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from Neil McNeil to Parliament: A Catholic social justice upbringing

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Andy Cash

A Catholic social justice upbringing

Ted Schmidt

One of the surprising results in the May Federal election was the victory of Andrew Cash in Dovercourt riding in downtown West Toronto. This was a riding that for 50 years had sent a Liberal to parliament and which had returned incumbent Mario Silva by 5,000 votes in the previous election.

Silva made the fatal mistake of taking Cash for granted — and for his stunning mistake *NOW* magazine quipped, “The voters traded in Silva for Cash.”

Andrew’s victory gave voice to many who watched in dismay as Canada seemingly moved away from its caring and compassionate history toward an ever more unequal society. As one

who has had a catbird seat on Andy’s principled life for more than three decades, his election said to me that periodically the cosmic wheels do tumble in the direction of justice.

A deep value system

Andy Cash left Neil McNeil over thirty years ago, but when he left he had already internalized a deep value system closely aligned with the liberation and creative perspectives of the Hebrew scriptures and the radical vision of the Sermon on the Mount. His response to Jesus’ invitation to the reign has never been the tepid “Lord! Lord!” rejected in Matthew’s gospel (7:21), but in the “doing of the Father’s will”, advocating for the values of the kingdom, fighting for the common good, an end to war making, increased foreign aid and sensitivity to the poor, the prime place where Jesus locates himself.

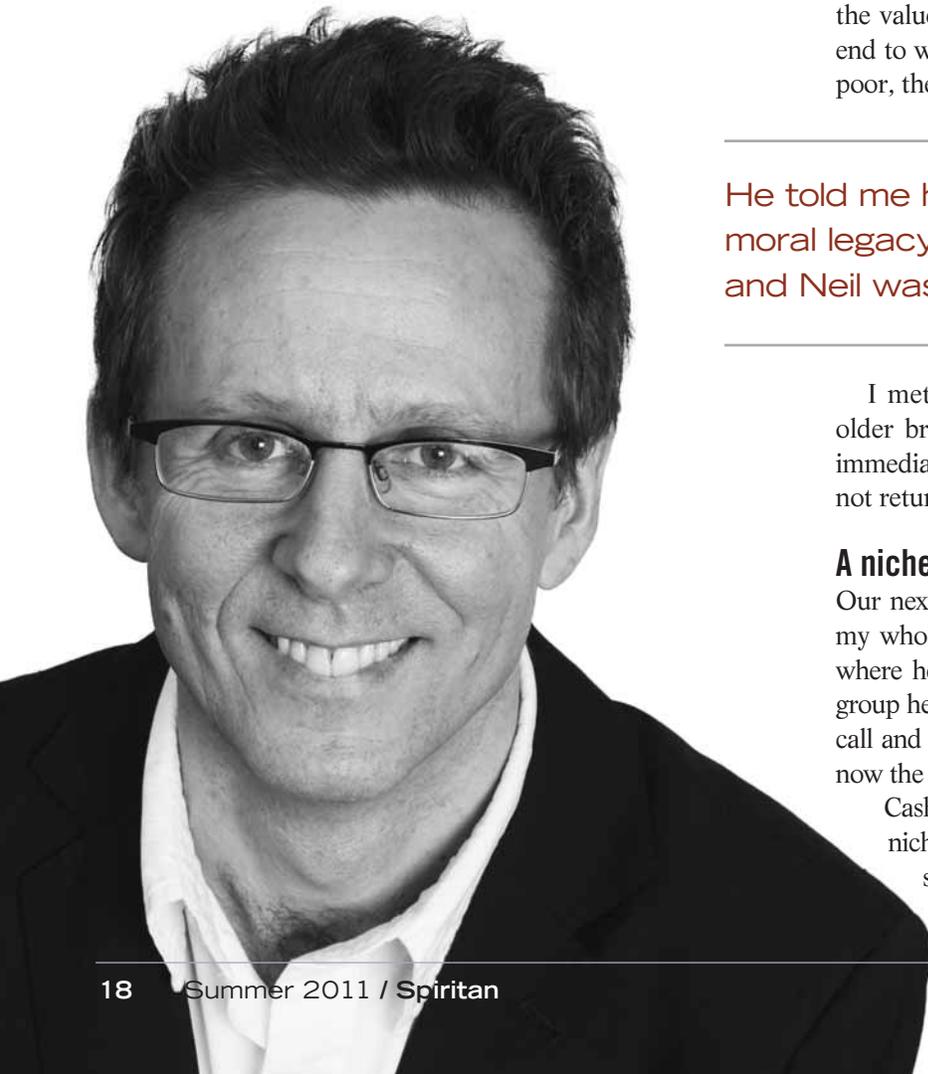
He told me how shocked he was that the moral legacy he had received from his family and Neil was not shared by the broader world.

