

## MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND SUNDAY

The First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

The Rev. Ken Sawyer

May 27, 2007

Here it is, Memorial Day weekend, a time tomorrow to remember and honor those who died in the military service of the country. Today, by custom here at First Parish, we remember a wider range of the departed – sort of like All Souls Day that precedes All Saints Day – but only among those who died since Memorial Day weekend the previous year.

For me personally, the nature of this exercise has changed since I began doing it about thirty years ago. It has always been a chance to pause to note in their passing what some people contributed to the world, for better or worse. But mostly these were people I got to learn about whom I was too young to have known much about from personal experience, as was not true for the older members of the congregation.

That aspect of the experience has changed. Now I tell of people whose notable activities I was old enough to have known of at the time, as is not true for the younger among you. Even if you were the kind of bright kid who was following the news by the time you were ten, if you are under forty-five, you probably don't have a first-hand memory of the eighteen-day vice-presidential candidacy of Thomas Eagleton and the issue involved, that of the public's awareness and understanding of mental illness.

Eagleton, a first-term senator from Missouri, had been picked by Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern. Eagleton had chosen not to reveal that he "had been hospitalized three times for depression and that his therapy twice involved electroshock therapy." Early into the campaign, though, this became public and the source of much concern and criticism. McGovern strongly backed Eagleton at first. "But the pressure from party leaders, campaign contributors and members of McGovern's own staff was unrelenting," and McGovern forced Eagleton to withdraw from the ticket.

"...McGovern said last April that he had come to regret his removal of Mr. Eagleton. 'If I had to do it over again, I'd have kept him,' ... McGovern said. 'I didn't know anything about mental illness. Nobody did.'"<sup>1</sup>

That is not quite true, of course. Many people knew things about mental illness, many of them accurate. But it is true that a condition like clinical depression was less well understood by the general public than by now – how common it was and is, how treatable many cases are, how someone like Tom Eagleton might go on to serve his Senate term and then three more terms with distinction, as he did.

Of course, we also know how awful the symptoms of depression or bipolar disorder can be, as was evident in the lives of many of the prominent authors who died this past year: Kurt Vonnegut, Art Buchwald, William Styron, George Trow, and Sidney Sheldon.

On a very different note, there in my "Authors" file are Bernard Gordon and Ted Berkman, united in having each written a screenplay for a movie starring Ronald Reagan, "Hellcats of the Navy" by Gordon and, by Berkman, "Bedtime for Bonzo." Berkman also co-wrote the screenplay for "Fear Strikes Out," about the struggles with mental illness of

Red Sox star Jimmy Piersall. In his 80s, Gordon wrote two books about his experience in the 1950s, “Hollywood Exile: or How I Learned to Love the Blacklist,” which he was on for a decade after having been named before Congress as a former Communist Party member; and “The Gordon File: A Screenwriter Recalls 20 Years of FBI Surveillance,” based on his 300-page F. B. I. file.

Among other writers who died were the author of “The Zen of Seeing,” Frederick Franck; of the ground-breaking “Toward a New Psychology of Women,” Jean Baker Miller; and of prose like this: “This one had crazy electric blue eyes that could smile, as well as a full-lipped mouth, and when she said, ‘Good morning’ it was like being licked by a soft, satin-furred llama.” That is by Mickey Spillane, described as “a master of the postwar private-eye potboiler.” The paper quoted some of his work, including a line like, “Silence has a funny sound,” and this, from “One Lonely Night”: “Isn’t that the way life is? You fight and struggle to get something and suddenly you’re there at the end and there’s nothing left to fight for any longer.”<sup>ii</sup>

A lot of distinguished journalists died: Oriana Fallaci, David Halberstam, Ed Bradley, Ellen Willis, and the columnists Mollie Ivins, Whitney Balliett, and Buchwald.

Ellen Willis was notable for the range of her interests, especially in politics, feminism, and rock criticism. The obituary notes that “Though Ms. Willis liked to describe herself as an anti-authoritarian democratic socialist, she was leery of extremism of either stripe.” She wrote, “My education was dominated by modernist thinkers and artists who taught me that the supreme imperative was courage to face the awful truth, to scorn the soft-minded optimism of religious and secular romantics as well as the corrupt optimism of governments, advertisers, and mechanistic or manipulative revolutionaries,” she wrote in 1981.

“Yet the modernists’ once subversive refusal to be gulled or lulled has long since degenerated into a ritual despair at least as corrupt – not to say smug – as the false cheer it replaced. The terms of the dialectic have reversed: now the subversive task is to affirm an authentic post-modern optimism that gives full weight to existent horror and possible (or probable) apocalyptic disaster yet insists – credibly – that we can, well, overcome. The catch is that you have to be an optimist (an American?) in the first place not to dismiss such a project as insane.”

