

Reflections for William Benjamin Spofford, the 4th Bishop of Eastern Oregon
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Trinity Cathedral, Portland, OR
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So, stand with me for a moment and think of this day...a day to celebrate the life of William Benjamin Spofford...it is December 21st the significant Winter Solstice Day for those of us in the northern hemisphere when light begins to lengthen once again...today an impressive Navajo woman, Cornelia Eaton, is being ordained to the diaconate in Farmington, NM...and it is the wonderfully expectant season of Advent...the Advent of Christ. I asked myself...how would Bill Spofford have begun this moment? He probably would have thought of theater...perhaps *Godspell* would have come to his mind...and perhaps he would have sung...(sing three times)...*Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord.*

Let us pray: Be with us dear Lord with your truth that cannot lie, your counsel that cannot fail...and make us to stand on our watch tower and wait ...for what you have to say to us...in Jesus name.

Polly Spofford is very much in my heart. I had the privilege of reflecting on her life when she died and while I have not verbally focused on her in what you are about to hear, I know her love, her wisdom, her nurturing and her faith formed a rudder and a vision for Bill. I know that because she was that for us in eastern Oregon as well. Steve Schneider, heart songs for you and the people of Grace Memorial for the life in Christ you have shared with Bill and Polly in recent years. And Amy, in these last month's your care of your granddad brought great comfort to him and blessed assurance to your family and to us and we thank you.

Katharine, welcome home! You honor us with your presence...and we came close to having two Presiding Bishops in this holy house as Ed and Patti Browning had planned on being here but complications prevented their journey. In the moments we share today there may not be another opportunity to publicly thank you, Katharine, for your gifted leadership so we do so now. (*Applause*)

And Dean Lupfer, I have missed you and I thank you for your welcome. I remember my first visit to a large Episcopal dwelling was here...I was probably 11 years old...and Dr. Kempton was preaching from the pulpit and I was quite in awe...and I think I thought what the caterpillar thought when she looked up at the butterfly and uttered: *You'll never get me up in one of those things!*

It was fifty-five years ago as a middler in our seminary in Cambridge I signed on for a chaplain's intern program at Massachusetts General Hospital. Bill Spofford was the Protestant Chaplain of that great care center and his supervised internship program was our first meeting. So, I followed him down the halls of Mass General and I learned precious secrets of the art of care-giving. Here are some samplesdo not stand on oxygen tubes....when you converse with patients who are in bed, pull up a chair and meet them at eye level....never assume a patient cannot hear you, especially if they are diagnosed as comatose....listen instead of talk when you are nervous or confused....listen instead of talk even when you are not nervous or confused....always ask permission to pray and if you pray, be very careful with your words.....earn the respect of the medical team by submitting to their authority and not exerting any authority you may think you have.... if you are faced with horrific tragedy, be still and tender with your heart....if you grieve so deeply that you are on the edge of despair, thank God for the moment, for you are poised to be of considerable help to others. These are lessons for life

Later that same year in the seminary, I followed Bill up the stairs of Burnham Hall where he taught a course entitled, "*Being the Church in Social Settings.*" The course was a water-shed moment for me. I learned it was not enough to believe in simply a personal, private manner....as though God depended on what I thought and was just hanging around to see what I would say! Now, THAT is a heresy. Rather, the more difficult part of believing was to learn the wisdom of having one's belief shaped by holy, fierce, relentless interaction....interaction with our holy God, with the humanity who populate our lives and with the created order that is alive with learnings for our questing souls. Much of this wisdom emerged from Bill's chaplaincy and the environment of vulnerability, caring and healing... but Bill was also shaped by his core belief that Jesus was the Incarnate Word of God not only because he listened to the Spirit born within him but also because he listened to the Spirit that was alive in his people...and alive in those who were not his people... and he listened to creation and the teachings of the earth...and all of that engagement of life was fueled by a love and appreciation for God's Presence and the companionship of others. Just as Jesus embraced this incredible saga of Presence and Community, so did Bill Spofford. There was nothing static about this holy interaction. I know more stories than you have time to hear of Bill's itch to be moving....to be on the go....an active synergy reflecting, I believe, the theological drama he embraced. When he was our bishop, there were times when we did not know where he lived and at the conclusion of a clergy gathering, we would often ask: Bishop, which of the 37 visions for the diocese do you want us to engage?

For me, the most exciting dimension of Bill's theology of engagement was the primary attention he paid to context. He honored tradition and her teachings, but he was also reverent and expectant of the unique context of human life and the possibilities that might emerge from our prayerful attention. Consequently, he was leery of rigid orthodoxy....and he welcomed the wrestling that accompanied ancient truth being made uncouth by the grace that took context seriously. His theology of mission and evangelism was therefore shaped by his embrace of the Presence of Christ in his life and (like Harold Hill) knowing the territoryterritory filled with unknown truths of God just waiting to be embraced! What a difference it would have made in Christian history if we had employed such a fusion of theology and context more consistentlyinviting pagans and the truth they carried into our circles rather than condemning them to the fires of fear.

