

# MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND SUNDAY

A Sermon given at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts

By the Rev. Ken Sawyer

On May 25, 2003

For those who have never attended a Sunday service here on Memorial Day weekend before, there is this habit I've gotten into of commemorating people in the public sphere who have died in the previous twelve months. There are people here today who have been to over twenty of these Sundays, who say they look forward to them. And there are people who stay faithfully stay home.

Often themes develop, some of them recurrently. Our troubled national history regarding race relations is brought to mind yearly by the death of someone like Mamie Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old African-American whose brutal killing in Mississippi in 1955 helped fuel the civil rights movement. Ms. Mobley herself became "an outspoken champion for children in poor neighborhoods and an activist"<sup>1</sup> for racial justice, in particular in the case of her son, whose killers were never arrested.

Every year for a while still there will be victims of McCarthyism, whose careers were damaged or destroyed a half century ago. Kim Hunter, for example, who played Stella in Tennessee Williams' play, "A Streetcar Named Desire," both in the original cast on stage and in the movie, won an Oscar for her work in that movie, but by then was unemployable for five years, apparently for having been a sponsor of a peace symposium.

Of course, there are always political figures who have died. I've got a list of the ones I know about downstairs, from Abba Eban to Ron Zeigler, so you don't have to listen to the whole list. I've done that for entertainers, authors, and sports figures, too. And I've covered a table with all the obituaries.

I will note that it was a sports figure who received the most press coverage after his death. Well, we do live in Massachusetts, and Ted Williams died. (At least for now ... One of his children had him cryogenically stored. But he had the most press even before that.)

I also note that among the entertainers was the actor Rod Steiger. This gets pretty personal, but Steiger starred in the movie I've seen more than any other, "The Pawnbroker." I hasten to say, I haven't seen it for over thirty years. But I saw it when it first came out. I was about eighteen. Steiger plays a man in New York who survived the Holocaust, but not without awful memories and psychic damage. He has closed down emotionally in response. It was so riveting that when I saw it the next year, I knew in advance every line, every movement any actor would make.

I saw it every year for the next ten years. It may not be a great movie. Even back then, I thought a scene or two were heavy-handed and clumsy. But it reminded me that the Holocaust had been. Now we've got many more and more effective ways of doing that. But I've always known, for over twenty years, that when Rod Steiger died, I would thank him for the wonderful job he did in that movie.

---

<sup>1</sup> John W. Fountain, "Mamie Mobley Is Dead at 81; Victim's Mother," *New York Times*, Jan. 7, 2003, p. A17

Conspicuous among the politicians to me were two Democratic senators, Paul Wellstone and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. That's probably partly a partisan interest, because as it happens, I'm a liberal Democrat myself. But it also seemed interesting paired with the death of John Rawls, probably the most influential political philosopher in the last fifty years, who wrote on political liberalism.

All three men were strikingly independent minded. Wellstone didn't mind being the only dissenter in a Senate vote. Moynihan didn't mind serving in two Republican administrations, or coming up with his own sophisticated, sometimes surprising take on an issue. And Rawls didn't mind positioning himself outside the rest of his field and reviving the questions and concerns that political philosophy had handled traditionally.

Rawls' political liberalism was disconnected from other forms of liberalism, like the religious, even though in fact his memorial service was held at our UU church in Lexington, where he lived. But for him, it was important for a society to affirm a political liberalism -- a commitment to freedom and toleration -- that allowed all the differing religious and social views to get along.

I hope to get back to Rawls in the future. He fits in with Isaiah Berlin, Albert Camus, George Orwell and other philosophers who resist utopianism, perfectionism, and totalitarianism in favor of a committed attempt to build humane and just and free societies.

I am intrigued by inventors, people who bring things into the world that didn't exist before, whether it's a vaccine or a toy, an idea or an institution. There weren't any vaccine-creators among the departed this year, but it has been estimated that Nils Bohlin's invention for Volvo, the three-point safety belt, has saved a million lives. Uzi Gal, on the other hand, invented the Uzi submachine gun.

Among those who founded institutions, beer mogul Joseph Coors used his money and influence to create the Heritage Foundation to champion his conservative politics. Winston Blount helped create our Postal Service. And Margaret Formby began the Cowgirl Hall of Fame. Ms. Formby was given a house in Hereford, Texas, top house her collection of cowgirl memorabilia, but as she recalled, "We'd go for stretches, where for days on end, nobody would come." But she persevered, moving it eventually to Fort Worth, where it was taken over by others. "It's kind of like having a child and having to give that child up," she said. "It's sad."<sup>2</sup>

Among ideas we've come to take for granted are self-fulfilling prophesy, focus groups (both from Robert Merton, born Meyer Schkolnick) and the mid-life crisis (from Elliott Jaques).

A week ago a high school student received a seven-year contract to represent Nike shoes in his upcoming career in professional basketball. He will receive \$90 million. This is because there is an industry now called sports marketing. Mark McCormack invented it.

