

HERB SHELLANS (1931-2003)

As he wrote of himself in a poem – “How? When? What? Why? Damn, I’m such a curious guy!” – Herb was the most intellectually inquisitive man I’ve ever meant. He’s the only person I know who went to the library on a regular basis voluntarily. From Shakespeare to American Indian culture to folklore, Herb spent his life reading about the things in this world that fascinated him. He continually questioned practically everything, then he avidly researched all possible answers to those questions.

Raconteur, scholar, musician, author, artist – Herb was a true Renaissance man. He grew up in a rent-controlled apartment in Brooklyn, New York, on a street rich with ethnic diversity. His father, Sam, worked a number of jobs to support his family including courier, hotel doorman, and short order cook. It’s from his father that Herb likely learned to cook: Mike often fondly recalls to me that his dad’s perfectly cooked eggs – neither too runny nor too hard – and sautéed mushrooms were among his culinary specialties. Herb’s mother, Annie, was a legal secretary for a number of years, and she possessed an exuberance, sense of humor and love of life that were infectious. From Annie, Herb likely learned generosity and compassion, for he displayed interest in and concern for others, whatever the situation.

Herb’s curiosity about people and genuine kindness colored his actions throughout his life. Herb went out of his way to chat with service people and wait staff, and he liked to learn a few words in other languages specifically so he could communicate with foreign people in their native tongue. When Mike was a teen, he remembers running errands with his dad one day when Herb picked up a young hitchhiker. Herb drove the boy to his destination and, after a long conversation, gave him \$20. During Herb’s final stay at Hospice, a young lady was visiting someone in the unit, and she was carrying her newborn baby. It was a beautiful little girl, and the mother stepped into Herb’s room to say hello. The baby didn’t make a sound but smiled at Herb and Herb, though in pain, said kindly to the proud mother, “She’s only going to get sweeter and sweeter.”

Herb had been blessed with a beautiful tenor voice, and he taught himself to play guitar. As a young man, he became part of the singing group, The Wanderers, which appeared at various local venues and events in New York and New Jersey. Although Herb wanted badly to study music and become a professional musician, his father discouraged this as a vocation, stressing instead that he pursue an education. Sam wanted the best for his son, naturally, and didn't want him to struggle financially the way he himself had.

Singing remained important throughout Herb's life, and Herb would sing quite often during lectures, even if it was an Anthropology or Sociology class he was teaching. In 1968 he published the book, Folk Songs of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a text he compiled after traveling throughout the south and audio taping songs as they were sung to him. Even as his illness began taking a greater toll on him, Herb was using a hand exerciser Mike bought for him, trying to build up enough strength in them so that he could play his guitar once more.

While at Manhattan College, Herb fell in love with Harriet Rosenfeld, a beautiful classmate who attended band with him. Harriet was as reserved as Herb was extroverted, and they seemed perfectly suited to one another. From china to books, brass plates and Toby jugs, Herb and Harriet were enthusiastic collectors of various items, mostly English in origin. Their ideal afternoon was one spent visiting various junk and antique shops searching out unique finds. When Harriet began to decline from diabetes, Herb was her sole caregiver, lovingly attending to her.

Shortly before they married, Herb was drafted into the Army and was stationed at Ft. Dix in New Jersey. Although army life was not to Herb's liking, he approached it with his scholar's mind: while going through Herb's papers, Mike found copious notes Herb had taken during basic training, all scrupulously detailed, whatever the subject. My personal favorite is the small page he kept on proper protocol for prisoner-taking: Search, Silence, Segregate, Speed in Evacuation, Safeguard.

In a letter home to his parents, shortly after his induction, Herb lamented, "I'm still not completely without some pangs of loneliness. It's funny how one can feel so alone although living working, sleeping

and eating with so many other men. And, I do feel alone, very much alone." He made the best of his two years, however, even receiving good conduct and sharp shooting commendations. Music remained important even in the service, and Pfc. Herb Shellans performed frequently on The Fort Dix Show, a half-hour soldier talent show broadcast in the very early days of television. Thanks to his various business courses, Herb was an excellent typist, so the only action he saw was from behind a typewriter.

In no particular order, here are some thoughts on the various roles Herb played throughout his life.

THE TEACHER

Mike recalls that Herb always seemed to cut it close when leaving for work. Their home was just a couple of miles from Phoenix College so if the start time for class was 5:40pm, Herb would invariably leave the house at 5:30pm. He was rarely (if ever) late, so his ability to cut it close yet time it perfectly has always stayed with Mike.

After class, Herb would linger to speak to any student who needed his time. His office door always stood open, in case students came by.

