

ANTHONY PATRICK DAVID SPOONER 1945-2024

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Fifty eight years ago, a little Ford Escort drove the blond young man that used to be me, from his parents' suburban vicarage home to the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. On the same day and at much the same time, a peculiar-unto-itself moped, put-put putted the conservatively dressed, tinted bespectacled, dark haired young man that was Tony Spooner, from his parents' suburban home to the same University College. There they both joined a small band of students studying for an English Honours degree.

Tony and I were different from the rest. We were day boys, we lived at home, not in residence, so our social lives were as much outside the university as in it, and revolved around the Church as well as the campus.

For the following three years he and I were close, the best of occasionally fractious friends. Tony, more widely read and more academically confident than I, was something of a guru to me. I could bounce ideas off him and he would either take them seriously and help me refine them or he'd scorn them to death. I, to him, I like to think, was something of a sheet anchor, his temperament being more mercurial and less tranquil than mine.

He was, of course, crackers, whereas I was sane. He was eccentric, I was concentric. He was moody, I was not. He was laced-up-shoes, jacket-and-tie uptight. I was slip-slop-shod, untied, unkempt, louche. He was clever and diligent. I was rather less than clever and far from diligent. But how we laughed and rejoiced in putting each other down, cherished absurdity, revelled in irony and paradox and how we loved mother Church. He could be wickedly witty, crustily curmudgeonly and fabulously funny.

We became the best of friends and remained so down through the years, though with occasional fallings out and with long periods of minimal contact from being based in different continents. We shared much. The God stuff to start with. Tony was God struck, God bonkers, God convicted. So was I, though in a rather different, vicarage born, more settled and predictable, boring way for which he often mocked me. He seemed never, ever to doubt God, whereas to me, doubt was and remains a necessary, flip side of faith. So not only was he a guru to me intellectually, he was also, faithwise, a reassuring rock, as resistant to doubt as the Pope to Protestantism.

We both said our prayers, Tony more assiduously than I. Indeed he was a devotion junkie, never happier than when muttering a prayer, thumbing a Divine Office book, or telling rosary beads.

We both loved the high jinx of Anglo Catholicism and we carried our devotion to incense over into our secular lives by being, in those years, serious pipe smokers, though again in different ways. Tony was a pipe smoke dilettante, he preferred Rolls Royce meerschaums, vintage churchwardens and carved rosewood antiques to the cheap brutes I smoked. He puffed delicately, with refinement, I with vulgar, nicotine-gurgling gusto.

We loved music, especially of the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries and of course liturgical music. This was the one area in which I was more a guru to him than he to me. I could read music, was learning the piano at the time and knew the early music repertoire better than he did. I even persuaded him to join my father's church choir for a while and we were both avid record collectors.

We were also politically conservative. Tony, in those days, madly, crazily, notoriously so, though, I suspect, less from deep conviction than from a desire to define himself by difference. In a predominantly left wing university he was determined to be defiantly other. As too he was in his dress. However, unlike most folk as they grow older, Tony began to reveal a truer self that was more politically and indeed theologically nuanced and far less politically and theologically conservative. He was too bright to be crassly or crudely conservative, and so as the desire or need to define himself by difference fell away a Tony of broader sympathies and enthusiasms was revealed. An adventurous Tony too, open to versions of the faith and faiths that I preferred to shun.

I've dwelt at some length on the University Tony, because it was the longest, most formative and closest period of our friendship. My memories of university life are inseparable from my memories of Tony and they are happy memories. He was good company, he was different, he was interesting. Our long conversations in our homes, at the Students' Union, in the Jameson Hotel pub called "the Pit" and in the Europa Café often transcended mere wit, banter and persiflage to move on to matters that really do matter, our deepest convictions, hopes and aspirations. They were memorable, formative years with a great, true and lasting friend. Not a little of what I am today, is thanks to Tony. He paved the way to priesthood for me, arrived there first, was my longest and oldest true friend, possibly my only real friend, as defined by the 12th century Yorkshire monk St Aelred of Rievaulx whom I will quote at the end of this tribute.