Herb Lipton saw that Lipton Tea kept coming up with new products. Bill Blass kept coming up with new fashions.

Back in the early '60s, Marcel Jovine came up with the Visible Man and the Visible Woman, which enabled kids and others to see what's what inside the human

---

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Martin, "Margaret Formby, 73, Dies; Began Cowgirl Hall of Fame," *New York Times*, April 20, 2003

body. Jovine was Italian born and first came to the States as a prisoner of war during World War II. He fell in love with a pianist and singer who came to perform for the prisoners. He was repatriated after the war but sailed back to marry the singer. And he started making toys, beginning with a doll. He eventually designed the Visible Engine, too.

Five more inventors to go, including the man who invented silly putty, Dr. Earl Warrick, and the man who designed and patented the modern Frisbee, Ed Headrick. Silly putty, moldable stuff that can be made into a very bouncy ball or flattened against newsprint to capture the print or image there or just stretched and fussed with, was a failed attempt to create a substitute for rubber. It was too plain for that, but it sold like crazy to children.

When Headrick went to work as head of research and development for Wham-O Manufacturing Company, he set out to find a use for “a warehouse full of unused plastic that had been intended for Hula Hoops, another Wham-O product that came and went quickly.

“His idea was to modify the Pluto Platter, a disc toy originally intended for children, into a sport for teenagers and adults.” He added rings, perfected the shape, and wham-o, Frisbees flying on every college campus.

In an interview last October, Headrick said, “We used to say that Frisbee is really a religion – ‘Frisbyterians,’ we’d call ourselves.

“When we die, we don’t go to purgatory. We just land up on the roof and lay there.”<sup>3</sup>

Now we get off into the land of extreme invention, where we satisfy a human need for fun but also for hope that the world is less prosaic than he can seem. After all, might one not seek wisdom from Zoltan the Astrological Wizard? If you grew up near a seaside boardwalk, as I did, or an amusement park, you will remember Zoltan, described as “a glass box on a pedestal. The box contained the embodied head of a man in a turban peering into a crystal ball.

“People prepared to spend a quarter to learn their future put a coin in the slot and punched in the sign of the zodiac they had been born under. Then they picked up an earpiece and listened to Zoltan’s predictions, which were delivered in basso profundo tones.

“Those predictions, intended as much for adults as for children, included lucky numbers, future romantic relationships and propitious times for new business ventures.”<sup>4</sup>

Zoltan was created by Massachusetts native Robert Bourque, who repaired pinball machines, jukeboxes and other mechanical devices. Actually the head itself was designed and sculpted by his friend and partner Robert Cottle, Captain Bob on Boston TV and the source of Zoltan’s recorded voice. They made about fifty or sixty, which long since went out of fashion, although a Zoltan-like machine named Zoltar had a role in the hit movie “Big.”

I have got to move on. But how can I not credit the man who invented the jackalope and the man who invented Bigfoot? Ray Wallace invented Bigfoot, up at a

---

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Martin, “Ed Headrick, 78, Designer Of the Commercial Frisbee,” *New York Times*, August 14, 2002, p. 19A

<sup>4</sup> Paul Lewis, “Robert Bourque, 82, Dies; Created Penny Arcade Wizard,” *New York Times*

northern California logging camp in 1958. His children announced it after he died. They shows the carved wooden feet their father wore to create the large tracks.

A son said, "It's weird because it was just a joke, and then it took on such a life of its own than even now, we can't stop it." And indeed, many people who believe that there is a species of large, guerilla-like animals in the wilds of North America, were unfazed by the announcement that the first evidence was faked, just as credulity continued regarding the Loch Ness monster even after the man who took the famous photo of the monster admitted it was a prank, just as the first crop circles in Britain were, yet belief in them goes on, too.

The story I read refused to take sides, of course, though it did note that "What nearly all Bigfoot stories lack is proof....,"<sup>5</sup> The fellow who wrote Douglas Herrick's death notice, Douglas Martin, had fun feigning some of the same neutrality regarding the jackalope invented when that Wyoming taxidermist mounted a jack rabbit for the wall with deer horns affixed. That was in 1932.

The author writes, "Whether jackalopes ever hopped the earth's surface is rather like the Loch Ness monster and Bigfoot; it depends on the observer...."

"Whether truth, fiction or metaphor, the mounted version of the jackalope ... relentlessly proliferated." Herrick, his brother and nephew produced tens of thousands of this curiosity for sale. Martin describes it as "perhaps the tackiest totem of the American West – half bunny, half antelope, and 100% tourist trap...."<sup>6</sup>

My thanks as always go to Polly for coming up with such a nice selection of music related to people who died. Still, she can't get to them all, so she passed on Billy Guy, who sang bass on such Coasters hits as "Charley Brown"; Lonnie Donegan, who had a hit with, "Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight?"; and the actor Richard Harris, who sang the unforgettable, "MacCarthur" Park in 1968.

But of course, some of you won't remember it, because you didn't hear it in the first place. The other half of your ministerial team here at First Parish tells me I can catch the attention of the baby boomers here by mentioning George Wyle, or rather, the TV theme song he wrote the tune for, "The Ballad of Gilligan's Island."

