

The Quadriplegic, sort of

This article deals with an elderly man who for all intensive purposes has become a quadriplegic though technically is not such, hence the “sort of.” Indeed, focusing upon a person who is radically confined is just as fascinating as someone who has voyaged on all seven seas if not more so. Strange how two opposites turn out to have more in common than at first glance. Let’s hope that some justice can be done in this brief account of a man who since having been confined, has touched the hearts of so many people. As for the Covid 19 pandemic still with us which restricts visitors, that doesn’t affect him in the slightest. The weird thing is, nothing does. I get the impression that having visitors would interfere with his flourishing which is going on right now in the thick of extreme dependency.

The person I have in mind is ninety-seven years old, still very much mentally with it, and is quite defensive when it comes to personal privacy. Who can blame him? Physically speaking, everything about him is exposed to the public, so he guards fiercely any tiny bit of privacy within his reach. Precisely for this reason he will be left anonymous. No problemo. We’re after something much larger which transcends any individuality and hopefully can be a model for the rest of us.

Despite the usual run of characteristics and traits, some of which are quite eccentric, he does give off the air of a universal man. This is not unusual when people reach an advanced age. Their idiosyncratic traits get swallowed up in a reality which somehow transfigures them. Already they have left us while as they hang around in their bodies. We know this to be true simply by being with such people. No further prove is required. As for the man we’re about to meet, he embraces all this and then some. We could say that he represents humanity as a whole while remaining very much an individual, warts and all.

A quick note about his origins are in order. He is of French Canadian descent and hails from Pawtucket Rhode Island. For all intensive purposes, we’ll go by his first name which is Roger. It has a tinge of being archaic and for this reason fits just right. Most of Roger’s forebears migrated to southern New England to work in the mills and had remained

a closely knit community. French was the language people used at home and among neighbors. Outside the confines of that neighborhood few spoke English. As for his English, even after all these years Roger speaks with a heavy accent. Almost everyone gets a kick from the way he expresses himself because doesn't bother hiding the way he murders grammar along with the heavily accented French-Canadian tone of his voice. Indeed, that adds a special charm when having a conversation with him.

As with that culture and generation, Roger was what we'd call a devout Catholic and remains so. He'll speak of religion in a way you don't hear much about nowadays. If we were talking about someone else, you might consider him or her old-fashioned. As for Roger, definitely not. It has worked all his life and continues to sustain him.

A proof of this is his amazing intercessory power. All the time people, even with Covid 19, people write, asking him to pray for such and such an intention. It's natural to think of such a person being addressed to present a severe demeanor and get real serious. As for Roger, far from it. Judging by his response, everything to him seems a joke. It's a cunning, thoughtfully laid out disguise which is how he wants it. More on this a bit later. Although far from being a miracle worker, it's amazing how much of what he had been asked to pray for comes to fruition even at this writing. Nothing old-fashioned about that. Also he's fond of attending Mass just about every morning.

As for a conversation, it's no picnic. Part of Roger's affliction is an inability to speak clearly because of some problem with muscles in his throat. However, as I noted above, this affliction...one among a multitude...has nothing to do with his mental acuity. He has to put up with it at all the time which naturally requires constant attention. You'd think after a while, even a short while, this would be bothersome. Such is clearly not the case. People are thrilled to be in his presence and watch...simply watch at how joyful he is, almost constantly being transfigured. This is no exaggeration but as close to the truth you can get. Many have remarked that never have they encountered this before, even among holy people.

When not in bed, Roger is confined to a wheelchair. It's electric and for some time he had been causing unintentional damage while maneuvering. It got so bad that they had to gear down the motor so it would go slow at all times. This enables him some maneuverability which basically consists of going from his room to the day room, chapel and then the dining room, a rather limited T shaped layout in which he operates. The extremes of these three borders define Roger's world beyond which lays the rest of the world. Roger is keenly aware of this and uses it as a reminder to pray for all of us who live there.

