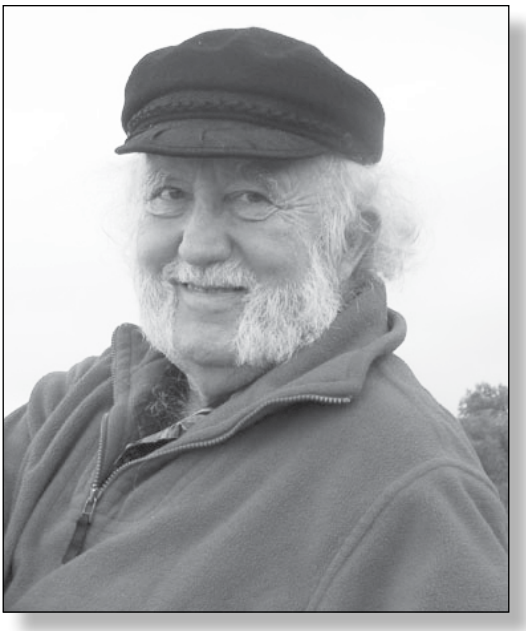

~ Remembering Bob Davis ~

One of Canada's leading educational thinkers and teacher activists, WILLIAM ROBERT (BOB) DAVIS has died. Born in Ottawa in June 1934 he died while vacationing in Cuba in February 2012. In the 1960s, he co-founded the Everdale Place (a School Community) and This Magazine is about Schools *(now* This Magazine*). In later years, he edited* Mudpie Magazine *and took an active role in teacher politics alongside his remarkably engaging and effective teaching of working-class and racialized high school students. Bob authored a number of books on education, music and politics, and as the founder of The Spadina Road Tabernacle Band, he brought to life a unique Canadian justice-oriented musical culture for fellow activists in the fight for strong and caring unions*

and a just and loving country. This eulogy was given at a memorial for Bob on March 24, 2012 in Toronto's Holy Trinity Church, overflowing with family, friends, fellow education and union activists, and many of their children and grandchildren.

It's so hard to believe he's gone.

That such a large spirit — such a powerful spirit — has left the world still seems impossible to me. His Being stays so solidly in my heart as I know it does in yours.

It's really impossible to believe — isn't it? — that he's not over there sitting at his electric piano — singing *There'll be Pie in the Sky Bye and Bye* with the Spadina Road Tabernacle Band or standing alone singing *The Old Triangle*.

He was so himself with this music.

I like to think of it, sometimes, as stubborn music. It was his "we will not be moved" music. This was music, Bob understood in the deepest part of him, that let us stand shoulder to shoulder — heart to heart — with those in our past who have stood up for love and justice and whose struggle is now our struggle. It was not some history lesson for Bob. The music said we stand together now. At this moment, we stand as one. We stand fast with our past and with our future.

Bob was such a wonderously stubborn human being. It drove us crazy when we weren't loving him for it. His last words in Cuba, when he was slipping away from us: "No need to call a doctor," he managed to say. Exactly what we would have expected.

There's this remarkable photo — many of you will remember it — of Bob standing nose to nose with a police captain on the Artistic Woodwork Strike line, where he was the picket-line captain. Each

morning on the way to the line, he would pick up "the Greeks," the toughest workers in the plant, who were as stubborn as himself, and best able to withstand the police charge that came to the line every morning. Alongside an extraordinary collection of activists, they stood at the core of one of the most powerful labour struggles in Toronto's recent history.

Bob Davis on the artistic woodwork picket line

When I think about that photo — and the determination on Bob's face — it brings back to me just how rooted he was in the politics of labour and working-class justice. This was no preacher's boy searching for excitement or a little meaning in his life. This was someone who consciously — and facing many obstacles — moved out of a deeply conservative Anglican childhood because he came to see that it is

only in this working-class struggle (a struggle in which he included all the peoples of the world wherever they might be) that there was a future for any of us. Only here was there genuine hope for human kind and the natural world in which we live.

At the same time, Bob never imagined there were easy organizing solutions. Indeed — in these dark times — what kept him alive politically was the continuing capacity of the human spirit to show itself, to insist on a loving and just world however much power might be ranged against it. Not for nothing was his last book entitled *Utopian Moments*, which he wrote in spite of a stroke that knocked him down five years ago and continued its assault for the rest of his life. Another bit of wonderful stubbornness — forcing himself to his feet and getting that book written. Because it mattered. Because those utopian moments mattered. They were the practical poetry of a revolution to come — a revolution he would not live to see.

There's something else just as important about Bob crossing social class lines the way he did. He changed his mind all right, but he didn't change the core of his Being. In so many remarkable ways, he never stopped being himself, wherever he was.

That led to all kinds of contradictions. And no one was more conscious of them than Bob.

As best he could, he took in all of his experience and tried not to deny its impact on him — whether it was his devout Anglican boyhood, his playing the organ at All Saints Cathedral, his tender and insecure time at Cambridge on a music scholarship, his plunging into the sixties of sex, drugs, rock and roll, country, jazz and blues, his headlong encounters with the New Left and the Old Left, with Marx and the Tupamaros, with Freud and with his psychoanalyst over many intense years of engaged analysis. ("Engaged," let me tell you, is hardly the word for it.) There was, as well, the experience of teaching in a military school and coaching its wrestling team ("Army Captain Davis" doesn't easily trip off the tongue does it? But there you have it.)

Then there was his remarkable leadership in building what can only be described as an archetypal 60s free school and publishing alternative education magazines, writing critical books on schooling, teaching tough kids in public high school and not so tough ones at OISE and York, sitting in for daycare at U of T and fighting for Black Studies programs.

