



# Bob Cullenbine

## he grew, we grew

### an aimless but appreciative reminiscence by fred nelson

Bob Cullenbine decided early on during his second six-month term as Free University Coordinator not to run again for the job a third time, and was replaced in that capacity on December 21 by John Dolly. It's maybe to John's advantage that he's quite new to the organization, but during the days before the election meeting he was sequestered in his room for long hours, worrying about the historical mantle about to be dropped on him and weeding through the brave new directions available to us; preoccupied, foremost, with what he could tell the election meeting he, Dolly, could honestly do to carry on. Somewhere during this moment of portent I was approached and asked on John's behalf, "what do you think he should say?" and for a sudden moment I felt, altogether for reasons of my own, reduced from a flaming revolutionary leader to a pensive elder statesman searching for words of wisdom to fuel the passing torch. "Tell him," I said finally, with an old man's conviction, "tell him to just get up there and say, 'I just promise to keep this whole operation together and deliver it intact to my successor' and then shut up and sit down again," and I realized then, drawing back to the shadows, that Cullenbine had accomplished that, and that while it had taken a toll on him, he had really done it, in the face of some pretty substantial contrary odds, all the while providing growth and maturity for the organization while we gave a good measure of the same to him. A long road, a good trip and not a bad contract.

I know very little about Cullenbine's background, and I've never really cared in light of the acid-rush of present incarnations we're all going through. He's from an upper-middle-class Hills-

borough family, openly, the sort of background a lot of our number spring from but are too busy being radical purists to have time to admit to, from Yale to an economics degree from Stanford in 1962 and maybe wiggled out at some other institutions in between. Prankster. Helped run St. Michael's alley...yeah, you remember that...in Palo Alto, years before it became Free University fashion to screw up a coffeehouse operation. Married a woman better, then, than he deserved; used to push her around a lot, but she gave him enough time to grow and become the sort of man she was really worth, and by 1970 he was living up to it and they had three lavishly-loved kids to show for their climb together. The community ethic: "If you have more than two kids, you're part of the problem." Robert S. Cullenbine: "The pill failed."

He was a hairy candlemaker when I first met him, back in the periphery of my first involvement with the Free University and the old community center project. He had a momentary sense, then, of his own authority and ability, but he was still riding out the lingering end of a total dropout trip, just beginning to surface in worlds of his own choice and making, and his responsibility and reliability were terrifyingly inconsistent. "you should have seen him before," someone told me, "when he was really bad," a circumstance I've had little nerve to picture. Cullenbine grew to dominate the community center effort...when he was together he would carry it, and when the Prankster rose in him, he'd nearly drown the project. He took over full responsibility after the Free U and Warren Thoits contrived to sink the original project, and he

emerged as a community leader, at once impressed and frightened by his own authority in the streets, during the Lytton Plaza demonstrations and the negotiations with the city fathers that attended them. (After a year as Free University Coordinator, he still says his proudest achievement was his successful fostering of the Free People's Free Music Company into a self-engendering force among the area's young people.) As Coordinator, he was the only college president to my immediate knowledge who led his own sit-ins, berating and cajoling the students to get involved, and on the other hand established the Free U to the point of providing Kaiser Plan health coverage for its paid staff, just a step short of a pension plan for old radicals and an engraved gold roach clip on retirement after thirty years' service.

He got arrested a lot. Sometimes for something he'd more or less done, but usually on charges of the cops' own contrivance; he was a big target. At the beginning, we'd all panic and run around raising bail; his wife Carole would just smile, shrug and ask if he'd be sprung loose in time for dinner. I got one of my best ethical lessons at age 28, sitting in the coffee room of the North County Courthouse early in the morning on Christmas Eve day; Wolpman and I waiting for him to turn himself in on still another warrant while he softly explained to his daughter Jennifer, five, why people like Daddy sometimes get arrested without having committed crimes. A measure of his balance is how well he can get along on a man-to-man basis with the police while getting arrested so often. "You know," one police official told me recently, while we were discussing an instance of police action against the Free U that the official still considers fully justified, "one thing that I've learned from dealing with Cullenbine is that whatever else you people may be, you're honest...you know," he continued, looking out his window, "I like him." I'm inclined to think that Cullenbine's behavior has served as a useful challenge to the official in question, and others, to stay aboveboard himself. After Cullenbine's most recent arrest the judge cut him loose on his own recognizance. "We've had a lot of experience to tell us," said His Honor, "that when he says he'll show up, he'll show up." Honor without peace.

