

Remembering Dion

Ian Weeks

Monday, July 16th, 2007.

Before I say anything about Dion I would like to thank several people. Emily I cannot find enough words to say how much my family and I have appreciated your friendship, through the trip to Canada and the USA and then in the last 6 months as you moved to Shepherd St and were simply there for Dion. Adrian, you too have played a very important part in the last years of Dion's life. Dr Elizabeth Leder had a special relationship with Dion as his GP for 15 years. Her care was wonderful. John King was Dion's neurological specialist who gave calm, patient and endlessly gentle care. Nurses at Melbourne and then Cotham Rod Private were also very kind. I watched one day, in astonishment, as Nurse Ardana Duncan moved Dion. For 10 minutes her every action was a half speed as she adjusted her movements to what Dion could match and to what he could stand. I have never seen such care and beauty in action, and I now know better than ever what "nursing" can mean. Thank you.. Then I would like to thank all of our family for their continuing care and concern and help. Finally, I want to thank all of you for coming here today and those who have sent messages. Continuing friendship meant a huge amount to Dion as his abilities collapsed.

Rudyard Kipling created a wonderful boy who travelled on the railway lines of North India, where our family travelled from Azamgarh to the foothills of the Himalaya's at Dehra Doon. This boy's name was Kim, but in the market places of Lahore, Delhi, Lucknow and Benares he was known everywhere as "the friend of all the world". That was also true of Dion. I am again and again astonished by the range and diversity of his friendships and his capacity to make friends in so many different places. How did that come to be?

I would like to tell you about the day before Dion's birth and the day of his birth. His mother, Wendy, and I went down to the US Embassy in South Yarra on the morning of the 27th of June, 1969. We joined thousands of others in a protest or demonstration, outside the US Embassy, speaking against the war in Vietnam. At one point several Maoists from Monash University threw Molotov Cocktails against the wall of one of

the Embassy buildings, which led a group of Mounted Police to charge the crowd in order to disperse them. I got Wendy out of there very quickly in case of any accident to her or Dion. In the early afternoon I came back to the Embassy to have an interview for our visas to go to Yale University. Needless to say I was hoping that no film footage had been developed by then. In the evening I was one of four speakers in the Melbourne Town Hall on the subject of Marxist-Christian Dialogue. At 1.00am in the next morning Wendy went into labour so we rushed down to the Women's Hospital where Dion was peacefully born in the early morning.

A few days later Wendy and Dion came out of hospital to St Hilda's College in the University of Melbourne, where Wendy and I were tutors. Dion was the first child born to St Hilda's College. Somewhere in the endless boxes of papers and photos I have a photo taken of Dion sitting in a small carry crib in front of a Television set on which Neil Armstrong was taking his and mankind's first steps onto the moon. When Dion was only 6 weeks old we flew to San Francisco and then on to New York and then went by train soon after to New Haven Connecticut. All of these things happened as the world around us was changing in astonishing ways. Many of you will take all of this for granted; it is simply the passage of your life. That view, however, conceals the astonishing nature and speed of the changes taking place at that time, and the enormous human violence involved in all of this. The American poet Allan Ginsburg wrote a famous poem about this time, called *Howl*, in which he says:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked...
Who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake like
Tragedy among the scholars of war
Who wandered – around and around at midnight in the rail road yard wondering where to go
And went, leaving no broken hearts...
And who were given instead the concrete void of insulin metrasol – electricity hydrotherapy –
Psychotherapy, occupational therapy, ping pong and amnesia...
And blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an *eli eli lamma sabacthani* saxophone
Cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio...
With the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand
years

In this world Dion soon found himself in confusion. Everyone who knew him spoke of a boy of considerable intelligence who could soon talk on any subject and soon talk

almost anyone around to whatever view suited Dion. But when he came to write the brilliance fled in a mess that looked like so many drunken chickens dancing foot prints spattered across inky messes of pages. None of us were able to solve Dion's despair in the contradictions between his abilities, and that despair marked one side of his life, for all of his life.

