

Michael Sprong

By Jay Davis

Michael Sprong and I were first in contact during the summer of 1987, which was a time of transition for me. My first marriage had fallen apart, and I was about to move from Aberdeen to Vermillion and start law school at USD. Having been active in the South Dakota Peace and Justice Center for many years, I was happy to volunteer to help with a mapping project, giving names to individual nuclear missile silos along with precise directions to reach each silo, in case anti-nuclear protesters wished to stage events at remote locations west of the Missouri River. (See Nuclear Heartland: A guide to the 1,000 missile silos of the United States, published by Nukewatch and edited by Samuel H. Day, Jr., 1988.) A friend and I camped out at West Whitlock and got off to an early start the next day, mapping twenty missile silos in remote locations. By mid-afternoon, we were being followed by Air Force missileers in a heavily armed van. If we slowed down to a crawl, so did they. If we sped up in an attempt to lose them, they stayed on our tail. If we made a wrong turn, so did they. Finally, we reached a missile silo that was open, with something like a semi truck backed up on the pad and soldiers with machine guns standing guard. Clearly, a new warhead with infinite destructive powers was being planted into the ground. I stopped just outside the perimeter, so as to write down some quick notes about that particular nuke and one missileer walked over to the car and asked if we needed anything. I said "no thanks, we're just tourists" and he walked away, knowing damn well that we weren't tourists, exploring gravel roads in the middle of nowhere.

The person in charge of the South Dakota portion of this mapping project was named Michael Sprong. He had only been in South Dakota for a short time, and I had never heard of him. We were supposed to meet up with him late that afternoon at the Verendrye monument above Fort Pierre, but that didn't work out. Little did I know that Michael, and his life partner Beth Preheim, would become close friends and very important characters in my life.

When I arrived in Vermillion a few weeks later, settling in to study the law and build a new life in a new community, I ventured an hour north to meet Mike and Beth at Rose Hill Farm, a charming location near Marion and Freeman that had been in Beth's Mennonite family for several generations. They received me warmly. While we had radically different life experiences, we had many things in common, including most of our political views. There were times when I needed a respite from my harried life in the university town, and they would welcome me with open arms. They also got to know my son Josh, who was just seven years old at the time. Michael and Josh shared an interest in several punk rock and alt-country musicians.

Some years later, when I had settled into working as a Legal Services attorney in Pierre, and Josh had come to live with me, Mike and Beth welcomed me into their home on Christmas day. As usual, Josh had flown out to Oregon to spend the holiday with his Mom, and I could feel lonely and bleak. But this Christmas was different. After opening my gifts and making a few phone calls to family, I got in my car and drove down to Rose Hill Farm where I was welcomed as if I were a close relative. It was an exciting and fulfilling way to spend the holiday.

Michael and Beth both served for years on the South Dakota Peace and Justice Center board, as did I. We were involved in lively discussions about how to advance a progressive perspective on many issues, including racism against Native people, protection of our natural resources from

uranium and gold mining, and serving as witnesses against the specter of war, nuclear or otherwise. Sometimes, we shared our frustrations about the hard-working, underpaid staff whom we hired to organize and advance our agenda. There was a time when Michael aspired to hold the executive director position, and other board members erected roadblocks to that idea. He was a bit outspoken and brash, and he had no college education. He had grown up in an environment of poverty and deprivation, and had received his political education out on the streets. The Peace and Justice Center was a faith-based organization, founded by a Roman Catholic sister, and Michael did not wear his religious convictions on his sleeve. I was of the opinion that he would have energized the organization, had he been given the chance to lead it.

We became even better acquainted over the years as we shared three epic travel adventures. Michael joined me on a trip to Churchill, Manitoba, an outpost on Hudson Bay. We drove up through Grand Forks, which was still reeling from the devastation of a huge flood, and Lake Winnipeg, where we camped out during the reveling of Icelandic-Canadians, and stashed my car at Thompson, where we boarded a passenger train which chugged slowly northward through tamarack forest and tundra to our destination. It was late summer, with oppressive humidity and heat and no shade, since we were north of trees. The legendary polar bears had ventured further north, but we did take a charter boat out into the bay to observe beluga whales at close range. We saw Inuit children cooling off on the black sandy beaches and jumping into the 38 degree water. We toured the museum and drank at the local saloon. The whole week was pretty exciting.

A few years after that, when I had moved from Pierre to Rapid City, Michael and Beth joined me on an autumn trek to the Grand Canyon, where we actually carried heavy backpacks as we carefully navigated the sometimes treacherous trail from the rim down to the Colorado River. It was pleasantly cool up on top, and fairly hot when we pitched our tent at the bottom, enjoying an entirely different perspective of one of America's most iconic destinations. The hike back to the top was more rigorous, but it didn't kill us. We spent that evening at a Best Western motel just outside the park, where we soaked in the hot tub and had quite a bit to drink as we watched the first Presidential debate between George W. Bush and John Kerry. On the trip home, we explored a bit of the Navajo reservation and got to the beginning of the trail to the top of Black Mesa, which is the highest point in Oklahoma, before realizing that we were still too sore to handle another long hike.

