

“MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND 2005”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
By the Rev. Ken Sawyer
On May 28, 2005

Every Memorial Day weekend, when the country is commemorating those who have served in our military endeavors, for many years I have taken the chance to recognize many of the people who have died in the previous twelve months who contributed in a variety of ways to our times, not all of them positive, but all of some consequence worth considering before their names fade into the past.

This year's rendition is somewhat abbreviated, since I was on sabbatical last spring and I saved my 2003-2004 remembrances until All Souls Day in early November. But not to worry, the months since then have seen the departure, usually sad, of many notable folks, like those whose accomplishments include the music that Polly Oliver and the choir are contributing this morning.

In recent years I have been providing lists -- available during coffee hour, and attached at the end of this website/hardcopy version -- of the names of many of the people I could have cited at greater length, but can't for lack of time. So, to take only one example, that of the music world, you can find listed Edward Patten, a member of Gladys Knights' back-up group, the Pips; the paramount nightclub pianist Bobby Short, who once delighted a small roomful of diners that included, only a few feet from the master, my wife and me; bandleaders Artie Shaw, Martin Denny, and Harry Simeon; singers Ray Peterson and Skeeter Davis, and others. Davis sang "The End of the World"; Peterson, "Corinna, Corinna" and "Tell Laura I Love Her."

You may have wondered about Jerry Orbach's name appearing in the order of service connected with the beautiful tune the choir will sing as a response to the benediction, since Orbach is better known now for his acting, either in the TV series "Law and Order" or in movies like "Crimes and Misdemeanors." But he was in the original cast of "The Fantasticks" and sang, "Try to Remember." He also starred in the original cast of the musical, "Chicago," as the lawyer, alongside Barney Martin, the original Amos Hart, Roxie's husband, who debuted "Cellophane Man." Martin ended up as Jerry Seinfeld's father on TV. He and Orbach both died this past year.

I won't mention most of the band members who died, except on my list downstairs, and except to acknowledge that for those of you younger than me, the death of the drummers for the Jefferson Airplane or the Searchers may mean less than the death of Johnny Ramone, guitarist for the Ramones.

Regular attendees at these services know I have penchants for certain categories of people, among them the writers of popular songs, people who made the words or the tunes that echo on in our mind for years or decades (even if we sometimes wish they wouldn't). Cy Coleman not only wrote "Witchcraft," but the string of songs that caused him to be eulogized [in *Atlantic* magazine] as "'Broadway's last good time," like "Hey, Look Me Over," "Big Spender," and "If My Friends Could See Me Now."

Other songs written by those fairly newly gone include “Wilverton Mountain,” “Ring of Fire,” and “Johnny Reb” [Merle Kilgore]; “Singing the Blues [Melvin Endsley]; “Besame Mucho” [Consuelo Valezquez]; and “Help Me Make It Through the Night” [Sammi Smith].

And then there are the innovators, those whose entrepreneurial or inventive talents introduced products or other achievements we have since come to take for granted -- including the man who once testified that he had made a career on one word. [Thurl Ravenscroft]

Clever, ambitious, and/or lucky people gave us the aluminum Bundt pan [David Dalquist], the Watergate complex [Nicholas Salgo], the first video rental store [George Atkinson], crash-test dummies [Samuel Alderson], The Wine Speculator magazine [Robert Morrissey], Amway [Jay Van Andel], Iams pet food [Paul Iams], Miracle-Gro [Horace Hagedorn], the automated chicken plucker [Andrew Toti], the “Got Milk?” ad campaign among others [Jay Schulberg], the DeLorean and Avanti automobiles [John DeLorean and John Ebstein], long-life batteries [Lewis May], and Gold’s horseradish [Morris Gold], which was originally made at Morris Gold’s family’s home in Brooklyn by his mother, a Polish immigrant, bottled by her young sons, and sold store to store by the father, also a Polish immigrant.

