**[William Sage Dalzell (1929-2018)](https://rogersgleanings.com/2018/03/13/william-sage-dalzell-1929-2018/)**

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Bill Dalzell was one of the first people I got to know after moving to New York City. I will never forget his kindness to me. My friendship with Bill was a long and enduring one.

If you got to know Bill well, as I did -- if you were privileged to know him -- you will probably know the following things about him, and, if you do, will know that they are all true.

He never cared about externals. Dressed simply. Lived by intuition. He followed politics closely but was fundamentally an apolitical person.

He believed absolutely in the spiritual, in mysticism, and in bona fide psychics such as Edgar Cayce and the medium Grace Cooke, author of the White Eagle books. He was interested in the writings of mystics such as Meister Eckhart -- in the case of Eckhart, in the concept of detachment or disinterestedness: renouncing self-interest to attain spiritual enlightenment.

He believed without any doubt that there was an afterlife on “the other side.”

He was skeptical of much of what is considered orthodoxy -- he used to say, “Science marches backward.” A paradox with an element of truth in it.

He absolutely did not believe in medicine or doctors. He had no bank account, as far as I knew.

He had an interesting mind, in many respects totally unconventional. Was a nonconformist. Yet he was one of the kindest, politest, most civil persons you could hope to meet. He was a true gentleman. He had a warm, mellifluous voice with an inflection, which he never lost, that bespoke his Pennsylvania roots.

He thought for himself and by himself. He had an interesting way of expressing original concepts. For example, he told me that he liked to call cats “fur people.” He said it made it easier to conceptualize having a relationship with them. And, then there was his concept of the “foot philosophy,” which he explained by saying that when he couldn’t decide which bus or train to take, whether to go to a museum or the cinema, or whether to walk uptown or downtown, he would go wherever, instinctually, his feet took him, follow his feet.

He did not put on airs. Just the opposite. He used to say to me, when he was living on East 5th Street between Avenues A and B, “I live in a slum and I like it.” At that time (which was the time when I first met him), urban renewal and slum clearance were in the air.

He was a deeply religious person and, especially in his later years, a churchgoer. This despite the fact that he detested religious dogmatism.

He was a very earnest thinker. He dwelt all day long, every day, in the realm of ideas. He thought long and hard about things. Over and over again. Immortality and the afterlife. What is truth? The truth of art. The spiritual. Past lives. Places.

He did not have much use for formal education, although there was an English teacher at the prep school he attended, Mercersburg Academy in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, whom he never forgot, who taught him to appreciate poetry. He wasn’t impressed by scholarship or academic credentials. He developed his own credo, but it was never set in stone. He would often say, quoting some philosopher: “Truth is like a butterfly. If you pin it down, it dies.”

He had acute tastes in art and loved the arts.

He was an earnest seeker after truth. In a conversation we had a few months ago, he told me something a philosophy professor in a college class he was enrolled in said many years ago: “The question is not whether a philosophy or belief system is true, it’s whether you like it nor not; does it appeal to you, say something to you? The same thing applies to art.” He sent me a postcard of Notre-Dame de Paris on a trip there in the summer of 1969. I remember in essence what he wrote. That he would continue seeking truth wherever he went. That he was in search of truth, repeating the word several times.

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Some biographical details about Bill.

He grew up in Wilkinsburg, a borough adjacent to Pittsburgh. He loved the hills. The trolley cars. The movie theatre. How he went to a film once and before the film heard music, which he later learned was Felix Mendelssohn’s Hebrides Overture. He wasn’t expecting it. The music overwhelmed him. It was a mystical experience. Bill’s grandfather had a 78 rpm record of Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony. Bill played it over and over again and said to me in old age that he had never ever tired of it.

He moved to New York in the 1950’s. He loved his adopted city. He used to say, “Would you care to hear me sing the praises of New York?” He used to marvel at the fact that so many people of all races and nationalities lived cheek by jowl in harmony. At how much the City had to offer by way of culture and places to enjoy at modest prices.