I met Andy on the third floor of Neil after teaching his older brothers Ricky and Marty. My simple demand: return immediately the *Clockwork Orange* novel brother Marty had not returned to the Religion Department!

A niche in the world of music

Our next meeting and the beginning of a long friendship with my whole family was outside the Brunswick Tavern in 1980 where he was postering the next gig for L’Etranger, the punk group he and Charlie Angus started. Angus later heard a deeper call and left to open a Catholic Worker House in Cobalt. He is now the NDP member for Timmins-James Bay.

Cash’s hardscrabble education had begun, scrambling for a niche in the world of music. He would never attend university, but became a serious autodidact, a voracious reader as he strove mightily to understand the context



where he lived and worked. Unlike many others who went to university to get a passport to the good life, Andy did the intellectual spadework on an ongoing basis in order to cut through society's blandishments, propaganda and false consciousness.

Boomtown

Once in a conversation he told me how shocked he was that the moral legacy he had received from his family and Neil was not shared by the broader world dominated as it was by the ethos of the greed decade, the 90s. He took issue with this in his 1990 Juno-winning song "Boomtown", a strong critique of "market values" over the national interest.

*I don't wanna live in this Boomtown no more!
I don't want to judge my life by what I can't afford
I don't wanna live in this Boomtown
It's busting down my door (Chorus)*

*The landlord called last night, he said he's
selling off our home
He says he's sorry but the neighbourhood has changed
They'll renovate this old dump and put us out
with last week's JUNK
Some trendy folks gonna have a new place to play.*

I've watched with admiration his sterling attempts to forge a life in music which would have great integrity. His lyrics consistently showed a deep understanding of the deleterious effects of advanced capitalism on ordinary folks. Also, he was abundantly worried about the marginalization of kingdom values.

Murder, 2007

*In Jesus' name, the sign of the cross
You can see him weep at the senseless loss
He says, "Sometimes I regret those 33 years,"
As the blood spilled fills his eyes with tears.
Murder = opportunity,
you can make a lot of money selling weaponry.
Jesus said, "Do not kill."
Yeah — well, Jesus Christ he's so over the hill.*

In a recent article by Paul Weinburg, the author compared Andrew's election chances to those of his opponent in these words, "But he makes up for that with an intensity that's hard to ignore, perhaps the result of his Catholic social action upbringing ..."

When Andrew won, I received a call from Neil Principal, Mike Wallace, and veteran teacher Paul Edwards. They had gifts and a note of congratulation and they asked me to bring them to Andy. They too were proud that a former Neil student with a Catholic social justice upbringing was off to join his lifelong pal Charlie Angus in challenging the religion of empire and corporate dominance. ■

Ted Schmidt taught Religion at Neil McNeil from 1968-1986.



My Heart is Ready

O God,
you alone can handle the human heart.
I acknowledge your power.
For a long time you have been trying
to speak to my heart.
But, for an equally long time,
I have refused to listen.

Come to this heart of mine
where you have wanted to come for so long
— a heart that is finally ready
to listen to you..

O God, you want me to be
a man after your own heart.
Give me strength.
Anoint me with your wisdom.
Enlighten me with your insight.
I will make you known
to hearts that do not know you.

My God, what do you want me to do?
My heart is ready.

**Prayer of Claude Poullart Des Places,
founder of the Spiritans
Spiritans celebrate him on 2 October every year**