Oh, and then there are intermittent windshield wipers, invented by Robert Kearns, who successfully sued Ford for violating his patent, and got tens of millions of dollars from Ford and Chrysler. His attempts to generate further return from other companies were unsuccessful, as were his efforts to force all companies that used the device he designed to have to buy them from factories of his own. Despite his wealth, he ended up obsessively, bitterly frustrated, a lesson in itself. But weren’t many of us grateful for his invention this month?!

William Lester revolutionized the plastics industry 70 years ago in Leominster with his design of an automatic molding machine. Jeff Raskin was largely responsible for the Apple Macintosh computer. And then there was the guy with the one word that made his career. It did not transform our world the way that usable plastic products or popular home computers did, but just about everybody here knows the word that made Thurl Ravenscroft’s fortune: Great.

The man was a voice. He provided voices for films and for Disleyland rides. The Kellogg cereal company sent him a picture of Tony the Tiger, whom they hoped to use to promote their Frosted Flakes. Ravenscroft himself came up with the idea of the cartoon character proclaiming the product to be “Great!” He was Tony’s voice for over 50 years. Another voice who died was that of Phineas T. Bluster, Flub-a-Dub, Heckle and Jeckle, and Deputy Dawg [Dayton Allen]. Another was the voice of Fred Flintstone [Henry Corden].

Speaking of odd niches in the nation’s economic life, probably the most unusual memorial service this past year was that performed for George Molchan, who for over 30 years played Little Oscar, the small Oscar Meyer mascot who appeared with the Weinermobile at parades and at supermarkets. “The Weinermobile was parked near Mr. Molchan’s grave in Merrillville, Indiana.... Before priests said the final prayers over the coffin, about 50 mourners sang a chorus of the Oscar Meyer jingle and then blew short blasts on hot dog-shaped whistles.” When I die, you can skip the whistles. But if you’re moved to sing the jingle, okay.

And to me the most unusual story I found in a death notice was that of Red Rountree, who was in his 80s when he decided to explore a new avocation, robbing banks. First a judge in Mississippi put him on probation and told him to leave the state. Then he tried it again in Florida and spent three years in jail. A year after his release, he passed a note to a teller in Texas who said, “‘Are you kidding?’ [but] complied anyway.” Rountree was sentenced to 12 ½ years, but died in prison shortly before his 93rd birthday.

I have only two short observations from the world of sports: One, champions come in many sizes. Football star Reggie White weighed 300 pounds, Red Sox pitcher Dick Radatz was 6’6”, Dick Weber (“the greatest bowler ever”) weighed 130, the same as marathoner Johnny Kelley. Two, Johnny Kelley, who ran the Boston marathon 61 times, finishing second seven times, finishing in the top 10 18 times, finishing 58 times (though not on his first try), was and remains an inspiration when it comes to finding and dedicating yourself to something you love.

A few more admirable figures: Peter Benenson, a London lawyer, upset in 1961 at repression, in particular the jailing for seven years of two students in Portugal for toasting freedom, wrote a letter to the paper, urging “a one-year campaign of letter-writing to repressive authorities, demanding enforcement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the UN in 1948 but was widely ignored.”

Benenson wrote, “Open your newspaper any day, and you will find a report from somewhere in the world of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions or religion are unacceptable to his government. The reader feels a sickening sense of impotence. Yet if these feelings of disgust all over the world could be unified into common action, something effective could be done.”

“The result was an outpouring of letters, telegrams and publicity that swelled into a permanent campaign. And the formation of Amnesty International,” eventually “the world’s largest human rights organization with 1.8 million members, chapters in 64 countries and a perennially powerful voice against torture, unjust punishment and the death penalty.” [Robert McFadden]

There are a few pairing I like in this year’s class: as a better idea than robbing banks in one’s senior years, Virginia Hamilton Adair had her first collection of poems published nine years ago, when she was 83. And quite the success it was.

