Editor’s Page

By Alejandro Grattan-Dominguez

A Life Well-Justified

There is a line in the Bible (one of the very few that I can remember!) which says something about how lucky that man is “who can walk into his own house justified.”

Recently, I had cause to remember that line when a friend sent me an obituary notice about a fellow ex-pat I never met—but now will forever regret that I was not fortunate enough to have known him. It would have been an honor to shake his hand.

The obituary was written by Mary Jo McConahay and reads in part as follows: *Journalist, investigative poet and social activist John Ross died peacefully today at Lake Pátzcuaro in Mexico, where he had lived on and off for the past 50 years. He was 72. The cause was liver cancer.*

A national award-winning author of ten books, fiction and nonfiction, Ross received the American Book Award (1995) for "Rebellion from the Roots: Zapatista Uprising in Chiapas," and the coveted Upton Sinclair Award (2005) for "Murdered by Capitalism: 150 Years of Life and Death on the American Left." The first journalist to bring news of the indigenous Mexican Zapatista revolution to English-speaking readers, Ross was widely regarded as a "voice for those without a voice," who stood with the poor and oppressed in his brilliantly stylized writing, suffering beatings and arrests during many nonviolent protests.

An iconoclast who took every chance to afflict the comfortable and educate the public, in 2009 Ross turned down honors from the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, which had praised him for telling "stories nobody else could or would tell," and as an organizer for tenants' rights. In the chamber, Ross recalled an appearance before the Board 40 years before, when he was dragged from the same room for disturbing the peace.

He blamed an "attack" by the San Francisco Police Department for the loss of his left eye. Ross told the Board, "Death was on our plate" when he went to Baghdad as a human shield during U.S. bombing.

"Life, like reporting, is a kind of death sentence," he said. "Pardon me for having lived it so fully."

In 2010, under treatment for liver cancer, he toured nationally with "El Monstruo: True Tales of Dread & Redemption in Mexico City," already a cult classic, using a handheld magnifying glass to read his words before packed audiences.

One of the earliest resisters of the Vietnam War, Ross spent two and a half years as a prisoner of conscience in a federal penitentiary for refusing the draft. Upon his release, he recounted in a poem, when a prison official walked him to the door,

Ross, he told me with
a look of disgust
written all over his smarmy mush,
you never learned

how to be a prisoner.

I can't think of a greater epitaph, nor of a more magnificent life lived to its absolute hilt—and of such stuff are heroes made. John Ross will forevermore be one of mine.