

Funny I ran into this site. I was just recently musing on a story rebroadcast on "This American Life" in November of 2009 interviewing Kathie Russo about Spalding's death and the symbolism of a bird in their lives and what we are really here to do. I started a draft that I am finishing now after seeing that a movie had been made about him. It really helped and touched me as I dare consider Spalding a brother in arms.

I met Spalding in the early '90's in Eugene, OR. He was there at the Hult Center for "Monster In A Box". Now first I should say that I come from a very high-energy, (Italian/Honduran) family and was raised in Seventh-Day-Adventist churches and schools. I had been raised in what I considered a very cloistered, watchful life and had been raised on bible stories, interpreted literally- without subtext-, which was a constant topic after leaving the churches. My brother and I shared this "nearly-a-cult-religion" past with Spalding. I also have this first-generation-American experience of wandering away from home, and the desire to make sense of what I have been told was fact, without being talked into it, by the schools and churches I attended. This helped prepare the way I met Spalding, how he received my twin brother and me, and a small group of good friends he graced, by joining us. If you ever sat across from him in an intimate environment, he would simply glow with life in his directness. That night, after the performance, a dear friend who coordinates for the Hult Center asked a few of us if we wanted to meet Spalding. We were a bit bashful and unsure, but she assured us he liked to meet his fans. So downstairs we went and shortly, he came out of a room hidden under a long coat and a ski hat pulled to cover all but his face. We were introduced and after a short conversation, asked him to join us at a bar nearby. He was all up for it and we got him into one of our cars and once we arrived at this lively little wood-lined bar with lacquered picnic tables, we ordered beers and fries and set about a very lively conversation. As we spoke, it became apparent that my identical twin and I were on nearly the same level emotionally, spiritually as he. He brought it up, "...You do know, you could do my job easily! You think and speak in the same manner!" While I was quite flattered, I never wanted to be in front of the lights on the stage, where he excelled. One of the first things I remember sensing was his seriousness off of the stage. Having been one of the main class clowns in school, I have always seen humor as always half serious, often about a topic people are uncomfortable with. I have always had a side of me that felt as though there is too much electricity going through this thin wire, but the anxiety and tension still stay. I sensed this in Spalding. It became my twin's and my aim to see if we could make this man laugh this evening. It was still only about 10 p.m., and within a few pints and some bad jokes, Spalding was laughing so hard, he was slapping our shoulders and spilling tears. He later said he hadn't laughed so hard in years. This saddened me, that someone who gave so much of his inner dialogue received so little of it back. His monologues could bring the full gamut of my emotions out, so I felt the same sense of relief after he let all of his emotions and fears show. I told him he wore his emotion suit inside out for a living. I found that beautiful.

After that evening, we dropped him back at his hotel and continued meeting for the remainder of the time he was in town for the weekend. We walked around the beautiful little college town and talked about whatever feelings and senses came to mind... simple, to the core, all from the heart. We promised to stay in touch. He was very keyed up, as I recall, over his situation with Renee, and was on the phone with his therapist chattering nervously for backup often. Some of my friends commented that he seemed stressed out of his head. I was completely taken, as I know how it feels to be overwhelmed by having such strong senses and intuition. Where this comes from is a whole other topic. Suffice it to say that the adage, acute perception does not mean you're crazy, but it can drive you crazy.

A few years later, I received a call about the time, "A Slippery Slope" and he were touring. This was a different, more excited and confident Spalding. He had this sense about him of daring and reinvention. His interaction with the audience was mesmerizing. He seemed to be really listening. I believe the experiences he had with Kathie Russo, from his description, were exactly what he needed, a break from "the liberal who has to question eeeverything." Karen seemed to be a "just do it" type of powerful woman. This really excited him and he was in rare form that weekend. I was still living in Eugene, OR. Again, we walked around town discussing philosophy, existentialism, mysticism, psychedelia, love, hate, dreams, food, homes, relationships- now all ephemeral experiences for me. We spent enough time together that weekend imbibing in joyous simple experiences together between a few friends. But we all traded favorite stories, caught each other up about present and past commonalities and curious differences and hugged goodbye.

A few years passed, my older brother contracted ALS and began a slow descent. This was my first drop into mortality. Meanwhile, my shoulder froze while I was working, requiring radical surgery, and during retraining, I broke my ankle on both sides. It was the assurance of mortality and the betrayal of promises made to the body, the reminder of aging. Spalding's mother believed she could heal her own sicknesses and depression. She could not. He was keenly aware that he was a product of this upbringing, and possibly the anxiety/angst he carried. Whether we are victims or victors of our stories- or simply observers.