How’s this for a pairing: Rose Mary Woods died this year, and so did Peter Rodino. Congressman Rodino presided over the Watergate hearing in Congress, and Ms. Woods was Nixon’s longtime secretary, who inadvertently or vertently erased 18 ½ minutes of a tape of a critical meeting between the President and his chief of staff regarding the break-in. By the way, Rodino, who so rose to the occasion with his “patience, caution, enormous energy and fairness above all,” [Michael Kaufman, *N. Y. Times* 5/9/05] was a prime sponsor and floor manager of the Civil Rights Act of 1966.

That Act, and the struggle of which it was so important a part, brings another pairing to mind, of two white southern men. Bobby Frank Cherry died this year, after having been finally convicted of having been one of those who set off a bomb in a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four girls. And so did William Bootle, at 102, the judge who in 1961 ordered the end of segregation at the University of Georgia.

What are we to make of human nature, of what our brothers and sisters are capable of, and maybe we ourselves, either for devilry or decency? The truth seems to be that we humans are possessed of that range of potential, murderous hatred and

courageous decency. We can certainly hope that our own lives, and the religion we share, will adamantly take the side of Judge Bootle, who replied to press attention to his bold decision, simply “Right is right.”

There is more to the story, because Georgia had a statute that all state funding would be cut off to any white college or school that admitted a black student. Two years earlier Ernest Vandiver had been elected governor on a pledge that “no, not one” black child would enter a white school in Georgia. But days after Bootle made his ruling, Vandiver convened the legislature and persuaded it to repeal the statute. “His stand was credited with sparing the state the turbulence that swept much of the South in that period, but it cost him political support. He left office” two years later. [*N. Y. Times*, 2/23/05] He died in February.

Such deaths continue to remind us of that turbulent time, and those who contributed to the victories. Two names stand out among this year’s dead, James Forman and Shirley Chissom. Forman was “a civil rights pioneer who brought a fiercely revolutionary vision and masterly organizational skills to virtually every major civil rights battlefield in the 1960’s.” NAACP head Julian Bond said, Forman “really was the personality and the glue that held us all together.”

Shirley Chissom was the first black woman elected to Congress – for seven terms -- and the first black woman to run for president, in 1972. But as one writer [in *Newsweek*] noted, she didn’t want to be remembered for that. “Her idea of an epitaph was ... ‘Shirley Chissom had guts.’ Anyone who saw her in action – whether opposing the Vietnam War or enlisting George Wallace’s help to win minimum-wage coverage for domestic workers – would have agreed.”

Mention of that war gives me a chance to cite one person who was suggested to me by one of you, Matt Sheer. Matt sent along a couple fine tributes by others, and said himself that “Col. David Hackworth was America’s most decorated war veteran [2 Distinguished Service Crosses, 10 Silver Stars, 8 Bronze Stars, and 8 Purple Hearts] and ... the first senior officer to speak out against the Viet Nam War (in 1971)” – declaring it unwinnable and predicting the fall of Saigon within four years, four years before it fell -- and more recently, founder of the Soldiers for the Truth, which calls itself ‘The Voice of the Grunt.’ Both in and out of the Army Hack was dedicated to caring for the soldiers on the line.”

The world of entertainment lost such one-time stars as Virginia Mayo, Ossie Davis, and Sandra Dee, but one most notably. Every year I report whose death generated the most attention in the press. If you stop and think about it, the answer this year is obvious. Probably the death of no one since Princess Diana received the coverage given to that of the Pope. But I think the runner-up was Johnny Carson, edging out journalist Hunter Thompson. I am aware how many of you will have few memories of the comic who emceed a late-night TV show for decades, and if you’re young enough, it may be hard to imagine someone having the national impact of Letterman, Leno, and John Stewart combined – and using it in a way that appealed across geographical and political lines, and yet was persistently engaged with contemporary issues.

It was a show where it was great to be funny and talented – and goofy, too -- but also great to be smart. He highlighted the population explosion as well as TV’s all-time biggest draw, the wedding of Tiny Tim and Miss Vicky (which I couldn’t hope to explain

in the time available). And he won the trust and affection of the country in a way that newscaster Walter Cronkite had, too, but that nobody has since.

