drive out through the rock-throwing Legionnaires, Julius asks him to open the door so that he can reason with them. Julius leans out the open door and waves to the Legionnaires. They break his arm. So it was in some ways with Steve. In 2009, Steve worked with the Stella d’Oro Solidarity Committee (“International Troublemakers & Boat-Wreckers Union”) trying to save the jobs of workers at the Bronx Stella d’Oro Biscuit Company plant. As part of his campaign, he tried—on his own and without authorization from anybody—to convince Goldman Sachs to keep the plant open: Steve has done his research, has his numbers, and intends to show them how they can make a profit by keeping the plant open. He can’t get through by phone, so he goes down to Wall Street to persuade them. But he can’t get past the receptionist. The cops are called and seize him; he sits in their squad car, trying to figure out what went wrong. (I get this from Steve’s own hilarious but poignant account to me, delivered with his customary joyful verbosity.)

Steve often quoted his father’s penultimate words: “We were euchred.” Steve made the error of trying to repeat the 1966 sit-in in 1967, this time as a “study-in,” again in the Administration Building. Naomi, Heather, and others argued against it. (Steve tended not to listen to women in those days, though he grew much better on this front later on.) But Steve bulled ahead. It turned out

to be a catastrophic failure. The Administration of that moral sewer sent the teachers of Sosh I and II to take down the names of those protesters who they recognized from their classes. So much for the life of the mind. Deeply and passionately principled, and fully understanding the implications of such a betrayal of teacher—student relations, Steve cried out, again and again, “You hacks, you hacks!” In my head I hear his voice and see his face.

I think, in the end, Steve and the rest of us were euchred by a medical profession that often deserves contempt and not the deference that they are usually given. Steve spent six weeks in intensive care at a classy New York hospital. Like his father before him, Steve was euchred by medical misdiagnosis and failure to treat. Despite the heroic and resourceful efforts of his wife, Ellen Goldensohn—to whom the doctors remained largely deaf—they found no cause for his condition, missed the significance of the pain’s location, and came up with neither diagnosis nor intervention. When Ellen had him moved to another hospital in the last days, they did the same tests and came up with the grim diagnosis in two days. Too late: precious time had been lost. Steve, and the rest of us, were euchred by hacks. But let us continue to work, as did Steve, intelligently, passionately, and albeit comically, for a better world. And, along the way, let’s rename Edward H. Levi Hall Steve Kindred Hall.

Note

1. I wrote most of this on December 5, 2013 at a point when Steve Kindred was gone but not yet dead. He died on December 9, at the age of 69. Since then, I have combined my original with revisions and additions based on conversations and email feedback, mainly from Christopher Z. Hobson and Naomi Weisstein, and from various friends from University of Chicago days in the sixties, including Heather Booth, Rusti Eisenberg, Howie Machtinger, Miles Mogulescu, Bernie Tuchman, and Eric Shtob; also Micah Landau and Joanne Landy. None of these people are responsible for my interpretations.

Bibliography: Doctorow, E. L. *The Book of Daniel: A Novel*. Random House: New York, 1971.

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