

June 27, 1988

Dear Rita,

I enclose a column I wrote for Salt, a local Catholic magazine for which I am a regular columnist.

My heart was full when I wrote it; if it expresses some portion of what Bob meant to me and so many others, I'll be satisfied.

This must be a very difficult time for you still. My best and warmest thoughts are with you.

With love,

May O'Connell

# By their fruits ye shall know them

Mary O'Connell

**H**appy the man who  
follows not the counsel of the wicked,  
Nor walks in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the company of the insolent,  
But delights in the law of the Lord . . .  
*He is like a tree planted near running water,  
That yields its fruit in due season  
and whose leaves never fade. (First Psalm)*

The rabbi read these words at the recent funeral of Bob Mendelsohn, a man whom I greatly admired and was proud to call a friend. The verses set me thinking about what it takes to live a life that follows not the counsel of the wicked and the foolish, and does not sit still for insolence, but delights in the Lord. And I especially wondered at the second part: about how such a life yields its fruit.

Perhaps many readers already know of Dr. Robert Mendelsohn, a nationally recognized Chicago pediatrician who turned into a self-described "medical heretic." His heresy was not against his native Judaism, but against what he called "the religion of modern medicine."

Medicine a religion? Isn't it a science, based on hard, cold scientific facts, guaranteed to produce results? I can still see Mendelsohn's relish as he demolished these pretensions: as he called attention to the inaccurate tests, the unnecessary operations, the unforeseen side-effects, the doctor-caused diseases, all the expensive, sometimes deadly mistakes justified under the name of "science."

No, he insisted, medicine has abandoned science and become a religion. It has its own

priests (doctors), its temple (the hospital), its ritual language (medical jargon), its sacraments (operations) and holy waters (drugs). Doctors unwittingly speak the truth when they tell frightened patients to have "faith," argued Mendelsohn, because much of what modern medicine offers is unproven (not to mention potentially harmful). In one of his last columns, he gleefully turned the tables by reporting a scientific study indicating that prayer helped the recovery of patients with heart disease. That makes prayer, according to Mendelsohn, "one of the few medical remedies ever proven to be safe and effective by a controlled study."

Mendelsohn backed up his charges with some pretty grim stories. He did that deliberately: he wanted to scare people into taking serious responsibility for their own health. But he wasn't a grim man. He was warm and funny and expansive and deeply, deeply caring.

**T**hat's why I found the words of the Psalm spoken at his funeral, first in Hebrew, then in English, so moving. The opening verses describe a man who seeks out truth and will not sit still for stupidity. But the images are not those of grim self-righteousness, which is the great temptation of crusaders. No, the man is "happy," life-giving, "like a tree . . . that yields its fruit in due season."

The tree image, in particular, comes back to me. What does it take, I keep wondering, to stand up straight and tall, the way Bob Mendelsohn did, and speak the truth as you understand it? To withstand the elements—indeed to draw sustenance from them and from the earth in which

you're rooted? And to grow and reach out and bear fruit that lives beyond the place and the season in which you're planted?

That question goes beyond my "medical heretic" friend and touches the lives of most of the people who read or are written about in these pages:

- People who go against the accepted ways, the truths "everybody knows," and discover other truths.
- People who are not afraid to stand up and speak their truth and to act on it despite the odds.
- People whose lives become a "sign of contradiction"—and yet they live in humor and compassion, loving the ways of the Lord.

What it takes, of course, is what Christians call the spirit (and I noticed that the rabbi at the funeral shared that language: the body goes to the ground, he said, but the spirit returns to God who sent it).

A friend who was also at the funeral scoffed at the inadequacy of saying of Bob that "his spirit lives after him," because that language doesn't convey the forceful *presence* that those of us who knew him still feel. But what I'm talking about is not a personal spirit in some now-disembodied sense. I mean instead the spirit of life and honesty and humor and imagination and generosity, which was not unique to my friend but which he *lived* and by living helped pass on to others. The same spirit the rest of us can share; it's ours for the taking and the making of life what we will. And that sharing of the spirit is what makes a life like Bob's, or the lives and the courage of the people profiled month after month in these pages, bear fruit. ■

**Start (or keep)**

# Salt.

**coming to your mailbox**

**How to subscribe—10 issues for \$15**

Print your name and address below and send in this coupon with \$15 for 10 issues.

Bill me. (please add \$5 for a foreign address)

**How to update your address**

If you're a subscriber who's moving, print your *new* address below, paste the label with your old address from your most recent issue of Salt in the space provided and mail us this coupon. Allow about six weeks.

This is a new subscription

This is a renewal

This is a change of address

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

(Affix old address label here.)



Clip and mail to:

**Salt.**

205 W. Monroe Street, Chicago, IL 60606 (312) 236-7782 127-S

