

Farewell to A Friend

Liz Elliott

It is no longer possible - as if it ever were - to remain indifferent to the sight of another human being encaged. One must either share the degradation or be responsible for it. In one way or another one has to be accountable, whether to conscience or to peers who do care.

Claire Culhane from
No Longer Barred From Prison

Claire Culhane died on April 25, 1996 in Vancouver, B.C. On that day, as on any other, 1 in 5 children in Canada lived in poverty, the unemployment rate was over 10%, and about 32,800 adults were imprisoned in one of the 216 federal and provincial institutions across the country. This, of course, would not have been news to Claire. But it is news she would have wanted to privilege over the news of her own death of natural causes. She likely knew that she would not be forgotten, having touched so many people in the course of her remarkable life. It was more like her to be concerned about the state of the world she left behind.

This was a world in which Claire had lived her politics. She abhorred waste and took personal measures against it, from the conscientious recycling of used envelopes and paper in her correspondence to donating her body to a medical school. She had a modest lifestyle and few material possessions - excluding, of course, the voluminous paperwork she accumulated over two decades of prison activism. She felt as accountable to humanity as she expected state authorities to be. Few could meet her standards.

Claire was once described by a prisoner as a one woman army, a characterization which became the title of her biography, *One Woman Army* by Mick Lowe (Lowe, 1992). Claire Culhane was reputed as a woman of action, and her powers of endurance were well known. She was a person of enormous strength and energy who, in the end, could only be stopped by death. It was inevitable that some of us would at some time clash with this dynamic woman, whose stubborn determination seemed to invite conflict. But most of us respected the motives which drove her soul to action, as well as her infinite capacity to act on virtually any injustice presented to her.

In the introduction to her first book, *Why is Canada in Vietnam? The Truth about our Foreign Aid*, Claire is described by Wilfred Burchett as, “one of those all too rare spirits who believes her duties to humanity as a whole outweigh contractual obligations to organizations or governments.” Her experiences in Vietnam during the war and the sense of moral obligation to the people she left behind there motivated a series of actions on her return to Canada. On one occasion when Parliament was in session, she chained herself to a gallery chair in the House of Commons and scattered her pamphlets denouncing Canada’s involvement in the war over the heads of the sitting M.P.s. Claire’s duties to humanity came from a sense of connectedness to others and were complemented by her strong sense of duty to act. Her strategy was direct confrontation, her creed, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Vancouver Sun columnist Douglas Todd once wrote that rebels were found among people whose ethics motivated them to adopt unpopular causes, such as prisoners’ rights. Claire was one such rebel, beginning her career at the moment of her breech birth: “I put my foot in it right from the start,” she would say. Her involvement with prisoners began 21 years ago, as a women’s studies instructor in the B.C. provincial Lakeside prison for women. This began her legacy as a prisoners’ rights advocate and she spent the rest of her life working 20 hour days without pay at work from which, she would enjoy mentioning, she could not be fired. Claire was a watchdog for the human and legal rights of prisoners, who reminded government authorities and agents that they were accountable for their policies and practices. Government departments with security mandates such as those of corrections and the military, are notoriously resistant to public accountability. Undaunted, Claire called prisoners’ rights, “the best fight in town.” Her capacity for battle seemed inborn: “‘Nineteen eighteen,’ (her father) would tell his grandchildren ... ‘The year they ended one war in Europe, and another started in my house’” (Lowe, 1992: 5).

After her death Stephen Hume, also of the Sun, wrote: “This indefatigable Montreal-born daughter of Russian immigrants made it her task in life to become the voice of the voiceless, the voice of society’s cast-offs, the voice of the hated and the vilified, the voice of those buried in the labyrinths of the free world’s second biggest prison state.” Claire wasted no opportunities to make the connections between the politics of

imprisonment and the socio-economic practices of the state. The heavy reliance on imprisonment in addressing social problems speaks more to our failure as a society to provide for all of its members, than our illusionary success in maintaining law and order. She denounced the individualist philosophies of capitalism and denied that the “problem of crime” was a legal problem of individual “criminals.” Prisoners were, rather, like canaries in a social coal mine and we ignored them at our peril.

Claire espoused the abolition of the carceral network, not its reform. Prison abolition, as we know all too well, is an enormous social challenge. As our prisoners’ rights colleague Ruth Morris and others have noted, abolition may only be realized when we challenge the notions of revenge and punishment in our socio-political responses to harmful acts. A system of “justice” which pits offenders versus victims - as if these categories were absolute and distinct truisms - legitimates revenge by laundering it through the machinery of law. Revenge is cleansed and resignified as “retribution”; harmful social conflicts and tragedies are reduced to cases, and the authors of crimes are transformed into punishable individuals. Claire recognized how categorizing people as “other” made it easier to abuse power over them, and how systems of punishment were conducive to this abuse.

In the meantime, our inner cities are in decay and the numbers of the homeless and unemployed escalate; education and health services continue to be eroded. There is apparently no shortage of money, however, to lock people up - in sum violating, as Claire would argue, any claim we might have to civilized status. She spent her life trying to change this, accumulating a number of critics along the way. At her Vancouver memorial celebration¹, however, it was over 300 family and friends who gathered together and sang Claire’s favourite song, “Joe Hill,” about the union activist whose advice, “Don’t mourn: organize” was one of her familiar quotes. As if responding to the critics, one speaker later said that if Claire had been destined for hell, she would have it well organized by the time the rest of us got there. She would have liked that.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Memorial celebrations were also held in Ottawa, Montreal and various prisons in Canada.

REFERENCES

- Culhane, C. (1991). *No Longer Barred From Prison. Montreal:* Black Rose Books.
- Culhane, C. (1972). *Why is Canada in Vietnam? The Truth about our Foreign Aid.* Introduction by Wilfred Burchett. Toronto: NC Press.
- Lowe, M. (1992). *One Woman Army.* Toronto: Macmillan Canada.