

Roy Meachum

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Razz-berries



The voice on my telephone machine resonated with a Massachusetts' accent. The man identified himself as a physician who had written a letter protesting my column in the *Boston Globe* several months ago.

Specifically, the doctor objected to my reporting on the role played by the late Richard Cardinal Cushing in theologian Father Charles E. Curran's first clash with the Vatican bureaucracy 20 years ago.

Having failed to dissuade the Boston editors, who had independently confirmed the facts before running my piece, the man descended on me. His phone call followed a letter that demanded a retraction; On the tape he insisted on a reply, but in writing; he left no number.

I am not unsympathetic to his dilemma. With no memory of Rome's first attempt to fire Father Curran from the Catholic University faculty — a process renewed last year and apparently successfully — the doctor felt his conservative's reverence for Cardinal Cushing betrayed. Other Bostonians had telephoned to thank me for the column, commenting upon its balance.

Certainly, the tape message does not represent the man's last shot. If he calls while I am here, I will give him what comfort I can. I have not the time nor energy to engage in a lengthy correspondence, and I will not argue.

It may come as a surprise to some readers that I avoid arguments, the emotional poundings by which people seek to impose their views on others.

Discussions feed my soul. Without them I would certainly turn into Mr. Eliot's "old man in a dry season" — waiting for the hooded figure, Death. But in discussions, the right to disagree remains sacrosanct. This right permits the thought processes to breathe, giving life to the pursuit of the shadings of truth.

In arguments, people attempt to destroy others' opinions, which is all any human being really has. Objective truth disappears the instant it enters the human brain; it becomes ensnared with perception that springs from experience and a range of reactions, some primeval.

Psychology exists to help us under-

stand the sources of our differences. It can never hope to become an exact science because of the individual eccentricities of its subject matter, singular human beings.

Long ago I learned that no matter my intention my motives could be misunderstood. In some instances the simple, provable facts are not believed. Honest confusion can come into play.

In Cardinal Cushing's case, the Boston prelate built up a solid conservative record in his later years, but this shift came only after dissent spread among Boston Catholics to the point liberal thought created an administrative problem in his seminary.

Viewed from this perspective, it is perhaps impossible to believe he would give a quarter-inch to anyone who ever questioned authority. But the facts cannot be changed.

Nor is the central shaping of events altered by my memory mistaking an abnormally cold April for March. Playing Gotcha! has never interested

me, which is why I gave up the game of chess, one of my childhood's great passions. Similarly, I quickly gave up Trivial Pursuit. Does it really matter how many white dots there are on a PacMan playing field?

The effort to express ideas comes with the built-in probability of error, so all my effort goes to checking those facts vital to the meaning I intend. For all my professional life, I have been dependent upon the kindness of editors correcting my spelling mistakes.

Of course, the real sin I committed against the Massachusetts doctor was telling him something he did not want to hear. I violated his personal comfort, so his frustration and anger with me are understandable.

In the years I spent covering Catholic Church political struggles growing out of Vatican II, in this country and Rome, I was assaulted, sometimes physically, by both liberals and conservatives. Along with enemies, my reporting also brought me friends, including several bishops who led the hunt for Father Curran's head.

By coincidence the same year (1967) that pulled me into reporting church

politics also drew me professionally into the Middle East. Until the June Six-Days War, my support for Israel was unquestioning. I had even inquired in 1948 about fighting against the Arabs, only to be turned down because I was still in the U.S. Army. The rejection came from a Hagannah recruiter at Zeilsheim, a displaced persons camp outside Frankfurt, Germany.

However, when I reported while the shooting was still going on that the Israelis had staged a "brilliant" preemptive strike to start the war — a fact of history now — I became an anti-Semite, for the first time. Immediately, attempts were made to have me fired by an array of forces, private and public, including pressure from Dan Patir, Israeli Embassy press officer.

Even with the Catholic experience still fresh, I was completely unprepared for the personal attacks from a people with whom I had felt all my life a great affinity. The big kid whom I most admired as a small child in New Orleans walked every Saturday with his father to synagogue.

Thus, 20 years ago, in rapid fashion I learned that telling people what they were not willing to hear could touch off explosive reactions. And then, I was still a reporter, unable to express my opinions or conclusions. Things became no easier when I began commentary, always labeled as such.

Over the ensuing years I have learned to hold myself responsible to my conscience and to my editors, in that order. As printed before in this space I will make no attempt to reply directly to those who attack my views. When they extend their attacks against me as a human being, then they are free to strut and stomp away.

On the other hand, anyone who wishes to discuss any differences of opinion are welcome to telephone, at any time. My number is in the Frederick book. This repeats a standing offer made frequently in the past. Perhaps, not surprisingly, those who consider me the enemy have not opted to accept my invitation.