“Fidelity – So Great A Cloud of Witnesses – 2016”

Sunday, January 8, 2017
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Many of us who watch television news programs and PBS, the Public Broadcasting Service, took note of the death of Gwen Ifil last November. At age 61, she was co-anchor and co-managing editor of The NewsHour (with Judy Woodruff) and died of uterine and breast cancer.

Gwen Ifil, a native of Jamaica, Queens, was an outstanding print and broadcast journalist having worked for The Baltimore Sun, The Washington Post, The New York Times, NBC News, and PBS among others and had moderated nationally televised Vice-Presidential debates and Presidential primary debates. She was a pioneer and the most successful black woman reporter ever at the time of her death.

As noted in one obituary,

At a peak moment of … [her] broadcasting power, soon after becoming co-anchor of “The NewsHour,” she told the Times:  “When I was a little girl watching programs like this – because that’s the kind of nerdy family we were – I would look up and not see anyone who looked like me in any way. No women. No people of color.

I’m very keen about the fact that a little girl now, watching the news, when they see me and Judy sitting side by side, it will occur to them that that’s perfectly normal – that it won’t seem like any big breakthrough at all.” (Washington Post, 11/14/16)

She once spoke about wanting to be a journalist since age 9: “I was very conscious of the world being this very crazed place that demanded explanation… I didn’t see a whole lot of people who looked like me doing it on television [but] you get used to being underestimated.”

In this interview, she added, “I got my first job by exceeding expectations.... This is the way it is. How do I get around it, get through it, surprise them?” (NY Times, 11/15/16)

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Curious, demanding, resilient, gracious, and gritty, Gwen Ifil lived with integrity and courage. Throughout those years, she displayed fidelity to matters bigger than herself… things like justice, equality, fairness, and freedom, defying those who would diminish her or others. And she found colleagues and support for her blessed journey.

Equally, a great a cloud of witnesses surrounds us throughout our days… [kindred spirits, strangers, partners, (antagonists are few I pray), those who like us are curious, freedom loving, and wonderfully created, only slightly lower than the angels.]

Each of us as pilgrims on this journey between our birth day and our death day…

This morning in turning to some of those who died in 2016, I return to a traditional text [Hebrews 12:1] that reads, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside any mistake that weighs upon us, and let us [too] run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

Thanks in abundance to all those whose lives inspire us in our peculiar and difficult times, who in voice and deed showed fidelity to deep values, and who just may give you strength and courage in your own choices.

[The list of the well-known, and less well-known, this year as every year, goes on and on: those who in ordinary ways made choices… who were like you and me, characters in a story of hope… who, like you and me, make a difference by the stories we write…. The lives we create….]

Out of so many, there are some that I turn to because of personal contact and special appreciation for the stories their lives tell.

Two who died in the past year visited our church. The first I turn to is Elie Wiesel – novelist, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Holocaust survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and determined witness to ongoing injustices. Rabbi Joel Goor of the Metropolitan Synagogue and I hosted Wiesel for a Yom Ha-Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance service, in 1985. A week prior to that, Wiesel had implored President Reagan to skip his planned stop in West Germany at Bitberg – a Nazi and SS military cemetery. Reagan further exacerbated the issue by affirming that the SS dead soldiers were “victims just as surely as those who died in concentration camps.”

In these days of moral consternation and confusion at presidential levels, I offer Elie Wiesel’s declaration:
We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim…. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant…

Wiesel died at age 87 last July 2, and his spirit lives.

Also, Jesuit priest and activist Daniel Berrigan visited here for various events and causes and shared his prophetic faith as a guest preacher. Many will be familiar with his anti-war activism beginning in the 1960s, his anti-nuclear protests with the Catonsville 9 (burning draft records) and the Ploughshares 8 who poured their own blood on warhead documents and damaged two nuclear warhead nose cones at a General Electric weapons production facility in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania.

I also benefitted greatly from Berrigan’s 1975 joint volume The Raft is not the Shore, a dialogue with Buddhist monk and anti-war activist Thich Nhat Hanh, as I learned much about activist spirituality as a Buddhist practice.