What continued to form Bill Spofford, I believe, was his love of wild and lonely places. It is obvious from his ministry story that Polly and he could have served in most of our planet's venues...and they came close to doing so...but his love of the rural west was telling. In many ways the habitat of Missionary Districts in the 60's and 70's was ideal for Bill's pastoral gifts, his penchant for teaching and his theology of Incarnation being driven by context. During those decades, the Town and Country Program was, I believe, the most significant training program for parish ministry in our Church. Funded by the Roan Ridge Trust and participating dioceses, Norman Foote, Bill Spofford, Letitia Croom, Wes Frensdorff and a host of great mentors provided seminarians and future lay leaders with summer internships usually in small isolated, rural settings. A perhaps forgotten legacy of that program was that the rank and file members of those small, often beleaguered congregations were the educators of the interns. The wisdom was in the community and the supervisors of the program, if they were worth their salt, continually drummed into the interns the instructions...get out in the community, call on your people, learn their ways and listen...listen...listen to how Christ is present in their lives. I believe in those humble grass root settings, people began to find their voices....and believe that what they thought mattered.... and the seeds were planted for engaging the issues that have come our way in the past sixty years. In such sharing of wisdom involving the whole Body of Christ you find a paradigm of Bill's vision for the Church...a paradigm that claimed baptism as the primary ordination of us all.

I am compelled to also touch on another aspect of Bill being influenced by our outback, fringe locales...east of the Cascades. It has to do with dearth...a difficult word to pronounce and to communicate. So, for your benefit and mine, I

looked up some synonyms for dearth and they included *lack, shortage, drought, famine, want, deficiency*. I know not if eastern Oregon is to blame for this but Bill took dearth very seriously. There were about six or seven of us representing Eastern Oregon who attended the 1970 Houston General Convention. Bill made all the arrangements and set the expense allotment for us. My father in law and I shared a room in the hotel chosen by Bill...a hotel I would not describe in polite company. And it was not very clean...bath room down the hall...and a single light bulb hanging from an ancient chord the only light in our room. Since we were not in our room very much the major problem was food. Bill set our per-diem food allowance at \$7.00. It was a ten day convention and by the second day we were hungry. The Rice Hotel, where most of the rest of the church was staying, was within eye sight and we began to gaze and graze...as in eastern Oregon cattle operations. The Rice was home to an incredible number of events that featured buffets with very long serving tables adorned with an amazing array of food. I look back on our grazing with some question of the ethics of our behavior...but at the time it was survival.

My favorite story of Bill Spofford is somewhat related to the Houston experience as it speaks to Bill's urging the Church to be more responsible in how we spend our money on accommodations and menus at meetings and gatherings. During John Hines's tenure as Presiding Bishop it was decided for their interim meeting that the House of Bishops would meet in a quite lavish resort in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. As the bishops were gathering, Bishop Hines was confronted by the hotel manager who said there was some nut out on the south grounds of the facility claiming to be a bishop and pitching a tent. The manager assured Bishop Hines that they were taking care of it and that the fellow was soon to be evicted. Bishop Hines quickly responded that the person in question was probably not a nut...that indeed he probably was a bishop...and his name was probably Spofford.

One further word about Bill's faithful journey...In John's Gospel, Jesus is describing his understanding of love...of how love originates with God and that it is described vividly in sacrificing one's own life for another...and then he said to his disciples: *I no longer call you servants for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.* Many in this room know this has become a core verse for me in my understanding of Jesus and a Christology that is welcoming, expansive and liberating. *I no longer call you servants for the servant does not know what his master is doing, but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.* What

transparency...no holding back...no guarding whatever truth we may think we carry...all we have learned of God is to be made known, one to another...and we expect the same from each member of our faith communities and beyond. Bill lived into this definition of friendship with deep integrity. Whether he was in our small, lovely St. Thomas Parish in Canyon City, OR or in our magnificent Cathedral in Washington, DC, he never used his ordination credentials or his impressive intellect or his considerable power to stifle people or to control outcomes or decisions.

In remembering this man there are marching orders for our future. Beware of standing on someone's oxygen tube...either literally or when in dialogue...shape your belief with fearless interaction...be confident in your faith, but do not be rigid...pay attention to context ...listen well, inviting others to share in the reciprocity of grace...and believe that friendship might just be the turn-key into governance...in the distribution of power...and in the reconciliation of humanity...a dream that cost our Lord his life....and a dream for which Bill Spofford lived.

Amen.....God bless you!