There was yet another trip which I was privileged to share with Michael and Beth, this time to an ecumenical conference of peace and anti-nuclear groups at Maryville College in eastern Tennessee. During that event, we headed over to witness against nuclear weapons at nearby Oak Ridge, participated in seminars, and also spent some time with Michael's mother and brother, who had settled in another Tennessee small town. I had heard much about Michael's difficult upbringing and his family, but this was a chance to actually meet them. We also enjoyed a tour of the Eugene V. Debs home, a monument to America's leading socialist, in Terre Haute, Indiana. It is fair to say that we explored a good bit of America together.

In addition to those three epic adventures, I distinctly recall other times when Michael and Beth were my hosts as I ventured across the country. They briefly left South Dakota while I was in law school, so that Beth could complete her bachelors degree in nursing at Bethel College in Kansas, and I stayed with them one spring vacation as I headed down to Texas. On that visit, we enjoyed

live music in Wichita, and I got to meet Beth's father, who had been the head of the leading Mennonite denomination and was a personal friend of Jimmy Carter. There was another time when I was making the long drive from Massachusetts back to South Dakota, after checking up on Josh to see how he was doing in college, and I stayed with Michael and Beth at the Catholic Worker house in Des Moines, where they introduced me to some peace and justice legends.

While Michael Sprong lacked a formal education, he was extremely intelligent, had great intellectual curiosity and was very well-read. He could engage in conversation on a very wide variety of topics. Of course, he was capable of playing the devil's advocate and exploring the other side of a difficult question. He could mimic the mannerisms of other characters whom we encountered on the Peace and Justice Center board.

It is fair to say that Michael was a pretty good bullshitter. He was a living legend, who spent time in a federal prison camp after successfully disabling the Project ELF trigger for America's nuclear submarines in Wisconsin. He had participated in numerous protests at Offutt Air Force base near Omaha. He had overcome a dysfunctional upbringing and had traveled to the Philippines and El Salvador as an election observer and world peace advocate. He had nothing to apologize for. Nonetheless, he would sometimes make up stories and embellish, and sometimes it was hard to tell whether his story was real, since you wanted to believe him. On our trip to Hudson Bay, Michael told me about a previous adventure to Lake Winnipeg, where he had worked on a boat and was paid only with Moosehead beer. I quickly realized that this story was pure fiction, but declined to challenge him on it. I heard his various stories about sleeping in dumpsters after he left his family and ventured out into the world, and wasn't sure whether this was another embellishment or maybe it was real. The life that Michael Sprong lived was legendary enough, but that did not stop him from adding details.

This much we can say for sure: Michael Sprong had a heart of gold. He would literally give you the shirt off his back, and hospitality was his strong suit. In middle age, Michael and Beth developed a new passion, opening the Emmaus House in Yankton, loosely affiliated with the Catholic Worker movement, offering hospitality to people who came from all over the state and nation to visit loved ones who were incarcerated at the nearby state prison in Springfield, the federal prison camp and the state mental hospital, both of which were right there in town. If their visitors were able to reimburse them for some or all of the costs of hospitality, that was fine, but if they had no money, they were just as welcome. Visitors were provided clean beds and delicious meals. One thing they were not offered was television. They could sit up and talk, or they could retire and rest, but Emmaus House was not your typical motel.

In recent years, Michael Sprong went into a steep decline. His love for alcohol tightened its grip on him, and his physical health and mental acuity suffered. He tried inpatient alcohol treatment, which provided a respite but did not cure his disease. Emmaus House closed, and the only work he could find involved working in a convenience store and delivering newspapers. He was less aware of state and world news, and he was acutely aware of the fact that his best days were behind him. Beth was as supportive of him as she could possibly be, even as she endured a grueling battle with breast cancer, possibly fueled by her proximity to the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster back in 1979. Eventually she became discouraged with Michael, but even after

she divorced him and he moved into a tiny apartment nearby, she continued to care for him on a daily basis, making sure he was getting something to eat and taking his medications.

I was saddened but not really surprised to learn of Michael's death. His flame had burned intensely, and then it flickered and eventually burned out. It was an absolute privilege to be his longtime friend. Michael Sprong was someone for whom you always wished the best. His contribution to the community, and to society, could not be denied. He was the ultimate servant and messenger, who finally was not able to save himself.

Jay Davis  
November, 2024