

Gordon Jon Straw: Relationships Are Everything

Evelyn B. Straw and Amanda V. Straw

Gordon Jon Straw was a child of God. He was baptized and confirmed Lutheran. He was so connected with and involved in the church that he worked and served in many ways throughout his lifetime. Growing up, he was active in his home church in Cyrus, Minnesota, then worked for several summers in various Lutheran camps during his high-school years, followed by campus ministry and Lutheran Student Movement while attending college at the University of Minnesota, Morris.

In 1982, he entered seminary, where he learned how to weave together his Native culture and Christian theology, thanks to professor and mentor, the Rt. Rev. Steve Charleston, an Episcopal priest. Gordon shared that it was during this time when he learned what it meant to be both Lutheran and Native. These experiences shaped him as a human, father, husband, pastor, theologian, professor, etc. for the rest of his life.

When I met Gordon in 1989, he was serving an inner-city, primarily African-American congregation in Kansas City, Missouri. We met when he was selected for the first ELCA Multicultural Writer's Workshop. Gordon had been chosen to be one of four American Indian/Alaska Native writers for this project. The intent was to introduce the church to wonderfully gifted writers from the various ethnic communities in the ELCA, who were invited and hired to write from their unique perspective and cultural identity for the various Lutheran publications at the time (e.g., *Lutheran Magazine*, *Lutheran Partners*, etc.). Gordon continued to write, teaching the church about Native culture and history, such as where Lutheran and Native meet, for the remainder of his life.

A year later in 1990, he moved to Chicago to serve as the Director for American Indian/Alaska Native Ministries with the Commission for Multicultural Ministries of the ELCA. Our



Evelyn and Gordon Straw and daughter Amanda on the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate degree from Wartburg Theological Seminary, May 20, 2018.

friendship blossomed into romance and in August of 1992 we were married at Bethel Lutheran Church in Chicago—where three pastors co-led our marriage ceremony! We brought our cultures, customs and families together—mine being Puerto Rican and Gordon's being Brothertown Indian, German, and more. We grew together and learned from each other; we created a diverse and loving family from this wide variety of cultures, language, and race.

In 1995, our daughter Amanda was born and we began the serious work of exposing her to all of her heritage and culture. We attended Pow-Wows during the summers, bought her story/picture books from many cultures besides our own, visited Puerto Rico, and so much more.

Gordon had so many interests and passions. He strongly believed in justice and equality for all. He supported the LGBTQIA+ community and stayed involved with Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM). He enjoyed reading books (almost never read anything fiction), learning, teaching, preaching, listening to his vast music collection (primarily progressive rock), watching hockey

and poker tournaments, fishing, doing needlepoint, playing the guitar, and so much more.

Cooking and being in community with others were ways of living out who he was as a person. Gordon loved to cook, barbecue (even competed once), and enjoy a good meal with some fine wine. But most of all, he loved a single-malt whiskey. He often said that both his grandmother and mother were his greatest influencers in the kitchen. He found pure joy working in the kitchen, preparing a feast for whoever was visiting! Sharing a meal with others was a tangible way of sharing God's love and bounty. Taking a lunch break during the workday and eating lunch with others was a spiritual practice that he continued throughout his life. He ate, shared conversation, and learned about people during the meal. His lunch-buddies will attest that there was no talking about work during lunch either! At home, our kitchen and family room are one space. Gordon designed this himself. He wanted our family and friends to be in community while preparing our meals. This was another spiritual practice for him that he modeled everywhere he went. We miss his giftedness in the kitchen so very much.

Gordon was an amazing writer—in all forms. One aspect of his writing that impacted many were his Facebook (FB) posts. I can't count how many people shared with me that they miss his wise, thoughtful, and honest voice in this public forum. He had so many friends, including those who did not always agree with him on his perspectives. This was a way that he shared his beliefs, convictions, and opinions (yes, he had lots of those too); presented another side of things; and shared his hopes for the future and for the world in a very public space. In his FB posts, he spoke about injustice, racial discrimination, white supremacy, intolerance, racial and ethnic violence, gender justice, economic justice, homophobia, Native thought, and, of course, politics. I believe that through his posts, he wanted to motivate us toward working for a more just and loving world.

We will forever miss Gordon's prophetic voice and teaching. May his conviction for the priesthood of all believers and that the laity also have a place in our church remain our conviction as well. May his passion and commitment to spiritual formation as a component of theological education remain crucial and important for the development and formation of leaders for the church.

Gordon's words, written in November 2017, convey an extremely powerful message to us now as we grieve his loss and work to live each day without his presence: that his generous heart was preparing us for this time in our lives; that he somehow knew that

Sharing a meal with others was a tangible way of sharing God's love and bounty. Taking a lunch break during the workday and eating lunch with others was a spiritual practice that he continued throughout his life. He ate, shared conversation, and learned about people during the meal.

his words—this message—would ease our grief and would provide guidance for us to become a spiritually stronger community. What a legacy. Let it be so.

I like to think that it is the power of the Holy Spirit. It is in pain and suffering that each of us grows and becomes stronger spiritually, because of the creative presence of the Holy Spirit in our very person. When we become stronger spiritually, this brings strength to our physical, mental, and emotional aspects, too. This is spiritual formation: being shaped by the Spirit through our experience of pain and suffering—and especially when we are spiritually mute. Of course, I am not advocating for a view that people who suffer have it “better” than those who don't, nor that there is anything glorious or morally superior in suffering. Absolutely not. But, as Luther reminds us, it is in those times and places when all of our self-made monologues and supports have been knocked out from under us, that we truly see the Crucified One and experience the grace of God in a way too deep for words.

Thanks to the *Currents* editors, writers, contributors, and all others who assisted in the development of this issue in Gordon's honor. We know that Gordon is smiling knowing that his work and relationships with you all influenced what is being published.

Evelyn and Amanda Straw