Which is how she saw herself: “My deepest impulses are optimistic, an attitude that seems to me to me as spiritually necessary and proper as it is intellectually suspect.”<sup>iii</sup>

Though I am not sure I am an optimist by nature myself, I do try working in that direction and I like Willis’ attitude of realistic hopefulness.

The great and now late historian and political speech-writer Arthur Schlesinger attempted the same balance, with a little more weight on the side of realism in the 1949 book that “solidified his position as the spokesperson for postwar liberalism,” “The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom.” “Inspired by the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, [Schlesinger] argued that pragmatic, reform-minded liberalism, limited in scope, was the best that [people] could hope for politically.

“Problems will always torment us,’ he wrote, ‘because all important problems are insoluble: that is why they are important. The good comes from the continuing struggle to try and solve them, not from the vain hope of their solution.’”<sup>iv</sup>

So maybe we shall not overcome, all the way to solutions that end the important problems of race and class and war and sexism and materialism and greed – though we can stay engaged in the struggle. Willis and Schlesinger both did.

Some politicians of the sort I like died, like Ann Richards and our own former congressperson Bob Drinan, who twice spoke from this pulpit. I still have a Drinan bumper sticker on the inside wall of my garage. On the other hand, Augusto Pinochet and Saddam Hussein are no longer with us either.

It was another politician, though, who walked away easily with the award for generating the most press in his or her parting this year, and it wasn't Boris Yeltsin. It was Gerald Ford. I mean no disrespect to the man, but I have to guess that you get a hefty p.r. boost if you happen to die in the slow news days right after Christmas. Ford did have a pretty good record on some important issues like civil rights, though I always found it hard to forgive him for his 1970 attempt to impeach Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

Gerry Studds died, the first openly gay member of Congress. So did Robert Stafford, former Republican Senator and Governor of Vermont, known for his devotion to environmentalism and education. "After his retirement, [he] stayed mostly out of the public eye," but in 2000, days before the hotly-contested vote in Vermont on whether to legalize civil unions, Stafford spoke out: "I consider that love is one of the great forces in our society and especially in our state of Vermont. It occurs to me that even if a same-sex couple unites in love, what harm does that do anyone or society? So I felt compelled to come here and say that."<sup>v</sup>

But I know by now some of you are wondering when I am going to get to those creative souls who discovered, invented, marketed or were otherwise responsible for products, companies, and other aspects of our lives we take for granted – like TV dinners, Ramen noodles, the Charleston Chew candy bar, the Skotch cooler, the Aeron office chair, the flannel granny nightgown, foam rubber slippers, the Philly cheese steak sandwich, Haagen-Dazs ice cream, and Mister Softee.

Ramen noodles – "small packets of flavored dried noodles that require just a three-minute boil" -- were invented in Japan in 1957 by Momofuku Ando. Some say the secret was frying the noodles before you dried them, others that it was sprinkling the noodles with soup and then kneading them when they were half-dried. But a critical factor in the huge international success of the product was the choice of chicken broth for flavoring, because, as Mr. Ando wrote, "Hindus may not eat beef and Muslims may not eat pork, but there is not a single country that forbids the eating of chicken."<sup>vi</sup> A religious learning for the day. Here is another, that appeared in one obituary: "Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. Give him ramen noodles, and you don't have to teach him anything."<sup>vii</sup>

Then there were the companies that were founded and/or guided to success by people who died this year: Pottery Barn, Lands' End, Avis, In-N-Out Burgers, Motel 6, Helene Curtis, and Hooters.

The man who discovered the Van Allen belts of charged particles circling the earth died. His name was James Van Allen. Other deaths include the person who discovered the cause of sickle cell anemia.

By odd coincidence, three people died in their mid-40s: an incredible mountain climber, motivational speaker, and author, who fell while climbing; the death-defying

host of television shows, who, while filming one on “The Ocean’s Deadliest,” was killed by a stingray; and the author of the book, “Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff,” who had a fatal heart attack.

Sad to say, Dennis “DJ” Johnson, the one-time Celtics star, also had a heart attack while still young, only 52. Speaking of the Celtics, Red Auerbach, who created their dynasty as coach and general manager, died.

Other sports figures once famous died, too, but maybe the most poignant deaths were those of Darryl Stingley, at 55, a Patriots player hit hard during a pre-season game in 1978 and thereafter quadriplegic, whose attitude was as exemplary as the attitude of the player who hit him was unforgivable, many would say, though Stingley forgave him; and the race horse Barbaro, who was highly esteemed after winning the Kentucky Derby, only to pull up injured in the subsequent Preakness.

Meanwhile, it could be argued that the person who died this year who had the most influence on history and American life was the libertarian economist Milton Friedman, champion of the free market and opponent of much of what governments commonly do, including even the regulation of adult drug use, making him a conservative hero with whom they sometimes disagreed. But right or wrong, he was intellectually consistent.