The comedian Steve Martin wrote in a tribute directed to Carson, “Your gift ... was ... a blend of modesty and confidence.... You wanted to do the job and do it well. You allowed the spirit of your idols, Stan Laurel and Jonathan Winters among them [though I can’t believe he left out Jack Benny], to creep into you, and you found a way to twist their inspiration and make it new. In you I saw simplicity, joy, politeness, sympathy.”

Wow. What inspiring aspirations: to be simple, joyful, polite, and sympathetic. To allow the spirit of those we highly regard to be in us and contrive to make their inspiration new. I think I’ve got the morning’s benediction.

The Pope was not the only notable religious figure to have died, though the list is not one that brings pride to my professional heart. Oh, it’s true, Sister Dorothy Stang died, murdered in the Amazon forest for her brave environmental work. But so did James Porter, the Catholic priest whose conviction for molesting children prefigured the major sex abuse scandal soon to follow.

Then there was the evangelist Billy James Hargis, founder of the Christian Crusade. “At the height of his popularity in the 1960’s and 1970’s, Mr. Hargis – a shouting, arm-waving, 270-pound elemental force whom Oklahomans called a ‘bawl and jump’ preacher – broadcast sermons daily on 500 radio stations and 250 television stations.” He wrote a hundred books.

He had his set-backs. In the ‘50s, he took to identifying so many institutions as harboring Communists, he was been dropped as a minister by his denomination. In 1964, the IRS canceled his Christian Crusade’s tax-exempt status for its “political activities.” In a landmark decision five years later, the Supreme Court upheld the fairness doctrine of the FCC, requiring Hargis to provide free air time for a rebuttal from a journalist he had attacked in the air and causing stations to be wary of controversial shows. And then he was forced to resign as president of the college he had founded amid allegations of sexual misconduct with students, which he denied.

He kept up his Christian Crusade Ministries, though, right until last year. And to his credit, let it be said, he established a foundation that ran clinics and orphanages in Africa and Asia.

Two people to mention in passing from the world of religion, who make a nice contrast. One is the Protestant theologian Langdon Gilkey, who championed the compatibility of science and religion, and publicly argued against fundamentalist causes like school prayer and creationism. The other is Sister Lucia de Jesus dos Santos, who died at 97, the last of the three cousins to whom Mary, mother of Jesus, appeared six times at Fatima, Portugal, back in 1917, with messages for the world, and prophecies. Ever since, people have been making pilgrimages to Fatima, though probably not Langdon Gilkey. I found surfing the internet for Fatima particularly fascinating. It’s really not fair or kind to say, but much of it did bring to mind the novelist Saul Bellow’s best-known line, “A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep.”

It is time to close, I know, but let me only cite two scientists, first Ernst Mayr, the evolutionary biologist who established the crucial role that geography plays in the

creation of new species. Mayr was scheduled to speak at our UU church this winter in Bedford, where he lived, but that week he died. Well, he was 100 years old.

And then there was Hans Bethe [BAY-tah]. From the '30s on, when he immigrated to this country, "he made discoveries in the world of tiny particles described by quantum mechanics and the whorls of time and space envisioned by relativity theory. He did so into his mid-90's...." He is regarded as "the father of nuclear astrophysics," which studies the nature of stars.

And he was a physicist who helped create the atom bomb – and didn't regret it, given the peril his native Germany posed the world in the early '40s — but became a dedicated advocate of arms control and nuclear disarmament, "the science community liberal conscience." [William J. Broad, *N. Y. Times*, 6/8/05]

Well, I can't go on forever, though it may seem that I already have. I am sorry if I left out someone you were hoping to hear honored, or at least mentioned. Prince Rainier, maybe, or Max Schmeling. I never did get around to the Pope, and I thought he was going to get the most attention. Maybe there's just too much about him one could say. I feel that way about three other people: Susan Sontag, called "the pre-eminent intellectual of our time" [Charles McGrath, *Times* 1/2/05]; the playwright Arthur Miller; and Bellow. I have referred to them all in past sermons and probably will again.