During the day someone has to keep close watch over Roger as he eats his meals, including the simple act of drinking liquids. He has difficulty swallowing and can choke easily. During the bulk of the day he's out of his room and in a nearby spacious day room. There he either watches videos (endlessly, it seems) as well as devouring the local newspaper plus any other reading material. However, Roger is fond of doing spiritual reading (*lectio divina*). For that, he wheels down the corridor to his room, preferring to do it in private. Also the day is interspersed with two naps about an hour long.

An interesting, indeed somewhat humorous side note. Regardless of the temperature (the facility where he lives is kept quite warm), Roger always dresses in woolens: shirt, pants and his trademark winter hat. Never is he without that hat. I've heard that he wears it at night along with heavy pajamas. One person who had spent some time preparing Roger for bed said that it's more a ritual than an ordeal. After changing him into pajamas and going through the cumbersome process of lifting up and dropping into bed, he has dons that woolen hat and has a handkerchief placed strategically in the pocket of his top pajama just the way he likes it. Indeed, there's something downright comfy seeing him in bed once this arduous procedure is completed. Then comes the best part. Roger signs off to his caregiver with a wonderful smile and Thank You. Hugs were part of the routine but are suspended due to the pandemic.

Putting Roger to bed is one thing. Getting him out of bed is another, a real chore. They have a fairly large metal framed device that swings over his bed, latches onto him from beneath, lifts him up and deposits him into his electric chair. The same process is repeated: mid morning for a nap and after lunch for another nap, bringing the total of doing this to four times.

Then there's the trip to the bathroom for number two (number one is taken care of with a diaper). Each time Roger is brought to the bathroom he refers to it as his second home. However, he's does quite well in that department for a man of ninety-seven years of age.

I find Roger's confinement significant for personal reasons. I had grown up within walking distance to a zoo and often would go there to see the animals who quickly became friends. What struck me was that they lived their entire lives confined in a given space and didn't seem to mind it. They must have, of course, but to me that didn't register. It was fascinating to know that at all times they (and by "they" I mean everything from llamas to elephants to tropical birds) were in a given place at all times.

To live as such seemed attractive in an odd sort of way, even appealing. It went against every grain of normal human life, but then again the fascination persisted. Could a human emulate that way of living? Obviously it was possible but restricted to people like Roger. So when I came across him many years later, I simply put one and one together. So like those animals, even a I write this I know Roger's location and pretty much what he's doing. Being in one place at all times obviously is no picnic yet watching him makes his situation seem just as desirable if not more so than the moving about we consider a sign of being alive. Again, the current Covid 19 pandemic has shed some new light on being confined for so many people.

So if anyone of us find ourselves confined in one way or another we need to have our wits about us else we'd go crazy in a hurry. In a way, Roger was primed for his current existence. Always he was a homebody, liked to be alone and was attracted to praying both in a silent manner, usually his private devotions, and liturgically as at Mass. A lot of people find that attractive as well...but all the time? When I told a friend about Roger he remarked, "worthy of admiration but not imitation."

In the broader scheme of things we can't help but think of those who are home-bound and in nursing homes. What in God's name do they do all day long? Indeed, Roger is like them. Either he's laying down in bed or sitting where he reads or watches those videos. He never walks. In fact, it's hard to recall the last time I had seen him doing it. Even standing in

one position as when clothing him or changing his diaper is difficult. While these necessary functions are being done to him...yes, everything is done to him...this is where we see his real character shine forth and the inspiration for recording them.

I believe these introductory remarks are important to better appreciate Roger's situation. They set the stage for delving into his character, of what makes him so attractive. It seems the more confining he is, the greater the fascination. That's at the heart of it all.

So what, after all, makes this man tick? Again, for all intensive purposes he's a quadriplegic and has been for approximately twelve years. Every day his vital signs are taken and from what I gather, he's in great shape. I guess when you get in that condition (again, ninety-seven years old) somehow you level off and stay there provided you receive sufficient though not excessive care. People provide all your basics, and that's it. This process begins at or around the time people retire from work. For some years things go along with minor aches and pains but then the heavy duty stuff set in. One goes back to work only this time it's being a professional patient. Your chief occupation is to visit various doctors which at this stage of life can be just as demanding as when you had worked for a living. As for Roger, he has gone beyond both stages. If you're reasonably healthy as he is, you're in the final stretch.