On the internet I read, "When producer Sherwood Schwartz was pitching *Gilligan's Island*, CBS executives complained that new viewers would have trouble latching onto the show because of its complicated backstory. Schwartz solved the problem by writing that backstory into the lyrics of the song that opened each episode.... (Schwartz wrote the lyrics with a calypso beat in mind, not the sea chantey music by George Wyle that was eventually selected. But Wyle's tune will accommodate the words of "Amazing Grace," "The Yellow Rose of Texas," and any Emily Dickinson poem....)" Wyle also wrote the Christmas song, "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year."

Singers, songwriters, and musicians are on my lists downstairs. Paul Tripp is among them, who wrote "Tubby the Tuba." My parents had worked with Tripp, and I listened to the record a lot. It's like Peter and the Wolf, where instruments represent characters. And then there was Larry LaPrise. My thanks go to Roger Weigand for passing on this notice:

---

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Egan, "Search for Bigfoot Outlives The Man Who Created Him," *New York Times*, Jan., 2003

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Matrtin, "Douglas Herrick, 82, Dies; Father of West's Jackalope" *New York Times*, Jan. 19, 2003

“With all the sadness and trauma going on in the world at the moment, it is worth reflecting on the death of a very important person which almost unnoticed last week.

“Larry La Prise, the man who wrote ‘The Hokey Pokey,’ died peacefully at age 93. The most traumatic part for his family was getting him into the coffin. They put his left leg in .. and then the trouble started.”

In closing I want to mention one more song, the one we’ll soon be singing together, Lilli Marlene. Glancing at the words, you may have been surprised at its choice here in church, even if the tune was written by Norbert Schultze, who died this past year. But tomorrow is Memorial Day, and as much as I have adapted this day before to my own, broader uses, tomorrow honors those who died in military service.

So for one thing, the sadness of the song is to me an appropriate reminder of the sacrifices made by those who serve the country, and those who love them.

For another, the song has been called “the informal infantryman’s anthem that became the best-known song of World War II.”

And then there’s the story of the song, and how rose from obscurity to play that role, and with whom. Because it was the infantryman’s anthem on both sides.

The words were written during World War I by a German soldier, regretting his impending separation from two women, actually, Lilli and Marlene, whom he combines in the poem. (Try not to dwell on that fact. The point is, he wrote a touching poem.) Even before it was published in 1937, a Swedish cabaret singer in Munich named Lale Anderson had included it in her act. In 1939 she recorded it to a new tune, the one written by Schultze, with a bugle call introduction added by her accompanist. It was not a hit.

But in 1941, a German officer found a copy in a cellar in Vienna. The army was looking for a song to play at the end of the broadcast day at a station in Belgrade directed toward German troops in North Africa. The officer liked the bugle-call introduction. “Without that bugle call, my song would still be gathering dust,” said Schultze later.<sup>7</sup>

The response from the troops was immediate and overwhelming.

Meanwhile, back in Germany, Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda, had forbidden Anderson to perform because of her associations with Jews. Plus he disliked the sentimentality and sadness of the song. But he had to give in to the popular demand to see and hear her perform the song. (As Erin points out, it’s interesting to note that even the Nazi highest command could reverse itself if confronted with popular sentiment.)

Next thing you know, English and Australian troops were singing it, too, sometimes in German, sometimes in English, and sometimes in naughty renditions. The BBC commissioned Tommy Connor to provide a clean rendition, which it is said he accomplished in 25 minutes. That’s the one we’ll sing soon (I promise). It was recorded in England and sold a million copies in the first month. Eventually American troops took to the tune as well, and it became associated in this country with Marlene Dietrich, ex-German actress and singer.

---

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Richard Goldstein, “Norbert Schultze Dies at 91; His ‘Lili Marleen’ Was a Hit,” *New York Times*

I don't want to sentimentalize the story. Schultze spend the rest of the war writing music for German propaganda films. "I had a choice," he said later": to be a composer or face death, so I chose the first option." Who knows what any of us would do, caught in a national nightmare. But still.

And yet his song, his and Hans Leip's, the soldier who wrote the words, and Lale Anderson's, "Lilli Marlene," emerged, it has been said, "as the embodiment of a timeless theme: the sadness of separation brought on by war."<sup>8</sup>

It is a theme that is not only timeless but universal. Indeed, it reminds us that the most basic human emotions are shared by most folks in most places, as well as our hopes and needs, our foibles and failures, our causes for pride and our prayers.

As one writer noted, "'Lilli Marlene' is international. It is to be expected that she will emerge beside the barrack wall.... Her simple desire to meet a brigadier is hardly a German copyright. Politics may have dominated and nationalized, but songs have a way of leaping boundaries."

May we have happy remembrances of everyone, living or dead, who was in touch with their human oneness and goodness, and helped hurting and hurtful people alike leap boundaries and be one.

---

<sup>8</sup> Goldstein