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## We Call Him Father Wally

*Be generous, and you will be prosperous. Help others, and you will be helped.*

~ Proverbs 11:25

I went to college at DePaul University in the late 1970's. During that time, I was privileged to encounter a man by the name of Father Walter Brennan, a theology teacher and also a fraternity moderator. A fraternity moderator is a spiritual counselor who advises the fraternity brothers both collectively and individually, particularly when they have gone astray. On occasion, some of our brothers in our fraternity engaged in behavior that merited a little counseling to say the least.

Father Wally was a well-educated man who kept us grounded. More importantly, however, he mastered the art of connecting with others in an unassuming, down to earth way that made all feel comfortable. Consequently, most people were shocked to learn that Father Wally had two doctorates, one in theology and one in philosophy.

As an Irishman from the neighborhood, Father Wally fit the bill in many ways. He had a quick wit, great skill as a storyteller,

and a wicked sense of humor. Though he earned advanced scholastic degrees, Father Wally came across as a regular guy, with no airs, dispensing his wisdom in a manner not typical of a learned man steeped in the academic world.

Father Wally's innate ability to relate and communicate with others transcended his brilliant work at the university. He was a great teacher. He also possessed the unique and effective way of relating to kids our age. He attended our fraternity parties, had a beer or two, and fit right in. Whenever the fraternity took road trips, such as skiing trips to Colorado, Father Wally would be right there with us. He did not ski and would not participate in some of the more adventurous things we did as college students, but he was as much a part of those trips as anything I now remember. Amazingly, he also attended all of our "Hell Weekends," the annual initiation rites of the new brothers, and most often he provided the only link to common sense and sanity.

### Bringing the Mass to the Masses

*We think of the effective teachers we have had over the years with recognition, but those who have touched our humanity we remember with a deep sense of gratitude.*

~ Anonymous student

Rather than requiring fraternity brothers and friends to attend church services, Father Wally brought his service to us. He would ask one of us to pick up a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine. Father Wally might choose to have mass wherever we happened to be. On campus, he'd say, "Let's go sit on the grass," referring to an open space in the quadrangle. He sometimes conducted mass at our residences, before or after classes, on any day of the week.

It was a privilege and an enriching experience to attend Father Wally's services. Despite his ability to relate to a bunch of knuckleheads like us, he was a deeply spiritual priest. A member of the Marian Order of Servites, Father Walter Brennan was a great scholar of the Scriptures and also a widely respected historian of early Christian literature. His treatises on the Christian faith, and in particular on the Virgin Mary, were published worldwide. Father Wally was often recognized for his eloquent views on the importance of Mary in the history of the Church and is the author of the book, *The Sacred Memory of Mary*.

In a most unique and powerful way, he reached out and connected with us at a level at which we could relate. He taught us the great lessons in life, but at the same time was someone with whom we could both identify and respect. Father Wally dispensed his wisdom to us at an age and time when we needed it the most.

As our spiritual advisor, counselor, and friend, Father Wally's impact was far-reaching and profound. He became a friend to each of us and was someone whose influence remains to this day.

It didn't matter how many years skipped by, Father Wally was always there if you needed guidance or simply wanted to say hello. He celebrated and performed the ceremonies of my fraternity brothers who married and baptized their children. He was there to console us and to preside over the funerals of those we loved, including the funeral of my own mother. If you called or visited him, no matter how many years out of college, that strong, vibrant connection was still there. He was always ready to see you and was always prepared to listen. In my case, now twenty-five years after leaving DePaul University, Father Wally's influence and impact on my life continues to be extraordinary.

While Father Wally was the quintessential dolphin for each of us, his influence reached across the university and beyond, during his more than twenty-five years of service to the DePaul community. During his tenure, Father Walter Brennan was

voted, by the entire student body, as the most popular and most respected professor at DePaul University. Quite a distinction, considering DePaul University is the largest Catholic University in the country with over 20,000 students.