That which does not kill me makes me stranger...

In late 2000, I returned to my hometown, Portland, OR, where I stayed in a small room in a big house from a close friend while I tried to find my new career and face my older brother's imminent death from ALS, along with a mother and aunt fighting cancer. When I found out Spalding was returning to do a monologue, I excitedly told my housemate and his company I wanted them to see and meet Spalding- this man after my own heart. I found out through the sponsor, P.I.C.A, and the gracious Victoria Frey, where Spalding could be found. I left a message at the hotel, not sure if he would remember me as strongly I had him. Plus I was

insecure about him seeing me broken down after we had last met... me, still walking with a boot from my broken ankle! To my surprise, he almost immediately called me back and begged me to get him out of his hotel. When I went to pick him up, I was, at first, taken aback. Something seemed different. He *looked* different. He appeared to be in an exhausted, angst filled daze. And he was also wearing a walking boot. I had invited my twin and one of my friends who had commiserated with us in Eugene, to join us at the house of my host friend at the base of the NW hills. When we arrived, Spalding was still pacing and when introduced to my friends, responded to, "How are you?" with "...Not good. Not good at all." We took off for a walk in the nearby Forest Park and the peacefulness it offers. Curious, I asked him about his drop foot cast and why it appeared as though there was a dent in his forehead. Spalding was very honest. He was very disturbed and kept repeating that he had lost his muse and was fighting with writer's block since moving into a different house in NY. But it became more apparent when we returned and all gathered in the kitchen something else was also happening. He told the story of the accident in Ireland, Timothy Leary's widow in the passenger seat, the crash and his slamming into the back of Kathie's seat and how they rebuilt his forehead, and his drop leg. He was truly distraught that the story he was going to tell that night was not at all from his present, but from five years before. Somehow, I felt his angst was connected to what "hit" him while in Ireland. It was as if he had changed, and it wasn't through anything he had initiated, nor did it give him a clever, funny story to tell. I still remember his words in his monologue, "...there's near death experiences, and there's DEATH!"

This experience was what had changed him. Possibly convinced him. I could only guess, but something powerful had happened- and he didn't feel like himself anymore. It brought great pain to me and my brother and friend that we could not console Spalding in any way this time. I had a dark feeling even then.

I returned him back to his hotel so he could get a massage before he went to his performance that evening. I was lost. I returned back to my house, and all of us spoke with great concern about what we had just witnessed as opposed to what my brother and I had told my friends about the buoyancy of Spalding I felt I knew when meeting him in prior years. I knew one thing; he would perform his act without showing any of what he had just told us. The audience would be no wiser. And they weren't. The monologue about being a father and his relationship with Kathy were an older story. After one drink from the glass on the spartan table, water and microphone, he was the artist he played as himself. After he danced a jig around the stage at the end (with this drop-foot hidden), I went backstage to ask how it went. He looked at me and said, "That was the hardest, most painful experience and it gets worse every time I tell it. That's five years ago, not now!" I didn't know what to do, so I just gave him a hug. He wanted to trade addresses and correspond, and he gave me his New York address. I feel sorry to this day I didn't contact him and what he had requested of me. But something kept me back in concern. I will never know if I could have helped him with his incredible agony.

The day after his missing was reported and I heard the last film he saw was, Big Fish, I couldn't stop the tears, if you saw the "epic myth" that paralleled Spalding's life. Finding Kathie also knew that night and somehow the story gave him permission is strangely comforting to share the intuition I felt.

I hold a few items he shared with me over the time I was able to know him and they help me remember, along with the loss of my older brother, how sweet life is... and that we don't know why we're really here or for how long.

I'm so grateful to write this finally. I treasure the story from NPR of Kathie talking about Spalding appearing as a bird shortly after his death and the meaning of the bird in their family stories. I'm so very grateful for that! Spalding had spoken of Renee in our conversations as well, and I marveled at his changes after he met Kathie. Thanks for the opportunity to share this. I have photos I will scan of us laughing and talking along with the last visit of Spalding and a short message of his voice on my answering machine tape a few years before he left us. You are missed and NOT forgotten, Spalding. Thank you, Kathie! I hope this helps. It does me!

With Warmest Regards,

Gary Cipparone