Entertainers. One is struck by the huge gap between the favored childhoods of Kitty Carlisle and Jane Wyatt, and the poverty and worse from which Betty Hutton and June Allyson emerged. And by the name changes: Red Buttons was born Aaron Chwatt; Jack Warden, John Lebzelter; Kitty Carlisle, Catherine Conn; June Allyson, Ella Geisman; Betty Hutton, Elizabeth June Thornburg; Jan Murray, Murray Janofsky. Jane Wyatt was born Jane Wyatt.

Talk about culture, Chris Hayward helped create The Bullwinkle Show; with Atlantic Records, Ahmet Artegun helped create rock and roll; and Bob Carroll co-wrote all six seasons of “I Love Lucy.”

In the world of religion, one may note the recent death of Jerry Falwell, preacher and founder of the Moral Majority conservative political action group. But also the biblical scholar Robert Funk, who in his retirement created the Jesus Seminar, a gathering of fellow scholars who spent years going through the New Testament trying to determine which sayings and actions ascribed to Jesus were probably actually said or done by him – results that were then published, in striking form, where the New Testament is reproduced and the probable authenticity of each saying and deed is indicated by color. The group decided more than 4/5 of both the sayings and the actions are fictional.

People who know me may wonder how I handled this Sunday this year without giving in to the temptation to spend all the time on the writer Kurt Vonnegut, whose work I adore, for many reasons, including his skill as a writer and his personal theology or non-theology – until his death he was honorary lifetime president of the American Humanist Association.

Vonnegut addressed our UU General Assembly in 1986. He said he liked our movement, and thought if we had a symbol, it should be a bologna with a diagonal line through it – we were the “no bologna” religion. He gave a lecture at our church in Cambridge as part of the series of lectures that commemorated the American founder of Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing, and key aspects of Channing’s outlook. Vonnegut was assigned “human dignity” and he took the radical view that dignity is not

something we inherently possess that something we convey upon each other – and should convey to all. I was there.

He included one of his re-workings of the passion narrative of Jesus' death, which I have shared here. Just last September when the new church year began, I spent several minutes recounting events from one of my favorite Vonnegut novels, "The Sirens of Titan," a book I described as "a pondering on the nature and purpose of life, 'a seeking after clues ... as to what life [is] all about'" – which could be said of so much of Vonnegut's work.

I could quote him till the cows come home, but coffee hour awaits us, and the summer schedule of services includes a July 1st date when people can all share or at least listen to Vonnegut remembrances. I will offer now just a few little quotes. The first is a poem called "Requiem." It powerfully expresses Vonnegut's dismay at the way we humans have treated the planet. Over and over again he has said, we had this great place to be, but we were too greedy and ignorant not to ruin it. Late in his life he wrote sayings to a magazine like, "Dear future generations: Please accept our apologies. We were roaring drunk on petroleum. 2006 A.D. Kurt Vonnegut<sup>viii</sup>

His poem, "Requiem," concludes his last book, *A Man Without a Country*:

The crucified planet Earth,  
should it find a voice  
and a sense of irony,  
might now well say  
of our abuse of it,  
"Forgive them, Father,  
They know not what they do."

The irony would be  
that we know  
what we are doing.

When the last living thing  
has died on account of us,  
how poetic it would be  
if Earth could say,  
in a voice floating up  
perhaps  
from the floor  
of the Grand Canyon,  
"It is done."  
People did not like it here.

And finally, these few lines that begin his poem, "Worship":

I don't know about you,  
but I practice a disorganized religion.

[Hey, sounds like us!]  
 I belong to an unholy disorder.  
 We call ourselves,  
 “Our Lady of Perpetual Astonishment.”

As the years come and go, as people we love and admire come and go, until each of us goes, as everyone does, may we retain a sense of gratitude for the good and respect for those who enable it, a sympathy for those who suffer from the ills that persist, and a perpetual astonishment for the wonder of life itself.

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<sup>i</sup> Adam Clymer, “Thomas F. Eagleton, 77, a Running Mate for 18 Days, Dies,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 2007, A21

<sup>ii</sup> Mickey Splillane, quoted in *The New York Times*, July 23, 2006

<sup>iii</sup> Margalit Fox, “Ellen Willis, 64, Journalist and Feminist,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 10, 2006, A29

<sup>iv</sup> Douglas Martin, “Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., a Partisan Historian of Power, Is Dead at 89,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2007, A18

<sup>v</sup> Associated Press, “Robert T. Stafford, 93, Former Vermont Senator and Governor,” *The New York Times*, December 24, 2006, 23

<sup>vi</sup> Dennis Hevesi, “Momofuku Ando, 96, Dies; Invented Instant Ramen,” *The New York Times*

<sup>vii</sup> *The Week*, Jan. 26, 2007

<sup>viii</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, quoted in *USA Today*, April 13, 2007, 3E