

Richard Estrada: Philosopher, Gadfly, Friend

by David Simcox

Richard and I shared a special bond through suffering. We were partners in the creation of the Center for Immigration Studies. It was an inauspicious time. The new Center had no clout, no computers, no staff but us, no money, and dim prospects of getting any. When Richard was highly recommended to me by those I respect I had to wonder why a rising scholar of such repute would cast his lot with such an unproven institution.

Richard was easily the most hireable candidate for the job because some grant money came with him to help pay his no-frills salary. We worked together in a borrowed two-room suite that may have had in total 250 square feet of floor space, using boxes of books as typewriter stands. He never complained about these conditions. He suggested that the very austerities of our surroundings were in keeping with the self-sacrificing, bridge-burning, un-chic cause of immigration reform.

I realized early that I had a person with a remarkably inquiring mind, voracity of scholarship, and a poetic feel for the English language. It was clear that Richard would quickly outgrow the then-struggling Center. His future held much more than sifting INS and Census data to analyze the liabilities of mass immigration. If what I had wanted was a bean-counting quantitative sociologist on my staff, Richard clearly had

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a more expansive vision.

Even so, he was a tireless researcher. But he was much better as a visionary of the nation's absurdities and contradictions, an exposé of pretense, and a master packager and presenter of complex issues in simple terms. To me, he had a prophetic style in exposing unhealthy trends in American societies and the ills that would ensue from them if not corrected. When Richard wrote and talked he made me and others want to listen. His spirit, demeanor and language were compelling, as a prophet's must be.

The immigration reform movement has lost a stalwart champion in the untimely death of Richard Estrada, syndicated columnist with the Dallas Morning News, member of the Jordan Commission.

Despite his brilliance there was not a milligram of intellectual arrogance in the man. We spent hours talking about our shared interests: Mexican history, the politics of the Southwest, the *Via Crucis* of Hispanics in the labor market and the schools, the spreading inequality, and the inherent greed of free market

societies. Most often I became the pupil in these *tertulias*, playing the inquiring student to the Socratic Richard.

Richard was painfully exacting about his writing. He appreciated how even one phrase, one characterization imprecisely expressed, could reshape the tone and direction of an entire column or article. Richard mentioned more than once his tug of war with his editors in Dallas over his preference for the more precise term "asylum seeker" over the briefer, and more emotionally seductive but conclusory term "refugee."

When Richard was at the Dallas Morning News, he used to call me occasionally (and I suspect many of his other former coworkers) to ask for our unsparing critical reactions to a draft column. His inherent fastidiousness seemed to compel him to make one final search for that verbal misstep, that fatal nuance that he feared could lurk there. I'll have to admit that I was flattered. My suggestions at times involved ways of making the column

in question more supportive of immigration reform. But Richard was in search, first of all, of injustice, pretense and double-standards. He believed deeply in immigration reform, but his journalistic ethic forbade him from making his column into an exclusive platform for any cause, regardless of its merit.

At the same time, I know from his comments that his journalistic honesty about immigration and about the ambitions of Hispanic leaders came at a high cost in the form of angry pressures from ethnic spokesmen, readers and subscribers, and his own editors to soften his message or avoid the subject all together. He spoke of pickets, letter-writing campaigns, threatened boycotts, and the visits of protesting delegations of Hispanics to executives of the Morning News seeking to have him curbed or dropped. It could not have been an easy situation for the paper, but to its credit it retained Richard, let him write, and allowed him a four-year period of frequent absences to Washington to serve on the Jordan Commission.

I never sensed that Richard Estrada was intimidated by the protesters or particularly fearful about retribution from management. I think he serenely accepted those things as the price of being a truly independent thinker and voice. He never traded on his minority status and had little patience with those who did. It would have been easy and understandable for him to become a journalistic cheerleader for minority exceptionalism. But he didn't. He had a quiet, understated sense of humor about professional Hispanics. Once, before we traveled together to a meeting in the Bahamas, I told him INS pre-clearance at Nassau Airport would ask us to prove if we were American citizens. He said that was fine for me, but his job was to show the "required indignation" at such a question.

He rarely shrank from examining the politically incorrect. At the time when national guilt over the treatment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans was ascendant, ultimately yielding a law to indemnify them, Richard, ever the dialectical thinker, was inquiring why Italian and German aliens in the U.S., who often suffered comparable treatment, got neither recognition nor

compensation, and making readers aware of critical distinctions between the rights and immunities of aliens and citizens under national and international law in war time.

Richard depended on clear expression and sound reasoning to win the day. He was not a shouter. I recall he reluctantly accepted to appear on the Morton Downey show, one of those talk shows in the 1980s that judged its success by how much snarling rage and insults could be induced among the participants. Richard said his piece calmly, then sat serenely for the rest of the show, leaving pandemonium to others.

One painful loss attending Richard's early death is that his perceptions of the workings of the Jordan commission and his own role in it will go undocumented. I know he felt the frustrations of trying to work one's will in a deliberative group containing such radically opposed interests — trying to build, by committee, a rational immigration policy out of oil and water. But the ultimate recommendations of the commission for reducing legal immigration and the commission's attention to the plight of low-skilled U.S. workers, particularly established Hispanic immigrants, satisfied me that Richard had been persistent and persuasive. The ever serene and stoical Richard to my knowledge never registered anger or surprise that Congress and the Executive subsequently shelved those recommendations. He deplored but accepted as a given the ignoble side of American political behavior.

Richard's last column comparing the establishment's disparate treatment of Pat Buchanan and Pat Robertson for their reputed anti-Semitism could not be more exemplary of his life as a scribe: his fascination with the contradictions and hypocrisy of politics; his boldness in engaging no-win topics that other journalists might duck; and the sensitivity, objectivity and clarity of presentation that through it all bespoke a total absence of malice.

Richard will be missed by immigration reformers, by true defenders of minorities' interests, and by allies of America's underdogs.

I will miss him as a friend.

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