

“PETER’S WORK”: A TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR PETER M. CICCHINO

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Preparing to write this tribute to my dear friend Peter, I pull from my file cabinet an overstuffed folder labeled “Peter’s Work.” Afraid of rushing headlong into the sadness that still sits within me because of his too-early death, I enter this shadowy wood of words very tentatively. “I miss Peter so much,” I think to myself, “that seeing his words without seeing or hearing *him* will conjure only more grief.” Happily, with each step through the letters, articles, book chapters, editorials, and other pieces that Peter sent to me over the years, the wood grows more hospitable and I grow more spirited. A familiar voice seems to be calling from just around the next tree and I keep following it. Not surprisingly, Peter’s words fill all available space and time. Hours go by and I find myself continuing on—marveling *again*, laughing *again*, agreeing and disagreeing *again* and *again*. Rather than remind me of his absence, Peter’s words assert his presence. Like Prior Walter at the end of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, “Peter’s Work” looks me in the eye and demands “more life.”

From the moment I met him in August of 1982, I knew Peter was one of the most intelligent people I would ever know. Eloquent, witty, insightful, funny, Peter continually amazed me with his encyclopedic mind *and* heart. He could speak authoritatively about the applicability of Augustine’s theory of *ius in bello* to the nuclear proliferation of the 1980s seconds before clarifying the terms of *Star Trek*’s Organian Peace Treaty. Despite the mounds of work that covered his desk, he could give himself wholly to other people, helping them either to wend their way through Plotinus or to protest

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CIA recruitment on a Catholic university campus. Admittedly, Peter could make me crazy with his facility for words. After nights of lively conversation, during which he would sometimes berate me for being a “fence-sitter,” I would secretly hope that Peter would wake up the next day with laryngitis—just so I could think of something to say in the face of all those compound-complex sentences.

After eighteen years of knowing Peter M. Cicchino, I have finally thought of something to say, and I make it my tribute to him, his work, and our friendship. I am a different person because of Peter and his words. Though they have sometimes made a bloody entrance, Peter’s words have found a mark in me, making me more alive to justice and prodding me to spend less time sitting on fences. They have continually urged me to stay connected to my working-class family background and relearn living lessons on the dignity of labor and the “hidden injuries of class.” Peter’s words have given me elegant access to the political and moral ideals that grew from the sturdy trunk at the center of his life: the dignity and equality of all people. “Gay and lesbian people, people of color, women, the weak and the marginalized, the outsiders and nonconformists of all stripes, and poor people—especially, especially poor people”—proved Peter’s unflagging guides in knowing and engaging the world. Peter’s words have urged me to make those same people my guides in teaching, scholarship, and religious ministry. Peter’s words have invited me to imagine the shape of a new world where words *actually* take flesh in deeds of love, justice and peace.

I am more alive because of Peter M. Cicchino. “Peter’s Work” cannot be contained by an overstuffed folder in a file cabinet, by books on shelves, by articles in journals, not even by an imaginary wood of words. “Peter’s Work” transgresses boundaries and grows in potency with every thoughtful action and every active thought aimed at securing “the conditions for a decent human life for others.” “Peter’s Work,” for which I will be ever grateful, is that which awakens, provokes, imagines, demands “*more life!*”