

Cletus Daniel

December 26, 1943 – April 18, 2010

When Cletus Daniel died suddenly, his family lost a devoted husband, father, and loving grandfather; Cornell lost a distinguished scholar; students lost a brilliant teacher; staff members lost a friend and advocate; and those who loved him and were honored to be his friends lost an irreplaceable part of their lives.

We know that Clete was adamantly opposed to any public celebration of his life, but as his family stated in his obituary, we believe “in our hearts that he could accept, if not understand, our strong need to share our reflections on the life of this most private and beloved man.”

Clete was born on December 26, 1943 in Salinas, California only a few months after his family had left the coal fields of western Kentucky. He grew up listening to his father’s grim stories of the brutal hardships that digging coal underground inflicts. Clete spoke often of how what he called life’s darker possibilities gained confirmation and reinforcement from that dangerous and exhausting work and how difficult it was for so many to have humane values in the midst of constant reminders of life’s cheapness.

Clete also grew up in a culture of pervasive poverty. He was a gifted student but described school more as a respite or haven from his home life, and also as a promise of life’s possibilities where a hug or an affectionate pat on the shoulder was a nice add-on. He said that learning to read was emancipating. He also said that Dick and Jane described a world that he longed to inhabit: a peaceful, orderly, predictable place where the food was bountiful, the fun was wholesome, and the parents were loving but responsible.

Clete found himself in classes with the children of wealthy growers who controlled the central California economy. The chasm of opportunity and affluence that lay between him and his fellow students made a lasting impact on him. He spoke and wrote, for example, about the class divide between Mexican workers in the fields and the agribusiness landowners. This instilled in Clete a passion for justice that was at the core of his teaching and writing.

After high school, Clete went to work at the Campbell’s Soup factory in Sacramento. His hilarious descriptions of the soup-making process and its “ingredients” vastly increased the membership of Soup’s Anonymous’ twelve step program. If you’ve ever eaten their Cream of Mushroom soup, you’ll want to stop now. He took advantage of California’s free (at the time) community college and state university system to obtain his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at San Jose State University. He then completed the doctoral program at the University of Washington. (“They paid me to go to school” he would later recall. “What a racket.”)

Clete would relate how he often watched the Southern Pacific passenger train as it came through town and wondered what it would feel like to sit in the brightly-lit dining car and be observed by motionless watchers such as himself. He would add that he was never bold enough to imagine that someday he could be that traveler.

In 1973, this “almost accidental academic” traveled to Ithaca to become a Cornell University faculty member and Assistant Professor of History in the ILR School. Clete was a brilliant teacher who prepared every class thoroughly as a basis, not for rote lecturing, but for exciting and substantive classroom discussions with his students. He received a Distinguished Achievement in Teaching Award in 2002. His dedication to students also motivated him to become Director of the ILR School’s Credit Internship Program in 1989 and to oversee its development into world-wide opportunities for students that have changed many students’ lives for their own good and the good of others.

Clete’s research concerned people too poor, powerless, or dark skinned to fight back and who, too often, developed a sense of resignation and defeat. He believed that working class had the same ratio of fools to saints as every other class, but he knew from the first-hand experience of his early years that the working class was not and could not be the real malefactors of society.

His first book, Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers 1870-1941, was a history, as he described it “of the powerlessness of an occupational group: the men, women, and children who worked for wages in the fields and orchards of California.” It explained how that powerlessness was a product of the political and economic power of organized agribusiness interests. Clete dedicated the book to his father “who worked with his hands.” He also acknowledged his indebtedness to those who inspired the book: the Mexican farm laborers “who worked alongside me in the lettuce fields.” He called them his “first heroes.” He wrote that they showed and taught him compassion, that “they never permitted the wretchedness of their lives to rob them of their dignity,” and that, although “their names are not remembered,” their “faces and singular heroism are indelibly etched in my memory.”

In Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness: The FEPC in the Southwest 1941-1945, Clete wrote about the approximately three million Mexican and Mexican-Americans who were among those whose “race, color, creed, gender or national origin rendered them ineligible to participate fully and equally in the singular competition for material gain and social advantage that this country afforded.” Here he developed further the theme of the gap between American promise and practice and the experiences of “ineligible Americans” trying to reconcile the America of their dreams with the America of their experience.

Clete’s other books, The ACLU and the Wagner Act: An Inquiry into the Depression Era Crisis of American Liberalism and The Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States, extended his exploration of power and powerlessness and of efforts to reconstruct American society “at long last along the lines of the nation’s professed democratic ideals.” We know that Clete would have objected to a “then he wrote” remembrance, so we will say no more about his distinguished scholarly contributions.

More than anything we remember all the small things that made him the man that we love. Clete was as quick with a hug as he was with good natured humor. He loved to laugh at your expense or his own and would laugh until the tears welled up in his eyes. He loved red wine and Swiss chocolate, reading The Onion and watching the Simpsons. He hated having loose threads on his clothes and he was an insanely impatient driver. He loved well made shoes, his socks always matched his pants, and he had an amazing collection of ties. Clete liked to look good, but it was

not about vanity, but a response to a childhood where the shoes never fit, the socks always had holes, and the clothes were never new. To say he had a salty tongue would be an understatement, and he had the highest respect for people who took swearing to an art. He loved jazz, generously sharing his vast collection with his friends, and he spoke with a mix of envy and pride about his musician brothers. He was a true skeptic, but never let that morph into pessimism or cynicism. He loved words and would spend hours crafting emails, letters, and lectures. He believed that being a father was the most important thing he had ever done as a man. He loved rumbling summer thunder, the sound of the ocean in Cannon Beach, Oregon, and an oak tree on Libe's Slope that he believed was beautiful in every season. Van Gogh was his favorite painter, Paris his favorite city, Mexican his favorite food, and as a young man, Clete dreamt of traveling to the world that Hemingway wrote about, but seemed so alien to the young man from Salinas.

Clete was a deeply private person with a very small circle of close friends. For those of us privileged to be in that group, he was expansive and open, funny and playful, tender and generous, and fiercely protective. He believed anger was the hallmark of his personality, and he was quick to anger, rarely forgave a slight, and could send an email so withering as to "make our sphincter tighten," in his words. But that anger never led him to joylessness. If anything, he was able to find laughter even in life's darkest moments. It is this example that is the hardest to follow for those of us who miss him so much. While Clete believed anger to be his hallmark, in fact it was his kindness. Above all, he was kind and compassionate and most admired kindness in others. As he put it, "smart is good, but kind is better." He could not abide the pretense and inordinate self-regard of what he called "self-promoting careerist gas bags." He gloried in puncturing those gas bags with his piercing wit.

In his 1992 ILR Commencement address, Clete said that the "uniquely human nutrients – tolerance, generosity, understanding, compassion – sustain and invigorate the spirit as well as ennoble the mind." He lived out those words in every aspect of his life. Clete Daniel was truly a man for all seasons, a colleague for all seasons, and a friend for all seasons. Nothing will be the same without him.

James Gross, Chairperson; Lee Dyer, Risa Lieberwitz & Brigid Beachler