

Chuck Matthei, 1948-2002

By ROBERT ELLSBERG

Many of us can remember the day when Chuck Matthei first entered our lives. With his clarity of vision, his moral consistency and fearlessness, he gave the impression that it would not be such a difficult thing after all—in fact, it would be a great adventure—to live by one's ideals.

My own introduction to Chuck came one night in 1974, when I returned to my dorm room at Harvard and found him waiting for me. I didn't know who he was or how he had found me, but his appearance was well timed. Since turning eighteen that winter of my freshman year I had been undergoing a private crisis about whether to register for the draft. Scarcely anyone I knew could comprehend why this was something to worry about. But Chuck understood. Having somehow heard about my dilemma he had hitchhiked several hours to meet me.

As I later discovered, this was characteristic behavior for Chuck. He was drawn like a magnet to any young person at a moral crossroad. It didn't matter what the issue was. He didn't come to tell people what to do, but to share his own experience, and to support whatever instinct had led them to probe more deeply into the meaning and purpose of life.

To say that Chuck made a strong impression would be a great understatement. His long red beard and the authority in his voice made him seem much older than his years. (He was in his mid-twenties.) One could hardly fail to be caught up in his energy, his sense of mission, and his vision of a better world. He struck me as a modern Sir Galahad, "whose strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure." I had never met anyone like him.

His story unfolded during our first conversation. I learned about his growing up in Chicago and facing the challenge of Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement, about how he himself had met a crossroad in his life, passing up the opportunity of college and instead discovering his own alternative path after attending a Peacemakers conference in Cincinnati. Since then, he had tried to live consistently by the spirit of nonviolence, inspired by such figures as Gandhi, Tolstoy, and Dorothy Day. As far as I could tell he was something of an itinerant agitator—what Ammon Hennacy would call a "one man revolution"—who tried to change the world by the power of his own witness.

Chuck was a complete vegetarian—a "vegan"—who fasted one day a week, and did most of his grocery shopping out of supermarket dumpsters. When he was arrested for civil disobedience he practiced total non-cooperation—refusing to walk or eat. On a couple of occasions this policy put him in real peril. His reasoning was that by his refusal to cooperate he confronted the authorities with the full weight of his conscience as well as the full extent of their own responsibility. His hope and experience was that this type of response could transform any situation and open up surprising avenues of dialogue. He had seen it happen. When he was arrested for draft resistance in Chicago, the usually severe judge in his case was so intrigued and eventually moved by Chuck's witness that he ended up releasing him after only forty days.

The theme of freedom and responsibility was a recurring motif in Chuck's conversations. No matter what our circumstances, he said, we should never accept the claim that we have no choices. One of his favorite books was Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, a work based on the author's experiences in a Nazi concentration camp. Victor Frankl wrote that we have no control over the circumstances of our lives but, we have the power, under all circumstances, to shape our attitude. This was a message that Chuck lived by, and a gift he shared with anyone who would listen.

A year after meeting Chuck, I dropped out of college and made my way to the Catholic Worker in New York. There, in the following years, our paths frequently coincided. Chuck had been a long-time fellow traveler of the

Catholic Worker, and in these years he often returned to the Tivoli Farm as a base of operations. Though he never explicitly called himself a Christian, he found in the Catholic Worker movement, with its comprehensive vision of nonviolence, its personal ethic, its solidarity with the poor, and its constructive program, the closest expression of his personal values. Dorothy Day, in turn, loved him for his courage and discipline, his capacity for work, and his willingness to suffer for his beliefs. She often remarked that he was "another Ammon—but without the vanity."

By the late 1970s, Chuck's interests were turning increasingly to the field of alternative economics. It was a natural development from his interest in Gandhi. Chuck believed it wasn't enough simply to protest war and social injustice; we ought to translate the principles of nonviolence into programs that would make a real difference in the lives of the poor and point in the direction of a new social order. Before long, he had become a recognized authority on alternative models of land tenure and economic development. For someone who continued to live at subsistence level, he showed a positive genius for financial management. Over the next two decades, first as director of the Institute for Community Economics and then the founder of Equity Trust in Voluntown, CT, he established programs that benefited countless families and communities. No matter what the task or the challenge at hand, he always brought his full energy, his spirit, and his heart. As his mother later said, "His life was his work, and his work was his life."