Alongside this, however, Dion made himself a world and a life that many of you shared with him. In electricity and lighting and rock concerts with the very best of the great rock bands of Australia and from overseas, he found a home for his abilities which flowered in the different spaces of the electronic, illuminated, sonically-supercharged world. And he found a home in computers and later in digital photography, all part of the new world into which he was born. He was very good at this world. When he moved to Shepherd St, Surrey Hills, for the last two years of his life he re-wired much of the house so that he could remotely control lights and power. Yes, it is true that often Dion was like the electricity that coursed through the lights and sounds. He too could burn and shock. He did that often. But he was also a person of astonishing inner calm and the ability to understand people in deep and subtle ways. He once told me something about one person by telling me something that seemed to be about another person. It took me two hours to work out what he wanted to tell me, and why he told it to me so indirectly. He was a man with great insight and depth of understanding and compassion.

Late last year he came to see that the Motor Neuron Disease was moving from the peripheral muscles of his hands and legs to his throat and mouth. We went together to his GP, Elizabeth Leder and his neurological specialist, John King, and when they confirmed the progress of the disease he conducted research on the internet and arrived at the decisions not to allow surgical interventions for breathing and feeding, to cease taking the drug Rylutil which slowed the disease, and to not allow anti-biotic treatment for the lung infections which would surely come. His clarity of mind and courage in the face of these matters drew on the deepest resources of his being – and he did not find himself lacking in these. I find myself astonished with his courage and understanding.

At the same time he raged against the prohibitions and prejudices that prevented him from more directly and sooner ending his life. He consulted with Phillip Nitske, with Dignitas in Switzerland, and with various other organisations and individuals who had expertise in these areas. I share with him complete perplexity at the barbarity of our laws and practices. I urge you, as his friends and family, to join in building a kinder, compassionate and peaceful way in which those who with clear minds confront the ending of their own lives can do so without interference, stigmatism, and barbarity. Earlier this year I wrote *A Letter On Euthanasia to the Philosophical Society* at Deakin University, and the students, my colleagues and I met and discussed that letter. I have copied here the last few paragraphs of that Letter and I want to end with those words:

“Dylan Thomas wrote, “...go not gently into that dark night...”. He must have known my son. He is not going gently. As his disease has remorselessly worsened he has had many outbursts of rage, against the disease; against those who don't help and against help which re-enforces his helplessness; against family and friends who cannot care enough; against a father who cannot “kiss and make it better”. These rages, often annoying and inconvenient, sometimes trigger off feelings of helplessness in me, and powerful spasms of guilt over the many times of inattention, of self-pre-occupation, of ambitions and distances that displaced time together.

And there is so much more. There are so many memories across continents, and plans for the future which will not be. All of these are so profoundly important that they cannot be said because of the grief they release. For a father the opportunities to share in the nursing of a son are so very paradoxical. There is no school in which to learn how to do this.

What am I saying here at the end of this letter? I am struggling to say something about the extraordinary intimacy of disease and death, and that in the face of the coming dissolution of intimacy. This is an unbearable experience and yet it must be born. It stretches out to a coming end, but it is like a restless, tossed night, with rumpled sheets and tangled thoughts. In this expectation, horror, bearing, intimacy, often filled with hurt and confusion and despair and rage – is an experience of humanity that is pricelessly intimate and deep.

All this takes one to a realm that is beyond the social and the political. In this experience one meets the human, in all of the lurching awkwardness of what we are. This cannot be a place where we allow politics and parties and positions to intrude in their gross generality. The human is such an awkward, tender shoot that needs almost infinite care.”

Dion died on the 10th of July, 2007 at approximately 5.00pm, at the Cotham Rd Private Hospital in Kew, a suburb of Melbourne. He died peacefully, gently and quickly from the effects of a chest infection and from the medications which had helped him bear the pain of Motor Neuron Disease for the past two and a half years.

I read this tribute to him at a Service of Thanksgiving for His Life, held at the Fawkner Crematorium. He was surrounded by a wonderful gathering of family and friends. After the funeral we gathered at the Retreat Hotel in Sydney Rd, Brunswick, for a wake. Later his family gathered together at the home of Gill (Weeks) and Robert Webb in East Hawthorn.

R.I.P.