He made friends with many spiritually inclined people and, also, readily made friends with artists such as his lifelong friend Edwin Treitler, an artist, writer, and spiritual healer; the “magic realist” painter Gregory Gillespie; and the Greek-American painter Bill Komodore. He had an affinity for people in the arts. Gillespie’s portrait of Bill Dalzell, “Bill (in Studio),” was painted in the mid-1980’s when Bill was living in Pittsfield and Gillespie was living nearby in Belchertown, Massachusetts. The painting is owned by the Forum Galley in New York City. Bill had befriended Gillespie when the latter was studying at Cooper Union in New York in the late 1950’s.

He would on occasion speak about his parents: his father, who would visit Bill from time to time at his apartment on East 5th Street; and his mother, who died tragically of cancer in middle age. He felt an unnecessary operation led to her death. He never mentioned that his great-grandfather John Dalzell was a congressman from Pennsylvania.

He used to go the Metropolitan Museum of Art every weekend. He said that going to the Met was his equivalent of attending church. He would always begin by sitting in the cafeteria for an hour or so nursing a cup of coffee, lost in thought.

He had his favorite haunts. Besides the Met: the Thalia theater, an art movie house on West 95th Street; the Staten Island Ferry; the automat. He loved being able to see two films for the price of one at the Thalia and discovered art films there (as well as at the Museum of Modern Art). He loved to take the Staten Island Ferry to Staten Island and back. We did it together several times. Bill would recommend getting off on the Staten Island side and having a cup of coffee or walking around for a while. In his early New York days, he would get off and see a movie in Staten Island, then take the ferry back.

He had a discerning eye for art. He was an admirer of the painter Edward Hopper. Bill introduced me to Hopper. During museum trips we made together, he would point out how Hopper made use of light. “The light is different in America,” Bill would say. By “different,” he meant brighter. More brilliant. An observation which was true.

Bill loved the painting “The Peaceable Kingdom” by the American folk artist Edward Hicks and how the painting depicted visually Quaker principles: the lion lying down with the lamb. He would often go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the painting.

He had his favorite paintings and rooms in the Met. In the Medieval Art section behind The Great Hall, there was a marble sculpture of Saint Hilarion (North Italian School XII century), which was a favorite of Bill’s. He said it reminded him of me. Maybe Bill saw a corresponding sincerity and earnestness in me, in my expression.

Bill singlehandedly made me into a discerning filmgoer. He got me to appreciate foreign films such as *Ivan the Terrible*, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, the director Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Ordet*, and *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, films that most people would be unlikely to know about. He said that the whole Eisenstein film - *Ivan the Terrible*, Parts I and II --- comprised in essence, amounted to for the viewer, the experience of a Russian orthodox church service.

He loved the D. W. Griffith film *Intolerance*, which he had seen I don’t know how many times. The film ends with an idealistic vision of a day “when prison bars wrought in the fires of intolerance will no longer prevail” and spectral prisoners in striped uniforms are seen moving through prison walls which disappear. A scene remarked upon by Bill.

He only recently called my attention to a film he loved from his early days in New York City: *3rd Ave. El*, which was made in 1955. The music, as Bill pointed out, is a Haydn concerto played by harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. Bill thought the music was great and that it made the film. He made an observation to me once that I remember. He said that films work their magic by “sight and sound.”

He made an observation to me once that I remember. He said that films work their magic by “sight and sound.”

His aesthetic senses were astute. Yet, it was all intuition, never tendentious. I learned much from him about how, while trusting my own intuitions, and being guided by them, to discriminate between the most profound works of art (chiefly films and paintings) and currently popular ones which (he could see) were of only passing interest at best or works that did not speak directly to him. He told me once that a good “measuring rod” for films was to ask oneself: do you still think it’s great, are you still thinking about it, the day after?

This kind of thinking -- a sort of seat of the pants ratiocination -- influenced me strongly. I feel that Bill never got credit for it and that it was overlooked. Another thought of his along these lines was a remark he made about traveling. When one arrives home after an overseas trip, he said to me, one is not quite home yet, mentally, and is still, mentally, a traveler. It takes a day or two to feel fully back home mentally, and, during that day or two, one is experiencing one’s own city as a traveler would experience it.

