

“There was a table down at Duba’s”
Recollection by Richard A. Rhem
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Conversation has always been an important part of my life. When in seminary a close friend ran the bookstore and it became the site for ongoing animated conversations – or perhaps that is too mild – debates, arguments, confrontations between the “true conservatives and those of lesser commitment to the orthodox faith”. In typical student arrogance, we claimed we learned more in the bookstore than in class. That was silly, of course, but it also marked my seminary years.

One of my closest friends - then and to the present – is John Richard deWitt. Of acute mind and impeccable conservative commitment, “Dick” was a strong influence on me keeping me closely allied with the “old faith”. In the 1960s we both pursued graduate studies in The Netherlands – he at the very conservative Gereformeerde Seminary in Kampen; I, having begun to question my once solid orthodox Reformed faith matriculated to the University of Leiden where an internationally respected Reformed theologian, Professor Hendrikus Berkhof taught Dogmatics. This experience was the beginning of the parting of ways between Dick and me – but not of our friendship, our mutual esteem and affection.

I relate this background because returning from The Netherlands, Dick took a pastorate in the Southern Presbyterian Church, then a teaching career at the Reformed Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, and then to the pastorate of the very large, prestigious Presbyterian Church of Memphis, Tennessee. I returned to my first pastorate, the First Reformed Church of Spring Lake, Michigan whose name was changed in 1971 to Christ Community Church. The divide in thinking that was beginning to show in The Netherlands was widened.

To my dismay, in the early 1990s, Dick accepted a call from the Seventh Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, a congregation that, humanly speaking, could not compare with the Presbyterian congregation in Memphis. However Dick understands that move, I can only see it as a nostalgic return to the old Dutch Reformed piety of Dick’s youth. Seventh Reformed Church was very conservative – perhaps the most orthodox congregation in the Reformed Church of America.

Dick was (is) a great preacher. At the time I predicted he would draw the conservative ranks to Seventh necessitating a move to a larger structure. They did, indeed, add a balcony and increased the seating capacity considerably. But that is not why I relate all this.

Dr. Lester deKoster, one of the renowned leaders of the Christian Reformed Church, a former professor of rhetoric and the librarian at Calvin College and influential editor of the denomination’s magazine, *The Banner*, was attracted to Seventh and the preaching of Dick DeWitt. With his wife, Ruth, Dr. deKoster began to attend Seventh and eventually joined the congregation.

Dr. de Koster was, strange as it may seem, a close friend of Dr. Duncan Littlefair, famed pastor for many years of the Fountain Street Church, the bastion of liberal Christianity, in Grand Rapids. The two “giants” had crossed debating swords over the years. As far apart as can be imagined, they respected each other, and a deeper affection grew between them – two brilliant persons, a great gulf separating their respective faith understanding, yet intimate friends.

Dr. de Koster brought Dr. Littlefair to hear Dick de Witt preach. Dr. Littlefair knew a preacher when he heard one. He thought Seventh should rent De Vos Hall in Grand Rapids just to let Dick preach. There was quite a buzz as can be imagined when the “arch enemy of the faith” Duncan Littlefair attended services at Seventh.

Dr. de Koster (Lester) and Dr. Littlefair (Duncan) often lunched together. They invited Dick to join them. There was a table in a corner of Duba’s Bar where they met for serious and significant conversation – ideas, current events, things political, social and theological were always on the agenda.

After years of separation, my dear friend Dick was only a half hour away. We, too, had lunch, recalling much shared history as well as our present ministries. When I learned of the lunch Dick shared with Lester and Duncan, I asked Dick if he might see if I might be invited.

This was the time of our conflict with the Muskegon Classis of the Reformed Church of America. We were “in the news”. Duncan said, “Invite him. He needs us!” Lester was open to the invitation and prepared for battle with my “liberal views”. Our first lunch was a great experience for me; the stimulation of these really brilliant minds engaging each other thrilled me.

After the first lunch, Dick said to Lester, “I thought you were going to do battle with him”. Lester responded, “I liked him”. And from that time for nearly a decade, Tuesdays were sacred. The table at Duba’s was a kind of altar – I have no words for the stimulation, challenge and confirmation of those Tuesday encounters.

Lester, the staunch Calvinist, a scholar whose knowledge of John Calvin was second to none, was unyielding in his Reformed orthodoxy. Dick, too, never wavered from his Reformed faith though more open to the ongoing discussion of theological movement.

One Tuesday, whatever point was under discussion, Dick began to speak and I interrupted him, saying, “Dick reads all the books and journals I read and engages all the questions I engage.” Duncan turned to me and growled, “Don’t interrupt him!” He then turned to Dick and said, “What were you going to say?” Dick responded, “I was going to say what Dick just said.” Duncan, brilliant, mind razor-sharp, allowed no wandering from the point under discussion, tolerating no “side conversation”.

It was an incredible experience to be part of such a weekly conversation. We raised our glasses to Duncan’s mantra: “To the wonder, miracle, glory and joy of life”. For Duncan, that was “grace” enough, but Lester wanted prayer before the lunch was served. The highly engaged conversation never abated from the first sip of the martini until finally, after 2, 2 ½ hours we parted. We greeted and parted with embrace.

I cannot adequately express the wonder of that experience. Intellectually it was a feast whether we discussed the church fathers, the ancient creeds, or the latest theological publications, theology, politics, international relations, the human condition – all found place. Yet beyond the amazing stimulation of ideas, was the miracle of four persons who covered the whole spectrum from Liberal to Conservative, loving each other with deep affection. It was an amazing demonstration of loving human bonding beyond all separation or perspective on the deep and abiding issues of our human situation.

In my own growth and development, in my thinking and understanding I saw and loved a Lester who held dear to all that had shaped me. And I saw in Duncan, one so far from whence I came, so full of the awe and wonder of life, claiming to hold to natural religion – a naturalist who senses God in every leaf, every blade of grass, one alive with God. Dick and I

remain in touch, though now through correspondence as he retired from Seventh only to become pastor of the historic First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, South Carolina.

One of the highest honors accorded me was a privilege of conducting Duncan’s funeral in the beautiful Fountain Street Church he so loved. In my meditation I suggested the man who for years never spoke of “God” lest he be misunderstood, was, in reality “drunk with God”. Drunk with God he was and our Tuesday lunches were drenched with the divine – a bit of heaven in the midst of our ordinary days.

Richard Rhem