

THE BUSINESS 100: A CELEBRATION OF CORPORATE SUCCESS

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Remembering Danny

The Real Jazz

Peter Quinn remembers Daniel Cassidy, the author of *How the Irish Invented Slang*, as "a deeply spiritual man of passionate intensity and resonant laughter ... a social visionary filled with savage indignation against snobbery, pretense, arrogance ..."

On behalf of myself and Irish-American writers and artists, I'm here to talk about a truly great human being, our dear friend, Danny Cassidy. But let me begin long ago and far away, over forty years ago, when I was a freshman at Manhattan College in the Bronx. (And anyone interested in finding out how a college named Manhattan wound up in the Bronx should see me later.)

Like most of what I learned in kindergarten – and most of what I learned in high school – most of what I learned in college I've forgotten, and more of it goes each day. Besides, I was in college in the 60's and so much of what I learned, I didn't remember even when I learned it.

Among the few things I never forgot was an image I was introduced to in one of those art history survey courses of the *If-This-Is-Tuesday-This-Must-Be-The-Renaissance* variety.

The professor was going on about ancient Egypt, clicking through slide after slide as we rode the uptown express through 4,000 years of history in the requisite 50 minutes – see the pyramids along the Nile the Valley of the Kings Queen



Dan Cassidy (right) is pictured at *Irish America's* Top 100 Gala in March 2007, with *New York Times* writer Dan Barry and Mary Trinity Barry.

Nefertiti made up to look like Liz Taylor in Cleopatra.

My eyes grew heavy and then up popped this figure holding a scale. It was a god, the professor said. I can't remember the god's name. Horus maybe; or maybe not. He had the body of a man and the head of an ibis; or maybe a jackal.

What I remember clearest – what stayed with me all these years (while so much else has left/is leaving) – are those scales in which the god weighed the souls of the dead.

I'd been hearing about a last judgment since I was a small child, but it had become so rote I'd stopped thinking about it. But the image of this god and his scales made a lasting impression.

Why?

Maybe because of the striking juxtaposition of the human and the animal; maybe because I was entering my atheist phase (which I long ago left) when all religious imagery was dismissed or reduced to pretty lies, and this image didn't fit the traditional categories; or maybe because

I'd spent the previous several hours drinking beer at the Pinewood Bar on Broadway.

In any case, whatever my degree of sobriety – or lack thereof – and despite my unbelief, the impression was permanent. That ibis-headed-or jackal-headed-god... the scales... the soul...

the notion that there is a weight – a substance to what we do/do not do during our brief stay on this rented planet – and that this weight can touch/does touch the equilibrium of Eternity.

Sooner or later, one way or another, all of us will find ourselves in those scales, the significance of our lives weighed by our God, our family, our friends, our lovers, our spouses, our acquaintances, our enemies, our neighbors – take your pick.

The scales are as inevitable as death. The question is: Which way will they tip?

What difference did it make that we were here? What was changed? Made worse or better?

What act of love will be remembered? What kindness to be passed on to generations that won't even recall our names? What small weight added to the momentum of history away from planetary self-destruction?

I say all this because it's what looms largest for me as I take my inane turn at touching the meaning, importance, density, complexity, and lasting effects of a man I loved and considered a brother – a brother not by the small accident of birth or blood – but by conviction and free choice.

Say what you will about a life to come – or not to come – Danny's was a life that matters... that still matters... that, in ways the puny, peewee reach of our near-sighted intellects can never reach, will always matter.

From the first moment I met him, I was overwhelmed by Danny's sheer energy, the rapidity with which he thought and connected ideas, and the speed at which he put it all together, the words and sentences gushing with a velocity that was rare – even for, as he so enthusiastically described himself, a flannel-mouth from Brooklyn.

For the record, let me note that Danny

was the first person I met in merry, mel-low San Francisco who spoke normally, with no accent. And that's how we met, at the San Francisco Book Fair, one enchanted evening, when across a crowded room of quiet, polite conversations, I heard Danny's wonderful trademark New York dulcet tones... "Yeah, yeah, yeah... right, right, right"... that distinctive, bor-rough-rich, can't-be-mistaken-as-coming-from-anywhere-else sound: HONK. HONK.

Danny Cassidy

was so many things:
electro-magnetic phenomenon...
spiritual force...
intellectual fire storm...
atmospheric disturbance...
a deeply spiritual man of passionate
intensity and resonant laughter...
a social visionary filled with savage
indignation against snobbery,
pretense, arrogance...
and a proud and true Republican –

not in the school of the phony-baloney (both words from the Irish, as Danny would insist on reminding us: *fáinne*, for ring, referring to a swindle called the "Fawney Rig"; and *béal óna*, meaning silly, foolish speech) "Joe the Plumber." But in the tradition of Tone and Connolly that forever refuses to remain silent before the crimes and evils of imperialism, exploitation and racism, no matter where those crimes were/are/will be committed, whether in South Africa, Central America, the North of Ireland... East New York, Brooklyn.

Musician, writer, activist, Danny was the single greatest scholar I ever met – the truest intellectual – putting to flight and to shame that monstrous regiment of impotent academic hacks and time-servers who, with all their Ivy League credentials and foundation grants and university chairs, failed to uncover what Danny did with a single, frayed, dog-eared dictionary that he'd inherited.

How the Irish Invented Slang is a monumental achievement!

It will endure, no matter the bluster and bull of the Dictionary Dudes.

Despite the huffing and puffing of all the king's horses and all the king's men (or the queen's, for that matter), the pal-adins of the OED will never again put

together an honest version of their tome until they acknowledge the work of Danny Cassidy.

In fact, if you can forgive this crass commercial advertisement, I think it would be fitting here in this voting season if each of us went online today and ordered a copy of Danny's book from Amazon. In preparation for voting for Obama, cast a vote for Cassidy. (Now there's a dream ticket: Obama/Cassidy!)

Let the Dictionary Dudes know that his/their/our truth goes marching on!

Danny's book was a crowning accomplishment, but the last time I spoke to Danny – two days before he died – he said nothing about scholarship or dictionaries.

Weak but totally coherent, he said only this. That in the awareness of death's nearness, what stood out most prominently, dwarfing all else, were the two people who made all the difference in his life: his wife, Clare... and his mother, Doris.

Clare and Doris, he said, called him from death to life.

They showed him the possibility, the reality, the face of unconditional love... and here was the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the meaning of the gospels, the alpha and omega of all our human strivings, whatever road they may take us down.

At this point, if Danny were here, I know exactly what he'd say: "Come on, Quinn, you Bronx bum, stick a sock in it." Okay, Danny.

In your case, we already know which way the scales tip. In balance with this life, this death, you were the true giniker, the real jazz.

Each of us feels in his or her own soul, the weight of your loss.

Each of us carries with us the goodness and passion you brought to our lives.

Each of us will hold you in our hearts not as shadow or specter, but as a real presence.

Adios, mi hermano.

May perpetual light shine upon you.

*May you rest in peace, my brother,
until we meet again.*

Daniel Cassidy died on October 11, 2008 at his home in San Francisco. Peter Quinn gave the above eulogy at the funeral service in St. Paul's Church, San Francisco, on October 21.