Daniel Berrigan affirmed some years ago the importance of finding balance. For him, his balance is his own, and his clarity is a model. Berrigan observed, “I work in a cancer hospital in New York. I go periodically to the Pentagon, break the law, and am shunted into court and into jail. I honor Paul’s admonition: ‘Be not conformed to this world.’ I like to translate the words in my own way: ‘Try to be as marginal as possible to madness.’”

Like Gwen Ifil, he early saw some of the craziness of the world and created his own path. Daniel Berrigan died at age 94 last April.

Another illuminating character with a story of hope died at age 106, with an obituary on the front-page of the NY Times for someone most of us had never heard of. Tyrus Wong, his Americanized name, was a Chinese American immigrant as a child, and an artist, discriminated against and marginalized for decades. As a modernist painter in the 1930s, his work was included in shows in 1932 and 1934 at the Art Institute of Chicago along with work by Picasso, Matisse, and Paul Klee.

As an animator at Disney studios, he eventually became the art director for the movie we know as “Bambi.” His spare yet lush designs reflected his familiarity with 1000-year-old Song Dynasty landscapes. He created a new aesthetic for the Disney films, both sparse and mysterious. He later worked for Warner Brothers, but did not
receive full recognition for films like Bambi until 2001, when he was named a Disney Legend on par with Julie Andrews.

His approach with his own children reflects his nurture of personal talent. Like his own father, who had taught him as a child, he first guided them in drawing and calligraphy and encouraged them to make art. However, he did not allow them to have coloring books. He observed that he did not want them constrained by lines that had been put on paper by others. *(NY Times, 1/1/17)*

Tyrus Wong died on December 30 at age 106.

Janet Reno, the first woman to serve as the Attorney General of the United States died in November at age 78. Her tenure included highly publicized and sometimes politicized issues, such as

- Prosecuting and convicting those who bombed the World Trade Center in 1993 and Tim McVeigh for bombing the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995;
- Filing anti-trust charges against Microsoft;
- Filing suits against US tobacco companies for knowingly hiding the health hazards that arise from smoking;
- Approving the federal raid on a compound in Waco, Texas that led to 70 deaths, in an attempt to arrest a cult leader;
- Approving an independent prosecutor to pursue the Whitewater investigations related to land purchases in Arkansas by Bill and Hillary Clinton, which led to uncovering the affair between Monica Lewinsky and President Bill Clinton;

Reno consistently sought to be independent, non-partisan, and fair although often unfairly attacked. Parodied sometimes on “Saturday Night Live” for not embracing gender stereotypes, for her height at 6’ 1” and for her lack of traditional femininity, she chose to appear on the show as part of occasional skits. She too was a pioneer, one of 16 women in a class of 500 students at Harvard Law School 55 years ago. At one point, she was described as an alligator wrestler when in high school in Florida, but that skill was her mother’s, not hers.

She was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 1995 while in office and died of complications last month.
One of the best known persons in the world, Mohammad Ali, died last June, at age 74 also from Parkinson’s complications, likely arising from blows to the head in a number of boxing matches when he was past his prime.

In addition to being voted the best heavyweight boxer of the 20th century (or for some, the 2nd best behind Joe Louis), he was an activist, entertainer, and humanitarian. Born Cassius Clay, he took the name Mohammad Ali when he became a Black Muslim in 1964 with Malcolm X as one of his mentors. He was stripped of his title as World Champion when he was convicted for refusing induction into the Army because he was religiously a conscientious objector, a conviction that was later overturned. He later embraced the Sunni path of Islam, and then later became a Sufi.

He loved the spotlight and was both inspiring and polarizing as he followed his own heart, conscience, and racial pride. Among his honors was an honorary degree from Princeton University.

A few other sports figures of great renown who died last year are Gordie Howe (Mr. Hockey) at age 88; Pat Summit, University of Tennessee women's basketball coach, with more wins than anyone else, at age 64 from early onset Alzheimer’s; and Nate Thurmond, NBA star, one of only four players to have a quadruple-double – and what’s that? Scoring 10 or more points, having ten or more assists, ten or more rebounds, and having 10 or more blocks, or 10 or more steals in one game; it is a measure of skill on both offense and defense – excellence and balance. He was 74.

