

Three to Remember

In my pre-teen years this was the weekend when the summer began for me. School was out by Memorial Day, and I headed off for nearly three months to the small farm where my grandfather, along with an aunt and two uncles, lived outside of a small Ohio River town. I've know I've already told several stories about that place and time in my life.

In some years the hand-off from my West Virginia home to my Ohio home took place at a reunion that was held at a little country church out in the back country of West Virginia where my father had grown up. The families who lived in that "holler", as it was called—as well as the ones who, like my family, still had ties there even if they'd moved away—would gather on the Sunday afternoon of the Memorial Day weekend to catch up on their lives, and eat a lot of food since everyone brought a dish to share.

Since the gathering was being held in and around a church, it often happened that a few preachers would show up to do a little holding forth. At some point those who had gathered would assemble in the church for a few rounds of preaching. It was all part of the day's activities.

As the day wound down I would take my small suitcase from my parent's car and put it in an uncle's car and head off for Ohio where I would stay until the Labor Day weekend.

In addition to bringing food, many of the people who came to the reunion would bring flowers. There was a small cemetery up on a hill about a half mile from the church where many of the relatives and friends of those at the reunion were buried. Part of the day's activities included bringing your flowers up to the cemetery to decorate the graves of family members or friends who had passed away. In fact, the Holiday itself was originally called Decoration Day.

So while Decoration Day, which was later renamed Memorial Day, was created to honor persons who had lost their lives in war—and we just observed that aspect of it—my earliest memories of the Holiday are of it's being a time of remembrance; a time for sharing stories among those who came to the reunion, a time to talk about old times, and a time to remember people close to us who had

passed away. It is my recalling that spirit of remembrance, from those reunions, that has me sharing with you today—in something of a change of pace sermon for me—some of my recollections of three people who played a very significant role in my own life journey.

One of the two uncles with whom I spent my summers who did not attend the reunions was my Uncle Don. You've heard me speak of him already. The reason Don gave for missing the reunions was that he had to wrap things up at the high school where he taught history and civics in a small town near Cincinnati. That was probably true, but I also suspect it was because he didn't care for the preaching. Unlike my father, one of Uncle Don's brothers, Don did not do church or religion. He wasn't hostile to such things; church and religion were just not a part of his life.

The summers I spent with my Uncle Don—along with the other Ohio relatives—were something of a contrast to the strong religious atmosphere in my West Virginia home. That aura was largely due to the influence of my father—a Deacon in our local Baptist church. My father was a good, and very hard-working man, who cared deeply for his family. His formal education went to the eighth grade. Uncle Don—the youngest of his siblings—had gone to college and taught high school. He was the one, along with an Aunt—his sister—who taught me how to live a life of the mind in the summers we had together. My father, Gordon, loved my mother and their four children—my sisters and me. My Uncle Don and his sister, my Aunt Leota, happened to be in a position to offer me something my father was not in as much of a position to do. And Don was a bachelor with no family to raise.

About once a week Don would take me down to the little town library and have me check out 3 or 4 books geared for whatever age I happened to be—fiction and non-fiction. Most of the non-fiction ones had to do with American history—the high school subject Don taught. He and my Aunt Leota would discuss the books with me, probing me to find out what I'd learned by reading them. I was essentially “home-schooled” during those summers without it being called that. I had my run of the little farm as well—playing in the woods and splashing in a creek and planting my own gardens—even while Don taught me to how to exercise my mind.

Later, during my junior and senior high school years—and with my Ohio summers in the rear view mirror by then—Don would arrange for me to take a train to Cincinnati one weekend every spring. We would go to Cincinnati Reds games at the old Crosley Field and spend time at his “bachelor pad” in the town of Lebanon, Ohio. We would discuss some of my high school studies—especially the books I was reading for my English classes. I would later enter college as an English major, in part due to Don’s influence.

In addition to the life of the mind he gave me, Don also taught me all about baseball—that was another of our bonds. I’ve probably attended around three hundred games at Fenway Park since coming to Nashua, and scarcely one of those games goes by that I don’t at least at one point think of Don and me sitting in the stands of Crosley Field as he explained to me many of the nuances of the game of baseball as it was being played on the field in front of us.

Don married late in life, and he and his wife had twin daughters. When their girls were around ten years old Don fell off the roof of their home while doing some kind of home repair. He took a blow to the head on their patio, from which—very tragically—he did not recover. By then my wife and I were living in Maine where I was serving a UU church. His wife, my Aunt Tonda, asked if I would come to Lebanon, Ohio to conduct his memorial service. Needless to say, it was one of the toughest funerals I’ve ever done; but I was honored to honor the life of someone who had touched my life in such significant ways.

It was during my sophomore year of college that I met the second member of our trilogy for today. His name was Corky—Corky King. He was a campus minister at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia which I entered in the fall of 1963, and graduated from in the spring of 1967. Nearly every minister I’d known, up to the time I entered Marshall, was referred to as “Reverend” So-and-so. And now here was a minister who didn’t mind being called “Rev. King”, but preferred Corky.

