

In Memoriam

Richard Antoun

1932-2009

Two Memories

RICHARD ANTOUN, 77, LONG-TIME AND HONORED ANTHROPOLOGIST at Binghamton University, SUNY, was brutally murdered in his office in the early afternoon of December 4, 2009. Dick knew his killer, a graduate student in the department. The murder was a random act, without political or ideological content. Dick as victim was a ghastly coincidence. Terribly, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. His death has profoundly shocked our community and we deeply mourn his passing.

He began his life in 1932 in Worcester, Massachusetts, a first child. He grew up in the area, becoming a devoted fan of the Boston Braves and later the Red Sox, as well as the Patriots, the Celtics, and then the Syracuse Orangemen and the Binghamton Bearcats. After graduating from Williams College in 1953, he received a Master's from the Johns Hopkins University in International Relations. Remaining interested in the Middle East of his family's Lebanese origins, he next he obtained his Ph.D. in Anthropology and Middle Eastern Studies from Harvard University in 1963, after field work in the Jordanian village of Kufr al-Ma.

A sociocultural anthropologist, Dick took up a position at Indiana University in 1963, moving in 1970 to Binghamton, where he remained until his death. A tireless member of the Anthropology Department and of the Southwest Asian and North African Program, he was seen as a voice of reason. And Dick could be counted on to volunteer for whatever the task. He truly was extraordinarily generous with his time. In between, he published six books, including *Muslim Preacher in the Modern World* (Princeton 1989) and more than thirty articles, a recent one appearing in the prestigious *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. These were based on fieldwork not only in Jordan, but also in Lebanon and Iran. He focused on the dynamics within local communities, believing that here was the key to understanding the local, regional and national. He served as a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago and the American Universities of Beirut and Cairo.

And he served as President of the Middle East Studies Association in 1983, an honor that he modestly if incorrectly attributed to his Lebanese background. Officially retiring in 1999, Dick remained very active in university affairs, coming to campus nearly daily. Quite recently, he served as outside observer on a dissertation committee for one of my students, hardly the first such occasion, an additional mark of his selflessness and commitment to the academic enterprise.

His research interests carried over into his personal life. Convinced that change comes about through actions at the local level, Dick ardently pursued peace and justice as a member of the local Peace Action group, lecturing, and marching on warm sunny days and in the cold and dark as well. He was a loving and devoted husband, father, brother to two sisters and enthusiastic grandfather. During our last conversation, he and his dear wife Roz regaled me with tales of their recent Thanksgiving, when their house bulged with family members large and small, old and young.

As our local community struggles with this incomprehensible act, it universally remembers Dick for his gentleness, his kindness, his openness to others, his willingness to help. As one colleague said, "Dick Antoun was the least imaginable victim of such an act."

Donald Quataert
Binghamton University, SUNY

AFTER AN ABSENCE FROM ACADEMIC WORK, in 1976 I began looking for a place to continue my graduate work in anthropology. Because of Dr. Richard Antoun's work in Middle East anthropology, SUNY Binghamton was one of the places I applied. Dr. Antoun, probably interested in my Iran background and Persian language ability, likely helped find funding for my graduate work. I had a shaky time of it my first term back in graduate school. But Dr. Antoun patiently met with me to discuss a problematic essay, and didn't give up. He was a favorite of my small cohort of students. We respected his sincere interest in our progress, his tireless questioning, prodding, suggestions, and feedback. Plus, he was just pleasant and enjoyable to be around. Dr. Antoun was an admired teacher, demanding, charismatic, lively, and provocative, yet encouraging, positive, respectful, and genuinely kind.

His course on Political Anthropology was particularly lively, delighting us in trying to unravel and understand local-level politics and how it relates to national level political dynamics and conditions. "Antoun," as his graduate students referred to him among ourselves, used his own materials

from village Jordan for analysis, leading to spirited discussion. I remember especially Carol Carpenter's analytical insights into his data. Again, I realize his influence on my pedagogy: I will be using my own local-level political data from an Iranian village in my course "Transforming Middle East" this coming quarter. Antoun continued to be an exemplary mentor. After two years of Ph.D. coursework, I applied for research funding and obtained a grant for eighteen months of research in Iran, arriving in June of 1978 with my one year old daughter Karima in arms, only to become caught up in the Iranian Revolution of 1978-1979. For a time, the revolutionary strikes cut off communication, but after the 11 February 1979 Day of Revolution, letters and phone calls were again possible. Antoun supported my topical shift from indigenous forms of agricultural credit, to the Revolution seen from the village vantage point. I had not prepared to conduct field work about revolution, but when I returned to Binghamton, Antoun had a huge stack of books and articles waiting for me. His own work in political anthropology and his enthusiastic interest in my topic helped me overcome the disadvantage of lack of preparation. As I worked on my dissertation, beset by financial and domestic problems, Antoun continued to read my work, providing copious responses and suggestions, and helping me find write-up funding. When I felt I had done enough with the nine hundred pages, Antoun encouraged me to continue; some more work, he said, and it'll be a prize-winning dissertation. But I was hungry, I told him, and he accepted it. During the November 1986 MESA Conference, he was sitting at my table when the Malcolm H. Kerr Award was conferred on my dissertation. I handed the award check over to him—but he modestly handed it back.

His dedicated involvement in the work of his current and former students, generously working for their progress and achievements, has been a precious gift. We later co-edited a book together, and he kindly quoted and cited my work in his publications. Two months ago, he again encouraged and inspired me as we talked about our work on the phone. His wife Roz told me he had just finished an article on sports before his untimely and tragic death. Richard Antoun worked toward peace not only at global levels, but also in his own personal interaction with those around him. I am not alone in holding him in the highest regard. He was a fine academic, scholar, and teacher, yes; but also a humane and good man. ✎

Mary Elaine Hegland
Santa Clara University