### **A Ministry in the Streets**

*The ultimate measure of a person is not where they stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where they stand at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk their position, their prestige and even their life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous pathways, they will lift some bruised and beaten brother to a higher and more noble life.*

~ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

During his years at DePaul University and as our fraternity moderator, Father Wally chose to live in one of the most economically depressed and dangerous areas in Chicago. He could have lived wherever there was a parish and still teach at DePaul. He chose, however, the most desperate neighborhood in the city. The Lawndale and Westside communities had suffered the most damage following the riots on the days following Martin Luther King's assassination. Many Westside residents lived hard lives, amidst sky-high crime rates, run-down streets, and abandoned buildings. Few residents could escape the cycle of poverty that engulfed the area.

Father Wally was never one to back down from what he thought was a righteous cause. If he felt that something was wrong, he took a stand. He confided in us that he marched with the protestors during the infamous Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968. He said he rarely spoke of it for fear of retribution. Father Wally also said that he never regretted

marching alongside of the protesters because he knew in his heart their cause was right. When he spoke of that day, he was very quiet. Father Wally seemed to carry sadness for the deep divide that existed during that time and especially for those whose voices were not heard. Father Walter Brennan had a bit of a rebel in him, to be sure, but he rebelled in the most conscientious of ways and always stood on the side of the disenfranchised. It was what endeared him to so many: Father Wally's unwavering support of what was just.

Father Wally was surprised to find that the priests of this inner-city parish, Our Lady of Sorrows, rarely stepped outside its gates. Like some academics that never leave the proverbial ivory tower, the priests of this historic parish had little contact and no real connection with the surrounding neighborhood. The priests who lived in the rectory never left the parish walls to involve themselves in the neighborhood, or to even visit with their parishioners. This was something that Father Wally could not understand. The term "parish" meant neighborhood and community to him.

When Father Wally asked his fellow priests why they did not circulate within the community, the response was uniform: It is too dangerous out there. Father Wally felt that the community desperately needed the priests to walk among them for that very same reason, and he decided to force the issue. Hence, this remarkable scholar, teacher, and counselor expanded his ministry to yet another level. He chose to walk the streets of the Westside, alone, and at night.

Father Wally once told me, "I taught during the day and night was the only time I had available. It was also the most important time to be there for the people in the greatest need." So, this very short, unassuming and unfailingly kind Irish priest walked the streets of the desperately poor African-American neighborhood on Chicago's Westside with no sacred or signifying garments, no shield, no special badge, and no indication of privilege or position. Father Wally walked the streets as a simple

man, a human being, and most importantly, someone who cared.

At the height of the summer, during intense heat, he would don his Chicago Cubs hat, a simple shirt, black dress socks, shorts so long they almost touched his gym shoes. I told him once that he didn't wear shorts, they were short pants! In the winter it was a parka reaching far below his knees. Fashion was not Father Wally's concern. He didn't care what he looked like; his concern was what he meant to people and how he could be of service. He established a roving ministry. We called Father Wally the Mother Teresa of the Westside.

### **More than a Presence**

*Too often we underestimate the power of a touch,  
a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest  
compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which  
have the potential to turn a life around.*

~ Leo Buscaglia

As a result of his nightly walks and his exceedingly close ties to the community, Father Wally realized as the years passed that his mere presence in the neighborhood wasn't enough. He would tell us that he saw a twelve-year-old boy standing on a street corner, waiting for the bus, wearing a girl's torn shirt, on a freezing cold January night. Asking the boy why he had that shirt on and why he wasn't wearing a coat, the boy responded that it was the only shirt he had and he did not have a coat. So Father Wally took that child to the store and bought him a shirt and a coat. He would perform these kinds of deeds daily, for twenty-five years.

Father Wally would say, "Until you're there, in the neighborhood, you simply don't understand the needs that people face." He would tell us that the extent of the poverty was staggering, and that the toll on the human spirit was beyond measure.

Father Wally said people need hope and in this neighborhood, they were desperate for it. He explained that his assistance could not be a one-time event and he needed to be there on an ongoing basis. He believed it was important to teach those he helped that they could help themselves, and know it was possible for them to have a better life.

