

STOPPING TO THINK: ONE FINAL LOOK AT DOC & JEROME

At the beginning of this narrative, we visited the wake and funeral of Doc Lawler. As we take a final look at Doc and Jerome, we start by making another visit. After Doc died, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* columnist Jake McCarthy wrote, “it takes the death of a man like Doc Lawler to make a community stop and think.”ⁱ The community did stop to think about the questions we’ve been asking. What kind of a man was Doc Lawler? Were the *Globe-Democrat* and the federal authorities right or wrong in their assessments of his character? McCarthy believed that the Steamfitter leadership had been targeted and convicted because “some people thought unions shouldn’t spend money on the kind of politics that enhance their members’ interests, even in a time when every candidate from Richard Nixon on down is looking for a millionaire to bankroll his campaign.” McCarthy’s reasoning was that “even in a society that has its stock deals and tax writeoffs and special undercover business transactions, we’ve always made politicians fair game for criticism. So Doc Lawler had his name muddied up through the years.” McCarthy was right to identify elements of a class struggle in the attacks on Doc. But Doc was also a target because he was devoted, consistently and loyally, to Local 562, to the working class, and to the Democratic party. He made a perfect target because he was always there to be criticized. He didn’t ride any fences. How to interpret Doc’s beliefs and actions is left to the reader. Was his career marked by selfishness or loyalty? Narrow-mindedness or consistency? The questions remain unanswered, but one thing is for sure. You always knew where Doc stood on an issue.

This narrative has traced the exciting, sometimes controversial, lives of Jerome Shen and Doc Lawler. But Jerome and Doc were not revolutionaries. They changed St. Louis, but not the entire world. They were also men who recognized their own limitations. Two letters, one from Doc and one from Jerome, demonstrates this recognition of limits. Writing to his daughter Bridget, Doc commented in October 1966, on the occasion of the upcoming November elections:ⁱⁱ

Well time is running short now as the election is getting near. We are having quite many meetings but we don't seem to be able to get it moving the way it should. Nobody seems to take any ins. [interest] in it. The people sure have got away from elections, but they sure do beef when things don't go their way but they don't want to take time out to vote. If they every take the freedom of voting away from them, maybe they [would] wake up or if they put the poll tax on them like they do in the south then they might see what they are missing. But I hope it don't come to that

Doc accepted the political process, and the limits of this process were proper to respect. Though Doc wanted certain people in office and wanted certain issues promoted, he recognized that that the only real agent of change was the voting public. This accounts for his complaint that “the people sure have got away from elections.” He wanted people out in the polls because he knew that even the most effective backroom deals could not match up to a majority vote. His annoyance that people “sure do beef when things don't go their way” suggests that even though Doc might have been able to influence some decisions in the city of St. Louis, he also needed people to “take time out to vote.” Doc knew the support and participation of the public was vitally important. He couldn't do everything himself.

Jerome's acceptance of the powers above him are exemplified in a 1998 letter written to St. Louis Archbishop Justin Rigali, the head of the St. Louis Catholic Church.ⁱⁱⁱ In the three-page letter, Jerome outlined three cases of what he felt were “unethical things going

on in [St. Louis'] Catholic institutions.” After detailing cases of possible euthanasia, Jerome made nine direct suggestions about what the Archbishop should do in response. These included suggestions for a public statement from Rigali, establishing a special hotline for such cases, setting up a series of conferences to promote Catholic teaching on life and death, and establishing a “Defense Fund for Life.” It is in the ninth and final suggestion, however, that we see where Jerome felt human action could go no further. In this suggestion, Jerome writes that “as we all know, whatever we do, the ultimate result is decided by God’s will. Therefore, the most important thing for all of us to do is pray.” Whatever Jerome, Archbishop Rigali, or anyone else might do, ultimately the results would be “decided by God’s will.” For Doc Lawler too, it came down to this simple faith: Trust in God’s plan.

It might seem odd to finish this narrative by emphasizing that Doc and Jerome were men who recognized their limitations. But why not point out that they were men who forced fundamental shifts in the way things happened in St. Louis, Missouri, that they were instruments of change like Martin Luther King or John D. Rockefeller? Just because no St. Louis street will ever bear their name, it would be folly to dismiss their lives as unworthy of remembering.

When we look at Jerome T. Y. Shen and John L. Lawler, what do we see that is worth recognizing, worth remembering, and worth telling others? What we see are two men who exceeded their potential given their opportunities. They pushed themselves and took advantage of virtually every chance that arose and every talent that they were given. Doc took what he learned in the Kerry Patch and applied it to politics and the Steamfitter Union. Jerome took advantage of the opportunity to get to the United States. It may

sound simple, but upon further examination, it is not. How many times could they have given up on themselves and ignored their talents? Why didn't Doc give in to public pressure and the critical media? Why didn't Jerome stay with his family in Shanghai instead of risking a dangerous escape to the United States? When the Kerry Patch menaced its own, or when the field of pediatric medicine cold-shouldered a new Chinese doctor, what stopped Doc and Jerome from quitting? Why didn't they give up their hopes and ambitions? This narrative has focused on getting to know Doc and Jerome precisely because if you knew Doc and Jerome, you'd know why they didn't quit and why they not only survived, but thrived, in the city of St. Louis.

But the larger question still lingers – how do you explain the success of Doc and Jerome? It might seem to some that it was the individual efforts of each man, combined with help from family and friends, that led to fantastic lives. Courage, determination, and self-reliance are attributes which seem to fit these two men who wrote their own rules for life. This story, of two strong-willed independent men, is one way to see the lives of Doc and Jerome. But if you were to ask either man how they accomplished so much, the story would be different. Doc and Jerome would probably answer immediately: I was successful because of God's grace in my life. Their story would parallel the exclamations in Psalm 23, which was read at the Shens' anniversary Mass, and which captures the spirit of humble gratitude that surfaces after all the bubbling excitement has stopped. They were two men in St. Louis, Missouri, and looking back on all they have done, they would join in saying, "God,

*You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Only goodness and kindness follow me*

*all the days of my life;
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
for years to come.*

Both deeply influenced by Catholic theology, Doc and Jerome felt their lives were a small part of a divine plan. They didn't think they were extra-special or smarter or tougher than anyone else. What they did know was that they had talents, ideas, supporting spouses, loving families, and generous friends. The story of Doc Lawler and Jerome Shen, then, is not interesting because it couldn't happen to anyone else. It's interesting because it *could*.

ⁱ McCarthy, Jake. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. 2/2/72. "Looking Back at Doc Lawler."

ⁱⁱ Doc Lawler letter to Bridget, 10/23/66

ⁱⁱⁱ Letter from Jerome T.Y. Shen to Rev. Archbishop Justin Rigali. 11/25/98.