Finally, of course, there was baseball. You can't forget baseball. In his youth a passionate catcher in Quebec City and later a hardcore Blue Jay's fan. Even after his stroke, Bob had the Jay's latest statistics well in hand.

When it comes down to it, not much of the modern world got past Bob. He took it all in and tried to make it his own. Which meant, of course — to borrow an old 60s line I know he'd approve of — he had to let it all hang out. And that was a good thing, he thought. Bob believed in living his contradictions. So did I. For Bob, anyway. I never had the courage.

It made him a wonderful friend.

I think it was why Winnipeg's Cy Gonick, the editor of *Canadian Dimension*, recently wrote me to say "Bob was probably more loved than almost anyone else on the left in this country. I certainly loved him," he said.

That's why we're here, isn't it? Because we loved him. It's that simple.

We loved him in all his wonderful complexity.

And that complexity, I want to add, made him a great teacher.

I remember going happily with so many of you to Bob's retirement parties. Nobody could believe he was really going to retire from teaching, so we kept having parties. It made us feel better.

At the time, I wondered what made him such a great teacher. And I thought then it was because he taught without a net, leaving himself unprotected with the kids. Which, now that I think about it again, is pretty much the same as letting it all hang out.

For all his toughness, Bob continued to have — for me anyway — a really terrifying vulnerability with his students. I'd never chance it for a moment.

If his students didn't like him, didn't respect him, it would quite simply kill him. And at some level most of them knew this. Knew they had this power.

I'm thinking about his last Everdale reunion. Bob was genuinely frightened of what his old students would say to him. Of course, they told him they loved him, valued him, whatever the chaos of their lives together out there on The Place.

But he never took it for granted. And could hardly believe it when he heard it. I'm not sure he ever believed it.

And yet in spite of this vulnerability, maybe because of it, Bob's always took the trouble to let his students know — and the rest of the world, too, I might add — who he really was.

Warts and all. Take your best shot.

So, as you can imagine, after a few hours of seeing his old Everdale students again, Bob was telling them how scared he was to be there. And he wasn't just scared about their opinions of him. The whole experience of Everdale, he told them, had shaken him to his roots — part of a deep rebellion against his past, against the hierarchies of the Anglican Church and his dad's enormously powerful presence in his life. And it still shook him up — genuinely so — to have shaken his fist at God in such way, and maybe he was wrong to have done it. Maybe he was wrong.

It was still a genuine question he had kept in his heart after all those years, even though at the same time, he wouldn't have taken back that experience for all the world. Not to have loved those kids and taught them the best way he knew how. Unthinkable.

Now at the centre of this vulnerability, there is what I can only describe as Bob's really wild frankness with his students about the contradictions in his life — maybe not as frank as he was with all of us

in the pages of *This Magazine Is About Schools* — but very very frank. Whether about sex or politics or work or family.

Human frailties — Bob's frailties especially — were always there to be mixed up in the lesson plan.

Always there as part of the real world to be explored.

Now there is no question in my mind that when students first ran into Bob's frankness, his frailties — when they started to know him — most of them started thinking to themselves:

Who is this guy?

And more to the point: Don't people who talk like this soon fall apart on you?

Isn't this how it is in the world?

Vulnerable people get smashed. Any sensible person keeps their elbows up. This guy doesn't know where his elbows are.

But Bob keeps on talking in the same way and — surprise — he doesn't fall apart.

Far from it.

It turns out he's got the energy of ten different people for a whole variety of projects and a very serious education program to boot.

And it's this experience, it seems to me, that lay at the core of his teaching.

His kids came to see — if I can revisit an old line — that here was a teacher who has the strength of ten because his heart wasn't pure and he knew it and didn't mind if you knew it.

It was a great message for kids.

It made them feel secure because they knew it was the real thing.

It let them dream that their frailties could be recognized and lived with at the same time as they took hold of the world for themselves, with energy and with commitment.

One last thing:

Bob always knew he was lucky in life, whatever its difficulties.

He knew he was especially lucky in the loving and supportive fam-

ily he had — his parents, for whom he continued to feel deeply, his extraordinary daughters Laura and Haydee, his brother Art and his sisters Mary and Margie, his grandchildren Sammi and Ethiopia, a caring stepmother who is still with us, the nieces and nephews he kept close as well as his many uncles and aunts and cousins in the Ottawa valley, whose history he knew was inextricably his own. As always, for Bob, it was a contradictory Ottawa Valley history of fighting the French and the bears while staying close, building family, and keeping the music alive. He loved it all.

And, in his extraordinary way, he loved his friends — loved all the caring friendships he built over a lifetime. As so many of you here today know first hand.

Finally, I know he would want me to say — as he often said to me when we met — how lucky he was to have found Meredith, and to have had the love and happiness and support she had given him all these years. He used to say he didn't deserve it, but wouldn't have missed it for all the world.

He knew he was blessed.

Just as we know how blessed we were by having him amongst us.

GEORGE MARTELL has taught at the Faculty of Education and the Atkinson School of Social Sciences at York University. He was a founder of Point Blank School (an alternative school in Toronto's inner city), a founding editor of *This Magazine Is About Schools* and *Our Schools/Our Selves*, and the author of *The Politics of the Canadian Public School and A New Education Politics: Bob Rae's Legacy and the Response of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation.* An activist in community and parent education politics, George Martell served as an NDP trustee on the City of Toronto Board of Education and then as non-voting chair of the Board's NDP caucus. Later he acted as a senior education policy advisor to the provincial NDP prior to the party winning the 1990 Ontario election and its abandonment of its educational reform project.

This eulogy also appeared in *Canadian Dimension Magazine.*