As always… so many entertainers, musicians, actors… for example, Leonard Cohen and Debbie Reynolds, whom we include in our music this morning… and Prince, and Paul Kantner (of Jefferson Airplane)... so many … and we each have our favorites.

I am also fond of inventors, creative types who make special contributions. I lift up Dr. Denton Cooley, the Texas heart and thoracic surgeon involved in the first full artificial heart implant. My father and Denton Cooley completed their cardiac surgical residencies at about the same time at Johns Hopkins Hospital including saving “blue babies” – infants with congenital heart defects. Cooley died at age 96.

Another physician involved in artificial heart design was Henry Heimlich, who is best known for the Heimlich maneuver using abdominal thrusts to stop gagging. He too was 96. I might add that, once upon a time at Sarge’s Deli, I used it on a nearby customer who was in distress gagging. It worked!

Perhaps, like me you were unaware of the contributions of Vera Rubin, an astronomer whose observations and calculations more than 50 years ago proposed
crazy notions like “dark matter” that affects the rotation of galaxies. Rejected and at
times scorned as a woman in a male preserve, she has changed the way we look at the
universe.

As the first woman with permission to use the Palomar Observatory in California
in 1963, upon arrival she was welcomed with the news that there was not a ladies
bathroom for her. Her response? She went to her room, cut a tiny skirt out of paper,
and placed the cutout on the male figure on the door of the men’s bathroom. And
announced that the problem was solved!

She died on Christmas Day at age 88.

With a fondness for coffee-to-go, I note also the passing at age 84 of Robert
Hulseman, who helped create the Traveler’s coffee cup lid for take-out coffee, widely in
use and included in the Museum of Modern Art. Others appreciate his introduction of
red Solo drinking cups.

One more courageous, brave, noble soul for this morning of the many who
remain unmentioned:

Lawrence Manley Colburn died at age 67. In 1968, he was an 18-year-old door
gunner for a US Army helicopter on mission in My Lai, South Vietnam. He and the pilot
from the air observed dozens of apparently dead civilians in trenches and burning
buildings with troops on the ground shooting the not yet dead.

Having landed, the pilot Hugh Thompson confronted the Sergeant in charge, and
then 2nd Lieutenant William Calley, who tried to ignore them explaining they were
completing their job. Continuing their flight over the village area, the pilot Hugh
Thompson saw US soldiers chasing ten or so civilian Vietnamese preparing to kill them.

Realizing that the soldiers intended to murder the Vietnamese, Thompson again landed his aircraft between them and the villagers. Thompson turned to Colburn and crew chief [Glenn] Andreotta and told them that if the Americans began shooting at the villagers or him, they
should fire their M60 machine guns at the Americans: “Yall cover me! If
these bastards open up on me or these people, you open up on them.
Promise me!” Colburn (whose M60 faced 2nd Platoon) replied, “You got it
boss, consider it done.”

1 Would Mr. Colburn have fired at his fellow Americans?
“How could I ever be prepared for something like that?” he replied years later. “Would I have? I guess
that’s the $64,000 question, isn’t it?” Seymour M. Hersh, the independent journalist who later uncovered

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The out of control soldiers backed down.

Initially the military successfully covered up the massacre at My Lai of between 347 and possibly more than 500 unarmed civilians – men, women and children, with women having been gang-raped and mutilated. Eventually it was exposed although only Lt. Calley was convicted, sentenced, and confined for his actions.

Exactly thirty years later, in 1998, Colburn and Thompson were awarded the Soldier’s Medal, the United States Army’s highest award for bravery not involving direct contact with the enemy. At the same time, a posthumous medal was also awarded to Andreotta. [Then-Major General Michael Ackerman said at the 1998 ceremony:] "It was the ability to do the right thing even at the risk of their personal safety that guided these soldiers to do what they did." The three "set the standard for all soldiers to follow." Additionally on March 10, 1998, Senator Max Cleland (D-GA) entered a tribute to Thompson, Colburn, and Andreotta into the record of the U.S. Senate. Cleland said the three men were, "true examples of American patriotism at its finest.” Wikipedia: “Lawrence Colburn”

Lawrence Colburn was with his pilot Hugh Thompson at his death in 2006 age 62, and Colburn died at age 67 three weeks ago.

