

# Walt Reiner R.I.P.

Colleagues,

One of my dearest buddies during my years in the theology department at Valparaiso (Indiana) University, 1957-71, was Walt Reiner. Walt was *sui generis*, he fit no existing categories. To some extent, of course, that is true of every human being. Unique. No carbon copy anywhere. But with Walt it was even more so. Because students in the programs he directed at the University were required to have majors in theology, Walt was "sort of" a member of the theology department. Thus for many years we were constantly together, and for a few years as department chairman I was "sort of" his boss. But Walt's academic degree was in football! However, he read everything across the arts and sciences spectrum, and on his own became a fan of French Reformed (sic!) theologian Jacques Ellul. In keeping with his confessional heritage Ellul "mixed" God's left and right hand operations, and now and then Walt did too. No surprise, theological "mix-ups" abounded in conversations with Walt. But Walt was most often doing theology out on the streets and on the ramparts, as you'll see reading the obit below. So theological debate with Walt was always reality-based. Doctrine was tested by whether or not it worked "on the street." His mantra was something like this: "If it's Christian, it's gotta be something about Jesus. And if it's about Jesus, it's got to help people." That's not far from the double-dipstick of the Lutheran Confessions: "That Christ's merits and benefits not be wasted and that sinners get genuine comfort from those benefits."

And then there was always this: not that Walt needed any protector, but he was Bob Bertram's brother-in-law, so . . . .

We were buddies enough, so that early on Walt finessed my first ever publication, "Bible Lessons for the Church Year." He hustled the LCMS youth-ministry folks at the "Walther League" to

print it. It's a 216-page week-by-week- mimeographed manual for studying the Sunday Epistle Readings through the church year. There's no date on the copy I still have. Must have been 45 years ago. And cheap! "\$3.00 for one copy. \$2.50 each for ten or more."

Walt was a "Mensch." In Kant's categories—Walt read philosophy too—a "Ding an sich." Walt's works, his hundreds of "living letters," do follow him. Marie and I joined some 500 others of them at his Dec. 29 memorial service in Valparaiso.

Pasted below is the obit his kids wrote that appeared in the Gary, Indiana, newspaper.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

---

*On December 5, 2006, Walt Reiner, who described himself as a "community resource redistributor" died surrounded by family and friends. Walt, 82, was born on December 29, 1923, in Tampa, Florida, the youngest of three sons, to Otto and Frances (Mugge) Reiner. Growing up during the days of the Great Depression, Walter helped support his family from a very young age, eventually enlisting in the U.S. Navy during World War II where he participated in the first wave of attacks on Omaha and Normandy beaches, and subsequently served tours in North Africa and East Asia. [He was a communications specialist in seven landings, which meant he was one of the first on the beach helping to direct the following waves of troops – and he was only 17 or 18.] Following the War, Walter attended Springfield College in Springfield, MA, and, upon graduation, accepted a football coaching position at Valparaiso University. During his*

tenure as "Coach," Walter led the Crusaders to its only bowl game in VU's history, coaching such legends as Fred "Fuzzy" Thurston (Green Bay Packers) and earning hall-of-fame status in 2001. Walter was given leave from his coaching duties to serve his country during the Korean War. In 1952, he returned to VU and married the love of his life, his partner, his "Schatz" (treasure), and wife of 54 years, Lois (Bertram) Reiner.

In the early 1960s, Walt was asked by former VU President, O.P. Kretzmann to begin the Youth Leadership Training Program, which sought to connect young people to programs serving the broader community and world. In 1965, Walt moved his family to Chicago where he served as Director of Prince of Peace Volunteers, guiding 34 teams of volunteers in U.S. inner cities and overseas, whose work was captured in the documentary film, "I BELIEVE," aired on NBC in 1966.