When he was a kid, Mike would sometimes accompany his father when he taught night school, and he'd watch him lecture. He admired his dad's use of humor, and how he made an effort to get to know each of his students. (Mike obviously learned some teaching skills from his dad, as 2004 marked the start of Mike's twenty-first year on a college faculty).

THE EPICURE

Herb loved ice cream with a passion, and his favorite flavor was Baskin-Robbins Pralines 'n Cream. During his a hospital stay in early 2003, when he fought off pneumonia, Herb was eating up to 4 ice creams a day. He took to writing poems on the lids and giving them staff members. ("Once I was a little boy/Once I was a soldier/Once I dreamed of wondrous things/Instead, I just got older!") The last coherent thing Herb said to his son was, "Mike, do you think I can get some ice cream?" Naturally, Herb got some.

Herb was a fixture at Hometown Buffet and Sweet Tomatoes, where he loved to fill up on salad and “crunchy” vegetables. Mike and I enjoyed a final Father’s Day with Herb in May of 2003, when we went to a favorite restaurant here in Phoenix. You’d have never known he was a dying man, as Herb devoured steak, mushrooms, baked potato, salad and bread with gusto, and he washed everything down with a tall Bass ale beer.

THE CUT-UP

As Herb began preparing for his death, he did so in a typically organized, yet humorous manner. He collected all of his instructions for Mike regarding his accounts, etc., in a folder he labeled, “Book of the Dad.”

On the title page of Herb’s unpublished book on song parodies he used the pen name Norm de Plume.

There was an occasion when Herb quoted to me a tawdry routine from none other than Andrew “Dice” Clay. It’s not an ordinary senior citizen who can quote that sort of material, and I nearly fell off my chair. He had impeccable timing, Herb did, and he was masterful at telling jokes and using puns.

THE DAD

Herb relished his role as a father. When Mike was 4 or 5, Herb dressed up as Santa Claus one Christmas, then went outside and banged on the roof with a broom to simulate reindeer. Mike got so scared he cried. Mike recalls both of his parents supporting his musical endeavors wholeheartedly, encouraging and praising his pursuits. Herb encouraged in Mike the musical pursuit his own father had denied him, a legacy not lost on his son. When Mike, a burgeoning jazz trombonist, learned of a fine instrument for sale, one of his nicest memories is that his dad purchased it for him without hesitation, specifically winning the money at the dog track. During his illness, Mike usually saw his dad daily, and they often enjoyed eating lunch at a favorite restaurant. After one such outing, Herb and Mike visited a music store where Herb – again – shared in his son’s passion for music by buying him a tenor guitar. A gift all the more significant now.

Herb was a very good baseball player when he was a boy and was a fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers. In later years, he avidly followed the Diamondbacks. A very nice memory of Mike's is when he and his dad ate Chinese take-out together and watched the D-Backs win the World Series.

THE SCHOLAR

Later in life, Herb developed a special interest in Albert Einstein and felt he had a sort of cosmic connection with him. He read all of Einstein's works, had a six-foot tall cutout of him in his apartment, and he claimed that that at night, he had conversations with Einstein. (And this was before Herb even became ill).

When Herb moved into his new apartment at Fellowship Square in 2002, he brought with him 60 cartons of books. (That's no typo: 6-0 cartons, all full of books). Somehow, he managed to fit all of the volumes into his 2-bedroom unit and, although his time there was all too brief, he loved it.

A talented sketch artist, Herb enjoyed drawing pictures of birds and assorted wildlife, and also his beloved cat. One of the last pictures Herb drew was of a Bird of Paradise that had bloomed on the grounds of his community.

Herb wrote copiously over the years. Mike found reams of paper throughout his apartment with random thoughts, melody lines, a simple line or two of poetry or complete poems, and assorted song lyrics. These thoughts included reflections on his childhood, religion, nature and his illness. Many of them were about his parents or Harriet, and how much he loved and missed them. I'm sure he wrote the most late at night, and I think he stayed awake because his mind never stopped working and working. Not until the very end.

THE WAYFARER

The afternoon before he lost consciousness, Herb was struggling very hard to tell Mike something. His brain was starved for oxygen by that time, so it was hard for him to marshal his thoughts into words. As he held Mike's hand and looked intensely into his eyes, all he was able to say over and over was, "The future . . . The future." It was a very

touching and heartbreaking tableau for me to witness, but one as old as time. Herb was passing the torch to the next generation: his son, his name-bearer. Although there was more Herb may have wanted to say, the loving gaze he turned on Mike, and the warmth of his hand said it all.

Herb began the final leg of his journey shortly after that, and the inevitable call from Hospice came just after 1:30 a.m. on August 26. His struggle ended, the professor had reached the ultimate destination and would now, at last, learn all the answers to the questions he'd spent his lifetime asking.