

Rut Tufts, an Indispensable Friend

I think we all say frequently about ourselves, as Donald Rumsfeld did when challenged to resign recently, “There’s no such thing as the indispensable person.” And perhaps we don’t believe it any more than Rumsfeld did about himself. But Rut Tufts came as close as anyone could to being an indispensable person, even though he would never have made that claim. We are only now coming to see how indispensable he was.

Auret put it best when, in his president’s report for this meeting, he said that Rut’s death “left a void in the soul of the organization.” Organizations don’t have souls, except as the values they exemplify are embodied in the people who are central to them. And Rut embodied this organization’s soul in so many ways. I think of four:

--**his integrity in all his dealings.** You could always trust that whatever Rut said was straightforward and true to his understanding. If transparency is important to the FLA, it was central to the way Rut operated in all his dealings.

--**his painstaking attention to detail.** Rut was thorough in searching through the most minute details of our financial or personnel situations, sometimes exasperatingly thorough. He never let broad generalities substitute for the hard work of detailed analysis, something that embodies the way this organization works, or attempts to work.

--**his vision of the mission of the FLA, to improve the lives of those who work to make the goods sold by the FLA member companies and licensees.** Rut’s commitment to labor rights long pre-dated his involvement with the FLA and it never wavered. No matter how detailed his day-to-day labors got, he never lost sight of that central vision.

--**finally, his openness to be a bridge across divides,** as for example between the FLA and the WRC. Having experience and trust in both camps he was invaluable as a person who understood the ethos and values of both, and that spirit pervaded his work. It is a legacy we must work hard to sustain.

As an NGO representative, I can also recall the many times that Rut came to the NGO board members to point to a need for vigilance – often on matters we hadn’t noticed. In the ongoing daily work of the FLA, there is a natural tendency for the companies and the universities to dominate the dialogue, as their involvement is a matter of daily detailed concerns. But Rut was always mindful of a possible bias or imbalance in our work that might result, and so he took pains to make certain that we avoided any such problems by keeping the NGO members abreast of issues that needed our attention as they arose.

A couple months ago I also lost a great mentor, the Rev. William Sloan Coffin, who was chaplain at Yale when I was a seminary student there, and under whose leadership I had worked for a time. Among the many tributes and articles written about Bill Coffin after he died, he was quoted as having said in a recent interview, “*The only way to have a*

good death is to lead a good life. Lead a good one, full of curiosity, generosity, and compassion, and there's no need at the close of day to rage against the dying of the light. We can go gentle into that good night."

Curiosity, generosity and compassion characterized Rut's life. To that I'd add humility and humor. And Rut had these in abundance. My favorite personal memory of Rut was from a trip to China he and I made as part of a group of board members testing our monitoring protocols in about 2001. It was, I believe, Rut's first trip to that part of the world, and although I had been in various parts of Asia for decades, it was also my first trip to China outside a brief stay in Beijing years before. And although neither of us spoke Chinese, I felt a certain advantage in being able to read many of the signs, as I read Japanese. One afternoon Rut and I took off from the town where our hotel was located to visit the Opium War Museum in a nearby town on the banks of the Pearl River. We spent about two hours learning how barbaric the western powers were in that war. And then, feeling somewhat the target of historically deserved Chinese anger, we started to wander down toward the river. Being able, supposedly, to read the signs, I took the lead and very soon had led the two of us into a blind alley at the end of which was a large hog butchery filled with workers with long knives. After our experience at the museum, it was not a comfortable place for two gangly foreigners to be, at least in our imagination.

Well, Rut never let me forget that incident. And every time since then, when I have proposed something that he saw might also lead the FLA down a blind alley to a slaughter house, he would remind me of how I got us lost once before.

Rut's was not a "good death." It was premature, sudden, blindingly abrupt and tragic, that ended a very productive life and left his family and colleagues without any opportunity for a farewell. But his was a "good life," full of curiosity, generosity, compassion, humility and humor. And perhaps Bill Coffin is right, that that's the only preparation we can make for a "good death." While we may "rage at the dying of the light" in Rut's case, we can also celebrate, learn from, and for a long time ahead, appreciate our friend Rut and his "good life." May he rest in peace, and may all his family and friends find healing for that void in our collective soul that he left.

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