



INSTITUTE FOR
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My Friend Rob

As I write this, it is one year ago today - Friday the thirteenth, 1996 - that Robert Gordon Campbell Dunn, age 52, died of AIDS. He was a neighbor, dear friend, and "uncle" to my two children, especially my 14-year-old son Cory, who had known Rob since he was a toddler. Rob's death marked, for me, the end of an era: Rob was the last in a long line of people I loved who died of AIDS.

I didn't cry that much when Rob died. He had been in the hospital for fully one year before his death and had wasted away in an agonizingly slow fashion for months before his body finally, mercifully, broke down completely. His death was in no way romantic, he spoke no last words of wisdom before he left, he seemed ambivalent and scared of death up to the end. I wasn't even there at the moment he took his last breaths, although, thank the Mother, his loving nurse was with him to gather him in her arms as he passed. His death seemed anticlimactic to me and left me with a dull ache rather than sharp grief and tears. I told myself I had done all that in "anticipatory grieving."

Rob's life was as unique as his death was ordinary. He was part of a generation of gay men who had had the misfortune to "come out" before Stonewall. Like his peers in the gay community, Rob took for granted that gay life should imitate heterosexual living as closely as possible. Rob had been raised an upper-class WASP, and as an adult had a management career with a major gasoline company. He had a house in the suburbs, supported his "wife" in staying home to care for a legion of pets, and probably voted Republican. He was smart and often dryly funny, but mostly - well, rather pompous and a bit boring.

Then in 1985, during the birth of the Hyacinth AIDS Foundation, Rob, feeling a void in his life, became one of the earliest Hyacinth volunteers. Rob had spent his entire life insulated from the mass of humanity. Although he had experienced great pain from the stigmatization of being gay, he had in many respects led an otherwise privileged life. Now he came face to face with the most disadvantaged members of society: men, women, and children, straight and gay, who suffered multiple obstacles of illness, stigmatization, poverty, discrimination, and lack of opportunity. Rob observed and took on responsibility for the pain of the people he helped, but he also observed courage, determination, and generosity he had never encountered in his own family or social peers.

In 1986 he discovered he was HIV positive, and this knowledge propelled him to make every day of the remainder of his life meaningful. Rob divorced his "wife," moved from the 'burbs to my neighborhood in Jersey City, and devoted the bulk of his time to volunteer work and political activism. The aloof, arrogant white privileged male was reborn with his heart wide open with compassion for the downtrodden of the world. Rob found himself compelled to help others, and the more he devoted his life to helping the broader the scope of his compassion became. He founded a shelter for homeless people with AIDS in Jersey City, most of whom were not gay men, but rather IV drug users and people of color. He visited people with AIDS in public hospitals who were dying and had no other visitors. He did work with ACT-UP. When he for a time had an African-American lover, he immersed himself in learning about the problems of racism and from then on donated time and money to civil rights causes. When I adopted a baby from Guatemala, he learned about the role of the U.S. in oppression in Latin America and started donating money to Save the Children.

Rob had become a truly spiritual person. He remained suspicious until his death of organized religion, but he was drawn to the work of Ram Dass, who some of you

fellow "boomers" will recognize as Timothy Leary's sidekick, former Harvard professor and author of the hippie Bible *Be Here Now*. Ram Dass' primary message is that caring for others is a path to spiritual enlightenment. Rob did not learn this message; he became it. One of the many ways that Rob and I connected was in our devotion to Ram Dass. We went to many Ram Dass lectures and retreats together; we would joke that we were Ram Dass "junkies" who needed at least an annual "dose of Dass" to stay sane.

In January of this year I signed up for a week-long meditation retreat with Ram Dass to occur in July at Omega Institute in New York State. In February Ram Dass suffered a massive stroke and will probably never speak publicly again. The July retreat was held anyway as a benefit for RD, and I went to it. The minute I walked into the Main Hall at Omega, I realized for the first time that I had never been to a Ram Dass event without Rob. My sense of loss was overwhelming.

I cried for four days, for Rob, for Ram Dass, for Tony, Bob, Bill and all the other PWAs I loved, for all the losses in my life, and mostly of course for myself feeling so alone and afraid. Around the fourth day I began to hear Rob commenting, "Margie, darling, don't you think this is a bit much? I love drama as much as you do, but really..." I found myself laughing. The healing had begun.

My son Cory carries a picture of Rob in his wallet. Cory loves Rob and misses him on a personal basis, but because of his altruism and social conscience, Cory also considers Rob a hero. Come to think of it, so do I.