

Gerard Vanderhaar – “World Class Husband and Peacemaker”

On August 21, 2005, the longest day of the year, a day my husband usually called attention to and enjoyed in a special way, he took his last breath on earth.

That night, the moon was full and closest to the earth in many years. The Ethiopians have a saying that “when a holy man dies there is a full moon.” Truly, that was the case with Gerard Vanderhaar. He was indeed a holy man in the best sense of the word. An extraordinary man who I was blessed to share life with for over 35 years!

He was my soul mate, lover and best friend, life companion, cheerleader and mentor.

He changed my life not only personally but also spiritually, intellectually and politically.

We met in 1966 when I was Sister Janice Marie a Sister of Providence and he was Fr. Anthony Vanderhaar, a Dominican priest and the Director of the Masters Theology Program at Catherine Spaulding College in Louisville, KY.

It was not “love at first sight” for I had taken final vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and was not looking for a man. I was committed to being a nun for the rest of my life.

It was during the summer of 1968 that things began to happen between us and moved us away from our commitments to our Orders, to our commitment to each other. It was clear to us that we were meant for each other. In December of 1968 we decided to marry and in December of 1969, having received our dispensations from Rome, we married in a Chicago Catholic Church.

We had an incredible life’s journey together, and only grew in our love and respect for one another as well as deep appreciation for each other’s gifts. Gerry would often quote Eileen Egan saying, “Not everyone has all the gifts.”

And so it surely was in our life. We worked together, traveled to many places in the world, spreading the message of active nonviolence.

Gerard was everything people said about him and more. All those who met him - whether it was a peace activist on the street corner protesting a war (take your pick-Vietnam, Persian Gulf or Iraq) or a person serving him in the hospital, or working with the Neighborhood Association, or at the checkout counter at the grocery store - the repeated comments about him were that he was a caring, kind, listening, respectful, gentle and always smiling, cheery person. He felt all people had a goodness in them and there were not evil people even though he knew people were capable of doing evil things.

Each day he lived with centeredness and a conviction to live and work for a more perfect, nonviolent world.

Each day he greeted me with a smile and an expression of love and appreciation.

Each day he read the newspaper with his coffee and juice with “peace eyes.”

He had a passion for peace that was profound. He never faltered or deviated through the years. Never doubted his mission.

He knew he had not changed the world but he knew he had lived the life he felt called to live. When he was in Intensive Care a few days before he died, I asked him if he was afraid to die. After thinking about this question for a while he said:

I have four points regarding that question about fear of death:

1. I love my life now and would like to say here long and continue living.
2. My dying will be trouble for others, cause them pain for a while and I don't want to make you and others unhappy.
3. However, I do not want prolonged illness like my father had.
4. Finally, I AM NOT AFRAID TO DIE.

His answer will stay with me for the rest of my life. It was so peaceful, balanced and reflective of how he lived life.

He leaves a LEGACY OF PEACE that will only grow - through his writings and through the thousands of lives he influenced in some way. He shifted the planet a little closer toward peace. As one of his former students said, “I knew he was a great peacemaker but I didn't realize until I looked on the Internet that he was a giant in the peace movement.”

I knew him as my beloved husband, whom I miss enormously and will carry in my heart forever, continuing with many others to carry on our mission of peacemaking through active nonviolence.

Janice Vanderhaar
August 28, 2005