Father Wally knew this took money and he had little of it. So he organized efforts to raise funds to provide tuition for the children of the neighborhood so they could realize their improbable dream of going to college. He would buy clothes and food for entire families and provide transportation for countless individuals where none existed. Father Wally initiated two annual fundraisers: a summer picnic and a winter sports memorabilia auction that garnered the strong support of his current and former students of DePaul. Many of our fraternity brothers, now out in the working world, supported his efforts. A magical evening that brought together generations of students, and even their parents, became an annual event to visit with old friends and to support the mission of our mentor. In the spirit of the night, \$35,000 to \$40,000 was raised to support Father Wally's efforts in the community.

Father Wally dispensed these funds wisely and with a purpose. He used some of the money to offer part-time jobs for people to work in and around the parish. He knew kids could develop a sense of self-worth and motivation if they were offered a real job and were paid for their efforts. Father Walter Brennan searched the streets for those longing for a place in the future, and in the generous soul of a tireless humanitarian, the children of the neighborhood found hope.

Years later, reflecting on his efforts, Father Wally said, "I needed to do this; I had to do this." It was important to Father Wally to make connections with the kids who were simply hanging out. Many of those kids were not the ones who came to church. He felt that maybe he could prevent them from heading into trouble. If they were without critical connections at home,

such as having a father present in their lives or having a positive support system, then perhaps he could be a surrogate father or offer a secure environment.

Father Wally opened the parish doors of Our Lady of Sorrows in ways that had never been available in the past. The television room was now a place for the kids to come and watch basketball and football games. The kitchen in the rectory was a place to make a sandwich and enjoy food, which was scarce outside those walls. Now there was an oasis in the neighborhood where kids could gather safely and be surrounded by a positive influence.

If tragedy struck out in the streets, beyond the safety of the parish walls, as it often did, then it was time to be with the people where they lived. In a neighborhood where the sound of gunshots was common, and boarded-up buildings and empty lots made up the landscape, a small priest would step out his front door, alone, to walk among the poor and the forgotten.

### **A Neighborhood Full of Brennans**

*To touch the soul of another human being is to walk on holy ground.*

~ Stephen Covey

As you might imagine, Father Wally was a humble man. Whenever he had the time to meet and share a meal with former students, there was a single requirement: The meeting could never, ever, be at a "fancy" restaurant. Fancy was the word Father Wally used to describe any place that excluded the common folk. If the restaurant was a place where you had to dress differently and could not be yourself, he simply would not go there.

I was fortunate to meet often with Father Wally for breakfast and the occasional dinner. If I could get him out for dinner, he would request, "that little place, with the good food." He was

speaking of a pizzeria in the middle of an inner city block, with three booths and two tables. We regularly met for breakfast, early in the day, and always at a place called Uncle Mike's. Uncle Mike's was the classic American breakfast joint. A counter and a few booths filled with city workers, police officers, mail carriers, neighborhood residents and retirees. A waitress named Sally and a great short order cook named Gus made up the entire staff. Eggs any way you like them, potatoes, and a hot cup of coffee. Father Wally was right at home.

One day, at breakfast, Father Wally told me a story of a young child he met while walking the neighborhood. Over the years, he supported this young man's dream of a life free from the crime of the neighborhood and he offered him the shelter of the parish and gave him positive encouragement. Father Wally was proud of this young man as he went on to graduate from school, marry, and raise a wonderful family. The young man came back to see Father Wally one day and told him that he had two sons who he wished to have baptized. He said he named both of his sons Brennan.

Father Wally laughed so hard telling that story and then said, "You know there are a lot of people named Brennan in the neighborhood now." Father Walter Brennan looked out the window, and for a moment I saw a look of peace and a sense of pride on his face. Just as I was thinking of something good to say to him, he looked back, smiled, and said, "I sure hope all the Brennans are staying out of trouble!"

Father Wally represented so much to me that I constantly sought to reaffirm our deep connection. Simply being around him gave me a sense of contentment and purpose. Of course, he was to become the spiritual advisor and a member of the original Board of Directors of Dreams for Kids.

One day, in the spring of 2001, at one of our early morning breakfasts, I reminded Father Wally that we were not getting any younger and it might be a good time to document his philosophy and approach to community involvement. I asked him, "Why

don't you write something that we could use as a guide, so that others could read it and learn what you have accomplished? You could use this as an opportunity to explain the ways you have managed to bridge the gap between blacks and whites. It can be a treatise on how to reach all children of poverty and positively impact their lives."