During the 1960s, Walt supported Vietnam War Conscientious Objectors and became a civil rights activist in his own right. His leadership activities and commitment to human rights sustained him through a heresy trial before the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1967. From 1960 through 1968, Walt served as Director of Camp Concordia, a Lutheran [summer] camp in Gowen, Michigan.

During the late sixties, Walt was a founder of the Association of the Colleges of the Midwest's Urban Studies Program in Chicago, offering students at Valparaiso University, as well as a consortium of liberal arts colleges, the opportunity to truly experience the diversity of the city and to connect with those who were creatively addressing issues of racism, poverty, violence and other issues faced by thousands of people on a daily basis.

Returning to Valparaiso in 1969, Walt and Lois Reiner founded

*Valparaiso Builders Association, a predecessor organization to Project Neighbors, whose primary mission was, and continues to be, partnering with families in need to relocate to Valparaiso, offering a new sense of community in which all of its citizens learn from and respect diversity.*

*Project Neighbors, under Walt's direction, has provided homes to over 300 Valparaiso residents. In developing these new relationships, particularly in and around the Hilltop neighborhood, Walt turned his attention toward other projects that impact people's lives, including the development of Maria Elena's restaurant, the creation of top quality child care and medical/dental care at Hilltop Neighborhood House and Hilltop Community Health Center, the Village Market, and the latest, the Reiner Community Center.*

*Walt's relentless demonstration of care for the most vulnerable and commitment to implementing creative solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems in the spirit of citizenship and motivated by his strong faith won the support of many Valpo residents who, in turn, have begun to relate to class and race in new ways. Walt promoted the generosity of the larger community and demonstrated unfettered, energetic volunteerism, serving, with Lois, as the vital catalysts for relationship-building in their local community by "thinking globally and acting locally." Walt's life's works are the subject material both of the non-fiction novel, "Bringing It Home," as well as of the documentary "Making Miracles Happen."*

*In 1991, Walt "retired" from his formal teaching duties as associate professor emeritus of Valparaiso University's Christ College. In that same year, Walt was the co-winner of the University's Martin Luther King award, sharing the honor with his "brother," Karl E. Lutze. The following year, Walt was awarded the "Sagamore of the Wabash," the highest honor given*

to a resident of the State of Indiana for lifetime service. More recently in this year, Walt and Lois were named volunteers of the year by the Porter County Community Foundation. One of Walt's greatest thrills was to be a featured "performer" on the Planetary Blues Band CD several years ago.

Walt was predeceased by his brother, Otto Reiner, and more recently in September of this year, by his brother Dr. Ernest Reiner, co-founder of the Judeo-Christian Health Center in Tampa Florida. He is survived by Lois, his children Patricia Terrell (George) of Chicago, IL, Rebecca Reiner of Valparaiso, IN, Elizabeth Gingerich (Keith Chitwood) of Valparaiso, IN, and Mark Reiner (Linda) of Denver, CO, niece Leslie Reiner (Tony Kriseman) and nephew Chris Reiner (Kathleen Kilbride) and sister-in-law Doris, all of Tampa, FL, together with his dear grandchildren, Annie, Rachel, Dylan, Olivia, Katie, Susannah, Kyla and Clarice, and step-grandchildren Joe and Kelly Chitwood, and his larger family of community members and friends.

Walt does not want us to forget his messages translated into a lifetime of action, of building relationships and taking risks, all while keeping a sense of humor in taking one day at a time. His credo, he often said, was, "when you give up the need for power, reputation and money, you have the whole world open to you." There will be a private family burial in the Memorial Park Cemetery of Valparaiso followed by a celebration of Walt's abundant life at Immanuel Lutheran Church on Friday, December 29 (his 83rd birthday) at Immanuel Lutheran Church at 2:00 p.m., followed by a reception in the school's gymnasium. Walt and his family ask that all memorials be made to Project Neighbors, 408 Lafayette, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383, to carry on Walt's mission and legacy.

Published in the Gary (Indiana) Post-Tribune on 12/7/2006.