I invite you to look through all my collection. I encourage you to forward any good ones you come to in the year ahead, as some of you do. Just this week, Erin – who had already sent me the death notice for Thurl Ravenscroft – sent me Eddie Alberts, too, with the suggestion I go from "Great!" to humming the theme to Green Acres, a TV series Alberts was in.

Instead, I'll have you all rise and join with me in singing our final hymn.

The List for November, 2004, to June, 2005:

Art

Richard Avedon, photographer
 Will Eisner, comic book artist
 Joe Grant, Disney artist
 Philip Johnson, architect
 Harry Lampert, comic book artist (The Flash)
 J. P. Miller, children's book illustrator
 Ted Rand, children's book illustrator

Entertainment

Eddie Albert (actor)
 Dayton Allen (cartoon voices)
 Johnny Carson (TV host)

Frances Chaney (radio actress; black-listed)
 Henry Corden (cartoon voices)
 Ossie Davis (actor)
 Sandra Dee (actor)
 Mitch Hedberg (comedian)
 Vaughan Meader, comedian, impressionist
 Ismail Merchant (movie producer)
 Virginia Mayo (actress)
 Thelma White (actress, "Reefer Madness")

Music

Singers Jerry Orbach, who starred in the original productions of The Fantasticks and Chicago; Edward Patten, one of Gladys Knights' Pips; John Raitt; Tyrone David ("Turn Back the Hands of Time"); Jim Capaldi (wrote and sang hits for Traffic); Ray Peterson ("Tell Laura I Love Her," "Corinna Corinna"); Terry Melcher ("Hey Little Cobra"); Renata Tebaldi (opera); Skeeter Davis ("The End of the World," "I Can't Stay Mad at You")

Instrumentalists Bobby Short, nightclub pianist; Johnnie Johnson, pianist on Chuck Berry's hits; Spencer Dryden (drummer on Jefferson Airplane hits); Johnny Ramone (guitarist for the Ramones)

Band leaders Martin Denny (who once had a hit instrumental, "Quiet Village"); Harry Simeone ("The Little Drummer Boy"); Artie Shaw

Song-writers Sammi Smith ("Help Me Make It Through the Night"); Consuelo Velazquez ("Besame Mucho"); Merle Kilgore (Ring of Fire, Wilverton Mountain, Johnny Reb); Cy Coleman ("Witchcraft," "Big Spender," "The Best is Yet to Come," "Hey Look Me Over," "If My Friends Could See Me Now"); Jimmy Griffin ("For All We Know"); Melvin Endsley ("Singing the Blues"); Donald Yetter Gardner ("All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth")

Radio host Karl Haas

Politics

Yasir Arafat, Palestinian leader
 Peter Benenson, founded Amnesty International
 Bobby Frank Cherry, white supremacist, murderous bomber
 Shirley Chisholm, first black woman elected to Congress
 George Kennan, diplomat

John McTernan, lawyer
 Robert Merhige, judge who ordered U. of Georgia to desegregate
 Peter Rodino, congressman, led Watergate hearings
 S. E. Vandiver, Georgia governor
 Rose Mary Woods (Nixon's secretary)
 Zhao Ziyang, Chinese leader

Science

Hans Bethe, physics (helped create the atom bomb, campaigned for nuclear disarmament)
 Ernst Mayer, evolutionary biologist (established the role of geography in the creation of species)

Sports

John Kelley, marathon
 Sam Mills, football
 Dick Radatz, baseball
 Max Schmeling, boxing
 Reggie White, football
 Dick Weber, bowling

Writers

Virginia Hamilton Adair (poet)
 Saul Bellow (novelist)
 Robert Creeley (poet)
 Arthur Haley (novelist, "Airport")
 Robert Heilbroner (economics)
 Barbara Knutson (children's books)
 Arthur Miller (playwright)
 Jack Newfield (journalist)
 Noel Perrin (essayist, critic)
 Susan Sontag (essayist, critic)
 Hunter Thompson (journalist)
 Harvey Wheeler (novelist, "Fail-Safe")
 Max Velthuijs (children's books)