

Gene Is Dead

I did not know Gene well. Now that he might have committed suicide, his body washed ashore in Bodega Bay, I wish I knew him better. As I write these words, I strain to recollect whatever I can remember about him, so that I can know him better.

As the director of Loaves & Fishes, I do not get to know many of our homeless guests personally. I'm too immersed in tending to our little bureaucracy and dealing with the personnel politics of staff and board to work at the street level. As you can imagine, the few guests I get to deal with personally are those who stand out because they reside on the outer banks of the rules of Loaves & Fishes. Or they know how to start at the top when they have a complaint to make or an emergency loan to seek. These few have learned the most important lesson in pleading: persistence at the highest level of bureaucracy brings the greatest reward. And even if all they receive for their effort is a final "No," they heard it from the top. Getting to the warden achieves the highest status in the game of prison. Loaves & Fishes is not a prison, and I am not a warden, but the game is similar.

Gene was a young man in his early 30's, I think. He was always bedecked in a cowboy hat with the side brims curled up and decorated with a few long feathers sticking out from the headband. He walked in great haste and spoke in gulps of sentences. Wired up, eyes bulging, he would march into my office to bring me city, county, state, or federal regulations, which, in his view, paved the way for immediate construction of housing for homeless people. Each of these official-looking documents was turned over to me with a sense of urgency and secrecy, as if they had just been slipped to him by a government informant.

Gene generally managed to make his bold interruptions when I was in a meeting with another staffperson or talking on the telephone. To my credit, I listened to him, took his materials, thanked him profusely, and patted him on the shoulder as he left.

During the last year or two, my sightings of Gene were infrequent. He was in school, he told me once, to get his contractor's license. He told me he was no longer homeless and that he had been sober for a long time. I never doubted

his sobriety, but because he was always so wired and his communications so urgent and intense, I wondered if he might not be using crank.

Gene suffered from delusions of grandeur, but I suppose in many ways we all do. On one occasion, he burst into my office with a letter for me to sign. He had written a letter of recommendation about himself, addressed to the City of Sacramento Building Department, in which he stated that he had served as our on-site building inspector during the course of construction of the new Loaves & Fishes dining room. I told him I would be happy to sign the letter, but it would be necessary for me to rewrite it so that I could state his position in my own words. He said, "Fine!" I rewrote the letter in such a way as to imply that Gene had been helpful to us during construction, but I took great care to avoid any specifics. Gene thought the final letter was excellent. He carefully added it to his stack of documents and rushed off with a flourish, much the same way he had entered.

I strain to remember the last time I talked with him. I was standing in the middle of North C Street, talking with a staff member, when Gene appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. He walked right up and confided to me that he was hard at work on a research project that had to do with housing construction. He also wanted me to assure him I had received his latest delivery of documents, which he had left for me with the receptionist. I said I had received them and thanked him very much. Suddenly, he was off with great strides and in full motion.

The first reports surrounding his death tell of his recent depressions and a quantity of Valium found in his car at Bodega Bay after his body washed ashore. Later reports point out that he had made meal preparations in the little house close by the beach where he was staying, and this seemed to contradict the suicide theory.

Poor Gene. I wonder if the pounding surf, the roar and the energy of the ocean did not call him forth beyond his own control. Gene was always forward in his motion, seeking God knows what. I hope he found it at last.

I wish I knew him better.