Cullenbine's greatest burden came from within the organization, in the form of a growing tendency toward personalizing our hope of mutual emotional support into the demand that Cullenbine support all of us. We made him Daddy, a role he was even paid to play repeatedly in psychodrama marathons, and he worked hard and loyally at the role before he realized what was happening and felt gradually that because of his own strength, the community was being deprived of some of the self-reliance it needed to grow on its own. Daddy began backing out, and some of the kids were damned resentful. His phone would go off all night, and he would sit there patiently counseling self-styled suicides, bum-trippers, people with houses on fire from overheated candle wax, couples in a snit. Sometimes he got his own back, like the afternoon he came up to console me over a drink after a particularly trying experience, got tanked and forgot where he was. Daddy carried us all through some rough ones, and began cutting us off, we may learn in time, before we lost the ability to go even further on our own.

He was both relied on and resented by the community for his strength and conviction about his goals, and got arrested just as often for the same reasons. Few people realized, or allowed the possibility, that Cullenbine spends as much time as he does in the most painful self-doubt about his own actions; each substantial move has been made in a wash of sometimes fearful doubt about whether others will suffer for relying on his judgment and whether, in fact, his judgment is any good to begin with. Most of us think that it is and Cullenbine, riding out the last wave of his direct influence over Free U operations, is beginning to agree in retrospect. It's ironic that the Free U asked so much of him while granting its coordinators so little constitutional authority, and that he was then arrested and charged, effectively, without adequately exercising this nonexistent authority to restrain unknown other persons who may have placed what may have been a defaced American flag (defaced by someone else, years ago) in front of the MFU offices, a charge that will have Cullenbine in an expensive appeals procedure for some months to come.

Cullenbine retired as Coordinator to better pursue his social goals without the mutually-damaging burden of having to concern himself fulltime with the Free U's internal operations, and to support his growing family on a more adequate basis. Despite his huge abilities, there are no funds to support his continued community involvement; he's staying involved a bit, anyway, but he's also pounding the pavement looking for a "straight" job to feed his kids. He's resurrected some Brooks Brothers suits that haven't been gotten by the moths; he's bought a new pair of shoes, the first in years he hasn't immediately painted day-glo orange. His socks match now, even if his ties and shirts don't. His evolution is continuing, but even if it stopped now he'd be in a good, dry place he'd built on his own. He's leaning toward home and family, leaving a lot of the Free U community scrambling to realize that this isn't necessarily incompatible with service as a flaming revolutionary leader. He's been right through the middle of all the political, communal and drug experiments; he knows a little more now about which aspects of what alternatives are workable, and which ones aren't, he's ready to choose from the options.

Coincidentally, in Culley's wake, the Free U has had visited on it a long-needed new infusion of active members, substantially younger, feeling the first flush of enthusiasm from setting out on the same trail some of the rest of us have been on, and there have been some open challenges to Cullenbine as a post-revolutionary cop-out or, sillier still, as a tired old man, a refrain familiar to student politics at Stanford, where every two or three years some candidate for student office will accuse the incumbents of being part of an entrenched establishment going back somewhere near Jane Stanford's day. Our young braves have an exciting road ahead of them, but they have to travel it long and well to earn the revolutionary mantle they claim. It's easy to drop out of the system, call yourself a radical and immediately challenge everyone around you to be as pure as you are. It's harder to be a radical for several years and survive it a little bit pure, and a whole hell of a lot harder living daily with the legal, social and personal consequences of your radicalism,

and still stay at it. Armchair radicalism is a luxury, chin-out radicalism brings things down on you that you have to live with, every day. Few people in this area have tried, as Culley has done, staking their whole lives on their own kind of radicalism, sticking with it long enough to really permanently alter their own lives, their futures. People who've gotten that far are the real radicals; they've tested themselves in the most demanding ways, and don't have to test others.

Culley's pretty much there. He doesn't call himself a radical; more, rather, a liberal who does something direct about his beliefs, a place that allows for further growth and education. Culley's survived the test of having been, at various times, both extreme establishment and the extreme opposite, and has made up his own synthesis without destructively overcompensating for either, and that ain't a bad place to be. Travel on, comrade.



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Fred Nelson

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Any catchy phrase will do. Such as "Your leprosy is coming along splendidly." Or "Goodness, I didn't know Negroes were able to make an awkward move." Practice this phrase until it is at the ready. Then at your next encounter, don't say anything.

9. (This is the final exercise in the course and the student should devote appropriate time to it.)

Ken Kesey

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