At this time of life two general things happen. First, you're pretty much off everyone's radar screen except for family members. Chances are they're dead, so you're left hanging out there with people waiting for you to die. For all practical purposes you are a dead person among the living. That's solitude in the extreme, a challenge many of us are destined to face and part of why people who've met Roger are fascinated by him. He treats it all so lightly. I wish I could spell this out better, but here I run into a barrier beyond which I cannot go. Not that Roger is refusing entry but essentially the place in which he is now defiles being transmitted in any shape, manner or form.

Each of us come to this place and must decide what to do. One thing is certain. We must move forward and forward we go, passing beyond the veil. We know there's a chance of not making it and won't find this out until it's done. Should we manage the *transitus*, we see why this whole

thing is incommunicable and must leave it as such. Explaining it away is a waste of time. Roger and his carefully calculated silly grin is the best testimony of one who is in the process of making the passage successfully. When I brought this up with one of his caregivers, the response? Already Roger has made the *transitus*. We're the ones faced with the task.

The second thing that comes to the fore during this *transitus* is a clear awareness of how memories have affected you. Gone is the distinction between short term and long term memory. All memories build up imperceptibly until a time comes when they come at you in full force. I'm sure that has been true with Roger. I've seen it in people approximately eight to ten years younger than he, sometimes with a negative effect even bordering upon a loss of sanity. I have no concrete evidence but surmise from superficial contacts with Roger that when younger he had struggled mightily in an attempt to come to grips with his past. Even then he was cheery, but beneath that exterior you could detect a real struggle which involved the usual questions as to what is the meaning of my life, look at how I've wasted so much time, etc., etc., etc.

Eventually Roger had to move to an assisted living facility where he is right now. In his case things began to change rather quickly. Like so many people who never married, he had lived independently to the point of causing annoyance to people around him. He drifted into this not at once but gradually. Now Roger found himself in a regimented environment with all his needs taken care of by a truly remarkable staff who loved him instantly. So instead of finding the restrictions of his new home confining, he found in them a way to flourish.

Also Roger discovered something that had been missing in his life for so long. Always he had a great capacity for love that would manifest itself here and there, but quickly he withdrew it. I think awareness of his French-Canadian heritage had a large part to do with this. So pretty much right off the bat Roger thrived on all the attention showered upon him. Thus in his case as with ourselves, he had a real defect in his life that needed healing. And healed it did, almost miraculously. It seems that the memories of his past, mostly painful in that he had been neglected and shunned for so long, suddenly vanished. People couldn't help but notice which is part of the reason they were attracted to him.

So at ninety-seven and soon going on to ninety-eight, Roger is in cruise control and enjoying every minute. Recently someone told me that he was fully aware of enjoying his almost one-hundred percent dependency. Not exactly true. Thriving on it unabashedly would be more like it. Most of us would want to keep this quiet. So here we have a man of modest means, barely having made it out of high school, worked as a laborer and painter most his life and now on top it it all. Indeed he put in his time and now is reaping his reward in a way most us would be incapable of doing. You can tell this is genuine just by looking at the man. Obviously we shouldn't be jealous of someone who's in this condition, but still one can't help but be drawn to observe him all the more. If it worked for Roger, why can't it work for us. That's the question we're all asking.

Chances are if we were in his situation we'd be depressed and lament our situation non-stop. Like most people in difficult circumstances, they make us pause and consider how good we have it despite our problems. However, Roger does more than that. Somehow he's beyond the aches and pains belonging to his special situation that we come away envious of him. When garnering information for this article I made a specific point to ask those caring for Roger if he ever lamented his situation. As expected, all came back with a resounding "no." It was the way each person said this both individually and in unison that impressed me. Never have I heard such feedback and this not to lavish extravagant praise on someone who has happened to strike your fancy. A first-hand knowledge of Roger when he was younger put that in check, I can assure you. However, that was then, this is now.

