A GREAT AMERICAN AND A GREAT ARMENIAN

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Viken L. Attarian, Mount Royal, 4 June 2011

In Memoriam

Yesterday, one of the all-time great Americans, and equally great Armenian, Dr. Jack Kevorkian passed away quietly in a Michigan hospital, from complications of his long time disease, very unlike the turbulent life that he led fighting for a fundamental human right.

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On March 8, 2008, I gave a lecture at Columbia University on the topic of *The Vanishing Breed of the Armenian Intellectual.* That lecture turned into a series of ideas which I have elaborated since in numerous other ones as well as in essays. In it, I defined the intellectual as follows:

> "An intellectual is one, whose output in the field of human intellect (which includes any creative output) and whose derived actions from such thought will shape and reshape the society or collective that is paying attention to him/her. This output allows such a collective to see themselves in hereto unknown frames of reference, to push the ***boundaries*** of how they think of themselves and to imagine a new reality of existence.
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> ….
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> The operative word here is ***boundary.*** All systems, structures, societies, countries, even living organisms and subatomic particles are defined by their boundaries (or illusions thereof), by their edges, by what frames them. Why? Because not only do those limits define the whole, but also because edges and limits are the ones that are pushed and redefined. Interesting things happen not in the middle of the Bell curve but at its tail ends."

I then went on to use this definition to name a few intellectuals. For my American audience, I added:

"…On the US side of our common border I would mention ***Dr. Jack Kevorkian.*** Certainly a taboo name in most Armenian circles, but who fits the definition I gave of the intellectual. Because of his

convictions and actions, he has not only forced a societal debate on euthanasia in the US, but literally all over the world. Needless to say he has pushed the boundary of the system."

For almost all of my adult life, since I heard of him and his work, I have harbored a disappointment and occasionally even anger directed against all our Diasporan organizations and media for ignoring him. Regardless of one's position for or against assisted suicide for those who wanted to die with dignity, I was incensed by the total official and unofficial indifference towards this man who behaved true to his conscience, and wanted the betterment of the society he lived in, by continuously pushing all the boundaries and challenging the status quo. I found the attitude of the Armenian organizations backward and abhorrent, but also mostly symptomatic of the state of dysfunction we have collectively sunk into. There was no public space to discuss the issues advocated by Dr. Kevorkian within our communities. I am sure our so-called "leader"s would rather that he not even called himself an Armenian.

I am grateful that that injustice done to him by his Armenian countrymen was partially redressed by the UCLA Armenian Students' Association and the Armenian American Medical Society of California earlier this year when they invited him to speak. They deserve credit for their honourable gesture. And yet, like most things we do collectively, it seems like that it really was a case of "too little and too late".

The man and his work have now passed into history and both have turned into legend. Kevorkian arguably stands as a giant of the human rights movement in the US for sure and perhaps even the world. It is the Armenians, by their attitude, who had everything to gain by debating his ideas and actions and who have now lost that opportunity.

In a uniquely masterful film, *You Don't Know Jack*, released auspiciously on April 24, 2010 on HBO, the great Kevorkian is portrayed by the equally great Al Pacino, along with a stellar cast. Pacino went on to earn an Emmy and two Golden Globe awards for his amazing portrayal of the amazing Armenian.

I think that as a lasting tribute, every single Armenian institution and organization in the world should schedule a screening and debate of that film.

They don't come like that anymore. There are not many new Al Pacinos these days.

There certainly is not and will not be another Dr. Jack Kevorkian.

My world is now diminished by another hero.