

Reflections on Mario Cuomo

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I was honored – blessed – to have had the opportunity to work for Mario Cuomo during his last three years as Governor of New York State.

Over that time, I came to admire him for reasons I had not anticipated, even after years of observing his public life.

He was the hardest working person I have ever encountered. One example: On the day he gave his acclaimed speech nominating Bill Clinton for president, I sent him a memo he had requested summarizing the work of his Commission on Libraries. Notwithstanding his high profile assignment that evening, the memo came back to me the next morning marked up with comments and instructions.

I took his dedication as inspired by the oft-cited examples of his immigrant parents, but also by a sense of responsibility and gratitude for the opportunity for service his fellow citizens had given him.

He was considerate, in contrast to the reports common in the media back then of “the 800 pound gorilla” with a volcanic temper. I was moved, when circulating among his staff at a gathering after losing his bid for a fourth term, he said, “Sorry to have disrupted your life.” I don’t recall my response. I think I felt it was important to assure him I had found employment. I hope I had the grace to say as well, “It’s been an honor, sir.”

He was a person of profound faith, as well as a brilliant thinker, and his example led me to a deeper faith.

On the evening we learned of his death, my daughter asked, “What is your favorite Mario Cuomo memory?” I said, on a personal level, going with him to P.S. 50 in Queens, his first school. Watching him gaze about the halls, I imagined him thinking about how far he had come, from a small boy who entered school speaking only Italian, to the three-term Governor of what he called, “the greatest state, in the greatest nation, in the only world we know.”

The visit ended with a stop in what I recall as a 5th grade classroom. He answered questions from the students, presumably 10 year-olds. One girl asked, “How did you know what you wanted to do when you grew up?” First, he evoked laughter telling of misadventures in

professional baseball and of trying an education class to get closer to an interesting girl named Matilda who was studying to become a teacher. Then he turned serious, explaining how he found the law and then politics.

He concluded saying, "If you are really lucky, you will find something bigger than yourself that you want give your life to." He gave examples - teaching, nursing, public service. He also mentioned how, for a long time, the only option for many women was to take care of a family, but that a family is something bigger than ourselves worth giving your life to.

His answer was beautiful - funny and wise and so utterly respectful of the little girl and all her classmates.

Several Christmases ago, my wife gave our family the children's book the Governor wrote based on a true story from his diary of the 1982 campaign, told to illustrate the virtue of persistence. The story tells of coming home one evening as a boy to find that a beloved blue spruce in front of the family's new home had become uprooted and toppled over in a rainstorm. The Governor's father proclaimed, "We gonna push 'im up." The young Mario Cuomo and his brother were incredulous but did as their father said, using ropes and stakes to secure the tree upright. The story concludes that, decades later, the tree was still standing, grown to a height of 65 feet.

When I finished reading the story aloud the first time, my daughter, then no more than age five age, asked, "Can we go see the tree?" I answered that it was unlikely we would ever get to that part of New York City.

Instead, we planted a blue spruce in our front yard.