Upon further reflection, this knowledge of Roger needs to be fleshed out a bit more. Clearly he was one who didn't have it all put together. I'd say he was emotionally deficient and despite being older, remained immature. That became a turn-off for some people. Still, he had a treasure waiting to come into full flower. What amazed me then as it did now was that Roger was fully aware of this which didn't seem to bother him. I've seen people speak somewhat cruelly and angrily to him about this which rolled off Roger like water off a duck's back. You don't need more proof of where one is mentally and spiritually after hearing that!

In light of this deficiency which admittedly was obvious to everyone, I discovered that you don't need to have it all together to have access to the

treasure I'm trying to describe which now is in Roger's possession. Often we think a number of preconditions must be met to receive it. That can be a fatal mistake because it keeps us tied down. The restrictions have nothing to do with enjoying the gift, a fact which can't be emphasized enough.

Although Roger never stated this, I can with confidence say that he learned to use his deficiencies as a way to deflect attention away from the goal he pursued relentlessly in a hidden manner. That consists in enjoying the presence of God as fully as possible. He didn't simply want to remain motionless in it but to literally to wallow in it. Once in a while you could catch Roger off guard in this respect. In his own coy sort of way undetectable by most people you could see him using the limitations of his personality to disguise that treasure he had tucked away. I'd even venture to say that the so-called spiritual masters wouldn't pick up on this. And so this cunningly simple technique evolved—consciously or unconsciously isn't certain but I'd say the former—into Roger never being noticed. It is precisely the way he wanted it in order to safeguard what was most dear to him. As for us, we're simply onlookers.

This is as clever as it gets when you reflect upon it. As I discovered later, Roger knew what he wanted all his life. He simply spent his life refining it. Roger has made it his business to be that way, playing the fool, something which everyone who comes into contact with him falls for straight-away. The strange part is that he gets and does exactly what he wants and when and where. You can just about hear him saying, "See what I mean about being nothing and nobody?" Indeed this applies to Roger here and now, confined as he is to a wheelchair and having to be lifted into bed with a crane-like device.

An acquaintance of Roger shed more light on the overall pattern of his life. Always he had considered him to be in exile but one he's convinced will end in glory. I may be pushing it, but it'd come as no surprise that he's enjoying this glory right now. Try to imagine being happy not as a basic condition...an optimist of sorts... but continuously. As I had noted, those caring for Roger report this. In fact, they write it down in their official medical ledger. That indeed would be a priceless relic of sorts down the line.

Roger's mousy laugh is both a giveaway as to his unique form of happiness which is both irritating and charming. Irritating because when we run into him we can't help but be struck by the blatant nonsense of it all which puts us in a bind to respond adequately. And almost one-hundred percent of the time we get it wrong. We forget this is simply an act. Act it is but in a very different way, a means of disguising himself in which he seems to take great delight. Roger knows we're somewhat repelled and the more we show it, the more he enjoys it. We find him to be quite charming but only for the shortest time possible. It's that cultivated silliness that makes us want to move on as quickly as we can (and he wants that as well). If you ask what he's doing, always the reply is "nothing." Never does Roger take pains to elaborate. That's for us to figure out if we can get past our unease of being in his presence.

So it's well worth paying closer attention to this man who boasts about being nothing and nobody. After all, Roger is really up there in age and who knows how much longer he'll be with us. And he could care less. It's so evident on his face. He couldn't disguise it even with the help of a Hollywood make-up artist. This, of course, belays a deep and simple inner life where he's at one with himself. He can play the fool, and get away with it, that's how good he is at it. And like I noted above, Roger does, gets and has what he wants, simple as those things are.

Please note that the photo below is about six years old. Roger doesn't like being photographed, so we're lucky to have this one.