At first, Father Wally was resistant. He felt that simply reading this information would be a poor substitute to actually being in the neighborhood, walking the streets, and making connections. He believed that the only way one can truly make a difference was to show up every day in the trenches. Trust, in his eyes, came from constant work and affirmation. I fully understood Father Wally's concern, but I also believed that to be able to pass on his wealth of knowledge could only yield a great benefit.

I said to Father Wally that if he could teach people to do what he had done, then more of us could have an impact in the work he had begun. At first he said that this approach would not work because it was about trust. The people in the neighborhood trusted him because he was there everyday and never abandoned them. It worked because he was there.

As our discussion progressed, it proved to be an amazing insight into the depth of Father Wally's knowledge of the cycle of poverty and of race relations. It was a morning I will not soon forget. We talked about the day that was sure to come, when Father Wally was no longer here among us. He began to see the value of leaving something behind.

We both knew that when Father Wally passed on, this poor and mostly forgotten community would lose their champion. The people whom he had given so many years of his life to would be sorely in need of others who cared. Perhaps some others could step in, and the community would trust them because they were Father Wally's friends.

This idea intrigued Father Wally, and it excited him to know that his work might go on long after he was gone. He decided he would write up a plan, a "blueprint." Within this blueprint

would be his insights, gained through many years of experience in working with the poor and connecting with people of different races and cultures.

## **Blueprint for Harmony**

*I believe that there is a plan and a purpose for each person's life and that there are forces working in the universe to bring about good and to create a community of love and brotherhood. Those who can attune themselves to these forces-to God's purpose-can become special instruments of His will.*

~ Coretta Scott King

About a week later, Father Wally called me at my office and said that he had finished his blueprint. He was going to e-mail it to me. We both laughed because Father Wally was far from being a technological wizard. The kids he helped had recently set up his computer and taught him how to use it. As was his nature, he was both bewildered by the advancements of our time, and excited about learning a new skill. He even planned on taking a computer course so that he could stay current with the times. I can remember the first time he asked to use my cell phone. He had no idea how to use it and held it like a walkie-talkie. As soon as he realized that all the kids in his street ministry had cell phones, he got one too. On his cell phone, he was forever walking and talking, staying in touch, and making a difference.

That afternoon, Father Wally pressed the right button and successfully e-mailed his blueprint to me.

When I received and read his manuscript, I gained new insight into the brilliance of Father Wally. I found the document to be a simple, straightforward, yet profound view into human nature. The blueprint has prescriptions for all of humanity, yet can be applied on the street level.

The blueprint also offers keen insights into what separates individual human beings or groups of people. Father Wally clearly spelled out that it is a lack of understanding that divides individuals, communities, races, cultures, religions, and even nations. From this lack of understanding and ignorance about one another, prejudice is born and it grows, which then further clouds our vision. If we are able to better understand one another, we can begin to bridge the divide that exists between us. We can then tear down those walls and learn to appreciate one another.

In his writing, as in his everyday life, Father Wally pulled no punches. He wrote about the differences between blacks and whites, and why there is so much misunderstanding that exists between the races. He spoke about the characteristics of each group and how, if we were able to focus on those common characteristics, we would find the differences easier to accept.

Father Wally wrote of the fact that almost all of us in this country are descended from some other place. When we begin to understand and appreciate our respective origins and how they impact family and neighborhood, and how collectively we have become the United States, much becomes clear to us. Ultimately, Father Wally wrote a blueprint of understanding and cooperation and of potential harmony among people of all colors.

It was in his deep spirituality that Father Wally held the belief that God works through each of us, and once we understood the suffering that existed among those in great need, we would do God's work here on earth by being generous and kind. In the words and actions of Father Wally, "When you want to help someone, first you have to understand who they are. When you understand who they are, then you can gain acceptance. When they accept you in their life, they will trust you. When they trust you, you can truly make a difference."

The full text of Father Wally's brilliant blueprint and extensive insights on race relations and his work with the members of the Lawndale and Westside communities of Chicago is available in its full edited text on the Dreams for Kids website, [www.dreamsforkids.org/father-wally-scholarship](http://www.dreamsforkids.org/father-wally-scholarship)