The very best thing that ever happened to Tony, however, was Alison. She was never a member of our little group at university and I hardly knew her until she and Tony had become a couple. The Tony I knew had always seemed shy and tentative to the point of timidity when it came to romantic adventures or involvements, but then, out of the blue, or should I say pink, came Alison, a vibrant, witty, clever and lovely young woman with the widest and most infectious of smiles, easily his intellectual equal and certainly no conservative. They were engaged and married, long before I ever plucked up courage to pop the question to the right girl. He was indeed always out there ahead of me, paving the way to marriage, as well as to priesthood.

He and Alison have been an inspiring couple and yet, apparently, so different. I once said to Alison, when Tony was in one of his more curmudgeonly moods: "I cannot for the life of me understand why you ever married the bugger." She gave me that wide, knowing and yet enigmatic grin of hers and said "Who else, who else would or could have been more interesting?" Indeed. Indeed. She was and remains an adventurous, plucky girl who loved him for all that he was, for everything that he was, and rightly.

Their hospitality to myself and my family has been invariably lavish, open hearted and good, good fun. His study was always an icon-glittering cave of wonder, full of fascinating books, artefacts and objets d'arte. The whole house, likewise beautifully and colourfully adorned with African mementos and art work, their dining table laden with good, often exotic and adventurous provender.

In the year 2000 my first wife Margaret, of blessed memory, my then two teenage daughters and I, having temporarily swapped our Australian parish for one in Scotland, came to stay a couple of nights with them here in Clacton. My girls were intrigued by him. Who was this priest who, unlike their father, was so in tune with their world and enthusiasms, devoted to Buffy the Vampire Slayer of all things, full of fun, banter and teasing and with posters of the waif-like Bjork so prominently on display?

They loved him, and he loved them for loving him, and played up to them outrageously. He introduced them to winkles, whelks and jellied eels on the pier, and entranced them with exaggerated tales of their father's youth. It was the happiest of happy visits and both of them have asked me to send their love and condolences to Alison and the girls. Tony was so so good and empathetic with the young, especially with girls, and so his greatest of blessings, after Alison, were Miriam and Hannah whom he loved to bits, and they him.

His last few years have been fraught, both as parish priest and health-wise. To the perceptive, of all sorts and conditions, young or old, clever or simple, well educated or hardly educated, sophisticated or naive, Tony was a much loved and admired parish priest. Folk loved him as much because of his eccentricities and strong opinions as in spite of them, but even more because he was the real deal, a priest who really did believe what he preached and with intelligent and articulate gusto. He was no pusillanimous, half-hearted, have-your-cake-and-eat-it hypocrite. He was a larger than life, different, intriguing, opinionated and at times a curmudgeonly but splendid priest and God botherer. But in all institutions, let alone the church, there is always a handful of boring folk who prefer the predictable, uninteresting, dull, conventional and commonplace to anything more challenging, bracing and exciting.

A very small band of such folk made his last few years as a parish priest less than happy.

So he retired, withdrew, retreated to his glittering, wondrous cave of a study, to his hospitable home, marvellous wife and loving family and to his devotions. With deep regrets certainly, but regrets well tempered by relief. But then his physical ailments began really to assail him. Horrifically so, towards the end, and yet they were borne with great fortitude, courage, optimism and humour, certainly from my perspective and he was most wondrously supported, aided and abetted by Alison and the girls.

And out of his tribulations, for me at least, came at least one blessing, they prompted the resurrection of our close university friendship. I began to ring him pretty well every week for hour long conversations, about poetry, and music and to share with him my more active and ongoing parish life and then my retirement to a Cathedral city.

It wasn't pity or duty that brought on these phone calls, it was joy, because, even in extremis, he remained the fascinating, teasing, paradoxically both insulting and complimentary friend and conversationalist of yore. We were back where we started. In our end a beginning. Lovely, lovely, lovely.

About 900 years ago, St Aelred of Rievaulx wrote *"No medicine is more valuable, none more efficacious, none better suited to the cure of our temporal ills than a friend to whom we may turn for consolation in time of trouble, and with whom we may share happiness in time of joy."* Indeed, indeed, indeed.

Anthony Patrick David Spooner: may the resurrection of our friendship of old presage, herald and portend the Resurrection of Resurrections so wondrously witnessed by Mary Magdalene weeping in the garden. May you, Tony, like Mary Magdalene, from the lips of the risen Lord hear with joy the still small voice of recognition welcoming you into eternity with a simple, two syllable word: "Tony"