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I remember Bill at 218 East 18th Street like it was yesterday and wish I could bring those times back. The cubbyhole in the cellar where he had his printing press. The pay phone in the hall on the bottom floor on which he would get calls from clients. How Charlie Bloomstein, the executive director of the New York Friends Group, would haggle Bill about paying part of the monthly phone bill.

In the 1960’s, he was kept busy printing flyers for the War Resisters League and Women’s Strike for Peace. Handouts announcing a march or demonstration. They trusted him; he was their printer of choice. “The war is good for business,” he would say to me jokingly.

Bill and his printing press. How he seemed to keep it working with rubber bands and paper clips and would, in his own words, get down on his knees and pray to the press to not stop working. How he would read his *New York Times* as the press was humming with sheets coming out of it. He had bill pads he had made up with the words: “William Dalzell, Quality Multilith Printing.” He explained to me how a multilith printer worked. The key thing to keep in mind, he said, is that “oil and water don’t like each other.” He loved to observe how mechanical things worked, and he loved old inventions. In a Thanksgiving card Bill sent me in the 1980’s, he wrote about visiting the Science Museum in Boston with Ed Treitler and his daughter Anya. “My favorite thing was the steam engine,” he wrote. “I love steam engines.”

My job title at the New York Friends Group was Workroom Supervisor; my responsibilities included mimeographing. Bill would patiently try, repeatedly, to show me how to stack a ream of paper so that the ends lined up. I never quite got the hang of it.

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Bill’s mind interested me because, like mine, it ranged all over the place. Nothing was seemingly too mundane for him to notice and consider, think about, and nothing was too arcane or “airy.” He once got to talking about waiters. He didn’t like coffee shops because he preferred not to have to be waited upon. He preferred places such as a cafeteria or fast food place where you could place your order and take it to your table. “Americans don’t make good waiters,” he told me. “They don’t like to be in a subservient position.”

Bill said that he had once had an experience in a restaurant in Europe (he was no snob and was anything but an epicure) with the perfect waiter. “A good waiter,” he said, “is someone who is there when you want them and is not there when you don’t.”

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Bill was a great traveler. The places he went to (on a limited budget)! Europe. Mexico, where he lived for a while, on a Friends Service Committee project. Alaska and Labrador. The Aran and Orkney Islands. The Findhorn spiritual community in Scotland. Russia. The Monastery of Trinity-St. Sergius, which is located near Moscow in what was then known as the town of Zagorsk. Bill had what he described as a mystical, or near mystical, experience there.

He had interesting observations to share -- some of them “episodic,” but nonetheless fruitful. “The Scotch are in a class by themselves when it comes to love of books and reading,” he told me once. “You go into a bar and you’ll see a working man in working clothes with a worn [meaning its cover] book sticking out of his back pocket.”

His favorite place was Notre-Dame de Paris. He said that Notre-Dame was “the most holy place” he had ever visited.

He was in the United States Merchant Marine during his young adulthood. It must have been his first experience of travel. He told me that there is a lot of time on a ship where one is doing nothing and can presumably read and reflect. He said that as far as his duties on the ship were concerned, they almost always involved painting. Bill was not afraid or too snobby to do menial jobs.

He was not much of a writer, in terms of output, but he would write occasionally when he was away, always a very short communique -- by design -- usually a postcard. His writing was notable for its deliberate plainness and its sincerity. And his neat printing, which resembled calligraphy. He was a generous and thoughtful giver, on a limited budget, of gifts. If he wished to share a book with you, he would give you his own copy to keep, such as his ink stained copy of Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* and a book by Edgar Cayce.

Bill’s favorite poem was Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” which ends with the following lines which Bill would recite:

Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’

We are not now that strength which in old days

Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;

One equal temper of heroic hearts,

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

*-- Roger W. Smith*

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