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So great a cloud of witnesses; these are just a few, and you carry your own favorites….

Is there a uniting theme? Who are these witnesses? Despite their varying degrees of success, and their particular talents and skills, they seem to be much like you and me.

And who are we? Who are you?

Are you are a child of a blessed Creation, perhaps yea, even God? At the very least, which is so grand, are you are a child of integrity and kindness?

the My Lai massacre, said of Mr. Colburn in a phone interview on Friday that “for a door gunner in Vietnam to point his machine gun at an American officer” under those circumstances “was in the greatest tradition of American integrity.” ( NY Times, obituary by Sam Roberts, 12/16/16)
Isn’t that so much of our calling… to be just that – to honor our gifts and potential and to live with honor and integrity? (Thanks to Rev. B. Pescan)

Isn’t that the simple truth? This great a cloud of witnesses includes you, me, all of us.

We belong to each other as we write our stories. Keeping faith amid even heartache and confusion… praising Life, this stunning gift…saying/singing “Hallelujah” in times whether bitter or sweet.

Thanks be to those who have lived with fidelity to a few deep things, signing the air with their honor… so great a cloud of witnesses who continue to live in us, just as we hope to live on in others.

Readings

(1) This morning the first reading comes from Huston Smith’s autobiography – Tales of Wonder – Adventures Chasing the Divine. As a truly pioneering scholar of the world’s religions, the San Francisco Chronicle called him the “Rock Star of Religions” at age 90. He wrote 15 books and received 12 honorary degrees. In 1996, Bill Moyers devoted a 5-part PBS special to Smith’s life and work, ”The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith.” Smith himself produced three series for public television. He died on December 30 at age 97.

He concludes Tales of Wonder speculating about various “last lines”:

A playwright, I can only suppose, fusses over the last line, the one that will bring the curtain down. My last line – how typical of me – is not one but three closing lines as I postpone the curtain, unable to choose which is best.

First close: I echo the British author Elizabeth Pakenham (mother of novelist Antonia Fraser), whose last words were “How interesting, how very interesting it has all been.”

Second close: My second last line is actually an observation. The older I get, the more the boundary between me and not-me thins and becomes transparent. I look back upon the paths I have traveled and think, This is me. I look across the table at Kendra, my wife of sixty-five years, and
think, This is me. I feel my hip replacement and think, This is me. The childish *oneself versus other* becomes the mature *oneself and other* [which] becomes, finally, *oneself as other*.

*Third close:* I can choose my favorite closing, after all. It is borrowed from the martyr Saint John Chrysostom, who while being drawn and quartered was said to have exclaimed “Praise, praise for everything. Thanks, thanks for it all.” I savor the words in my mind, roll them on my tongue, and repeat them as my own: *Thanks for everything! Praise for it all!*

(2) “My Friend Leonard Cohen: Darkness and Praise” – Leon Wieseltier, *NY Times*, 11/14/16

Cultural critic Leon Wieseltier wrote about his friend Leonard Cohen shortly after Cohen’s death in November at age 82:

…. He (Cohen) lived in a weather of wisdom, which he created by seeking it rather than by finding it. He swam in beauty, because in its transience he aspired to discern a glimpse of eternity: There was always a trace of philosophy in his sensuality. He managed to combine a sense of absurdity with a sense of significance, a genuine feat. He was hospitable and strict, sweet and deep, humble and grand, probing and tender, a friend of melancholy but an enemy of gloom, a voluptuary with religion, a renegade enamored of tradition.

Leonard was, above all, in his music and in his poems and in his tone of life, the lyrical advocate of the finite and the flawed.

He also reports that some time ago, his elementary age son wrote to Leonard Cohen:

“Dear Uncle Leonard,” the email from the boy began. “Did anything inspire you to create ‘Hallelujah’?”

Later that same winter day the reply arrived: “I wanted to stand with those who clearly see G-d’s holy broken world for what it is, and still find the courage or the heart to praise it. You don’t always get what you want. You’re not always up for the challenge. But in this case – it was given to me. For which I am deeply grateful.”