Many years went by without my having much contact with Chuck. He would get in touch from time to time to buy copies of my anthology of Dorothy Day's writings. Always the evangelist, he used to hand these out to people he met along the way. This included, as I later learned, the doctors who began treating him two years ago when he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

I had not realized how much time had passed until I got a call from Peggy Scherer to say that Chuck had left the hospital and returned to Voluntown—unable to eat or talk—to die at home. Yet, when I called to see whether there was any chance of visiting, I was surprised when his sister began transmitting a message from Chuck himself. With the help of a laptop computer he was still issuing instructions, urging me to come right away, and to "bring some copies of your Dorothy Day book."

I arrived the next day, not knowing quite what to expect. I found him seated in a wheelchair with a computer poised on his lap. He looked very old and frail, though the familiar spirit was there in his eyes, and in the words he methodically tapped out on his keyboard. I was ashamed to have been on his key of touch during his illness, but Chuck swept that aside. "We have both been occupied, appropriately so," he typed, "but now you are here."

I described a book I was writing, trying to reflect, through the lives of the saints, what makes for a happy and whole life. He said, "I have a lot of thoughts about this. Would you like me to share them with you?" I said indeed I would. And so he began typing away:

"Since I got sick, many people have asked whether I am angry, frustrated, bitter. And I say, 'Never.' When people receive the diagnosis of a terminal illness they are first of all afraid of being alone, and they wonder about how they might have lived differently. But I have never been alone. I have been surrounded by good friends and community, and I have been blessed with meaningful work. I have never had to make decisions on the basis of money or peer pressure. Of course, looking back, there are things I would do differently. If it were otherwise it would mean that I had not learned from life."

He acknowledged that it is tempting, sometimes, to be discouraged. "You know how Dorothy wrote in the postscript to *The Long Loneliness* about how hard it is to

remember 'the duty of delight.' But I have said to friends as I contemplate the life I had and the end that is coming, 'It's not so hard, either, when one has been graced by such good work and good friends.' To me it is the recognition that we are never without a meaningful choice. This is a culture that nearly drowns people with meaningless consumer choices, yet leaves most of them feeling that they are powerless in the most important affairs of life—but that's not true.

"We may not be able to choose the moment of our entry into the world, the circumstances that confront us, the choices available, or the consequences that face us for making them. But we can always decide how we will respond to the choices and challenges we may have not have chosen to confront. We can keep hold of the only 'possession' that cannot be taken from us: our dignity, integrity, soul, call-it-what-you-will. That is the decision that defines us, the first important 'life lesson' we should teach our children. This is the decision I have to make every morning: I can rise and think about what has been done to me, what I have lost... or I can rise and say to myself, 'Here I am. Let's get moving!' With gratitude for good work, good friends, and a wonderful family, it's not a hard choice to make.... It's not hard to remember the 'duty of delight.'"

Yet he did have a concern. There were lessons he had learned about life that he wished he could pass on to his nephews and niece. From the table in front of him, covered with books and pictures, Chuck asked me to hand him a copy of *The Family of Man*, a classic book of photographs. After paging through it, he found a picture that he said was his favorite. It showed an older man of African children all surrounding an older man who was in the middle of saying something amazing. There was no caption, and at first I was confused. Then I said, "Are you the story teller?" Chuck said, "He is my hero."

I was struck by how much our conversation circled back to the beginning of our acquaintance, twenty-eight years before. What he had to say now was exactly the same message he had shared with me then. On the one hand that showed just how consistently he had lived by his personal code. It had guided him through life and remained his support up to the end. At the same time, there was little reason to doubt that he had successfully communicated this wisdom to his nephews and niece—and countless other people over the course of his life—even if he never wrote any of it down.

Eventually, it was time to leave. It didn't seem likely that I would ever see him again. What to say? I kissed him on the top of his bald head, thanked him for everything, and said goodbye. As I walked out of this sacred space into the cold autumn air of New England that he loved, I felt that I was leaving the best and bravest man I ever met. Chuck would have dismissed such sentiments. He never wanted people to be like him—just to find their own inner light, and to follow it as faithfully as they could. As he had remarked in our last conversation, quoting Dostoevsky, "Every age has need of a few fools."

If ever I am prone to discouragement, I will try to remember my last sight of him in his wheelchair, so close to death, typing away on his laptop computer: "Here I am! Let's get moving!"