

For Donald Sheehan

memorial given on Frost Day, July 2010, Franconia, NH

In honoring Donald Sheehan, a couple of words come immediately to mind. One is “vision.” Don was one of those people who had a strong sense of what could be. From the fact of this barn and house he helped to create something that has come to be called The Frost Place, something that stands for many people for a notion of poetry not at the periphery of life but at life’s center. In an age in which so much revolves around notions of identity that too often are self-defeating, Don honored poetry as a force to bring all of us into a deeper relationship with the sheer intensity of being alive as human beings, which is to say, as users of language. Don understood so well that in honoring Frost, we honor ourselves and our capacity to receive the gift of poetry, a capacity every person possesses. He believed passionately in the validity of that gift and accordingly he stressed generosity of spirit.

When one thinks about it, it seems natural that poetry should stress generosity since it is something to be shared and something upon which no monetary value can be placed. It is a spirit gift. Again, as a profoundly spiritual person, Don understood the value of giving. To be attached, to be possessive is both an indignity and burden. To be free and giving is to enact a kindly dignity that we hope to find at the core of our humanity. Don embodied that kindness and that dignity.

I sat in this barn and heard Don talk every year at the Frost Place Seminar on the most diverse and remarkable topics, everything from translating the psalms (Don read Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic) to J.D. Salinger to Russian icons to Plotinus to Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. Every talk he gave astonished us with its depth and insight. We realized we were in the presence of someone who was pursuing his own concerns yet who was aware of how to relate those concerns to others without compromising the subtlety of his thoughts. I remember vividly feeling at once stunned and elated, as if someone had flung open a door to a whole other continent. It wasn’t that Don expected us to immediately become scholars in the sense that he was a scholar. It was that he was showing us a whole domain of imagination that enlarged our sense of what the imagination constituted. As poets we could only be thankful for such aid.

There is no predicting grace but we know it when we come into contact with it. Don presented anyone who met him with an image of grace. He didn’t strain for it and he didn’t make a to-do about it. Grace isn’t like that. I for one am infinitely richer for having encountered that grace.