I entered Marshall with the intention of becoming a minister pretty much in the model of the minister of the evangelical Baptist church in which I’d been raised. Even with all I got from Don, the impact of that church and its minister—along with my home environment—steered me into the ministry as characterized by a conservative and evangelical brand of Christianity.

In my sophomore year I began hanging around a place called the Campus Christian Center. It was just adjacent to the Marshall campus. As I soon discovered, the Center did not espouse the same kind of Christianity I'd known up to that point. The campus ministers there, including this guy Corky, were religious liberals who were somewhere out on the left wing, both theologically and politically, of Protestant Christianity. I think they were put there by their denominations as a place where they could do the least harm!

At first I was pretty put off, and even offended, by the kind of Christianity they held to. But as I found my faith being challenged on a number of fronts in many of my college classes (no time to get into the details of all that here) I found myself being drawn to Corky to help me navigate the choppy spiritual waters I found myself in.

If Don had given me the tools for critical thinking, Corky taught me how to use them when it came to matters of religion and theology. He showed me how there were other ways to read the Bible than the near literal one I had. He showed me how to appreciate Christianity in concert with other world religions rather than in opposition to them. I learned to take an interfaith perspective on matters of religion instead of a my-religion-against-the-world stance with which I'd been raised. I came to value my conversations with Corky as much as the ones I'd been having with Don—and when I told Don about how my religious perspectives were changing, he seemed pleased.

Corky was also an activist. He helped me see the link between what people like Martin Luther King and William Sloan Coffin and the Berrigan brothers were doing, and their faith stances. Corky got a coffee house going in one of the rooms of the Campus Christian Center, and he brought in “local folkies” who introduced me to the songs of Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs and Joan Baez and Judy Collins and many others of that genre.

As I've said on other occasions, while my life has been through numerous transformations since I graduated college forty years ago, I still consider the four years I spent at Marshall as the four most singularly transformative ones of my life in terms of where my thinking was when I entered and where it was when I graduated. And I owe a lot of that transformation to Rev. Corky King.

The last time I saw Corky was shortly after I'd begun my own career in the ministry. He had left the ministry by then to become a psychologist. He was still living in Huntington at the time which was where I visited him. I recently found an on-line reference to an award he received in 2015. He had 10-12 years on me. He may well still be among the living, but I can't say for sure. In any case I remember him with gratitude, and will close the Corky part of this sermon with this story:

Just over ten years ago a movie came out called *We Are Marshall*. Much of it was filmed on the Marshall campus, made to look as it did in 1970-71—a few years after I'd graduated. It was about how the campus and the City of Huntington had to pull itself back together after the Marshall football team, along with all but one of its coaching staff, as well as several prominent citizens of Huntington, were killed in a plane crash on the flight home after a game in North Carolina. I knew one of the players who was on the plane.

In the movie about this tragedy Matthew McConaughey played the coach, Jack Lengyl, who was hired to rebuild the football team. Matthew Fox played Red Dawson, the surviving member of the coaching staff who had driven home from North Carolina to make a recruiting visit rather than taking the plane. There is a very moving scene where McConaughey's Jack Lengyl is trying to persuade Fox's Red Dawson to stay on the coaching staff, while Dawson just wants to leave coaching and put the whole horrible incident behind him.

I don't know how this decision was made, but that scene was filmed in the chapel the Campus Christian Center with McConaughey and Fox sitting next to one another in one of the pews. I had to see the movie a second time to even hear the dialogue in that scene. All I could see of that scene, the first time I saw it, was the very same room where Corky King and I had had so many of our conversations, and where I'd listened to a number of Corky's sermons that had so greatly challenged my religious world view. It was stunning what all of that scene brought back for me—and it had nothing to do with the actors who were playing it. It was the setting itself.

On this note, then, we move to the third member of the trilogy. It's another minister, in fact, and his name is Max. Max is still alive—in body. I've learned that he's in the latter stages of Alzheimer's. A fellow minister who sees him from time to time told me that if I were to visit Max now he wouldn't know me.

Rev. Max Gaebler was the minister of the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin for 35 years. Its building sits near the home campus of the University of Wisconsin and was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Max was someone I turned to at yet another pivotal point in my life, and at a time when he didn't even know me.

We're up to the mid-70s now. Following Corky's example I'd become a campus minister myself after attending and graduating from a very liberal mainline Protestant theological school. I was on the campus of the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point—about 100 miles north of Madison. And I hit another crises of faith. It was similar to the one at Marshall but on a different level.

I came to realize that, religiously and theologically and spiritually speaking, I was feeling constricted by even the most liberal interpretations of Christianity; and that I could no longer, in good faith, represent—as a minister—even its most liberalized expressions. I had not become anti-Christian in any way. I just knew it was time to move on.

The question was: Move on to what? Well, I could be a therapist; kinda like what Corky did. So I got myself accepted into an MSW program at the University of Wisconsin at Madison as a way of pursuing that option. But I really liked the ministry. Maybe I should check out these Unitarian Universalists and see if I might fit in there as one of their ministers. So sometime before leaving Stevens Point I made to trip to Madison to scout out the UUs.

I found a Madison phone directory. You do remember phone directories. They had yellow pages and white pages. In the Madison yellow pages, in the Church section, was a little block ad for the First Unitarian Society. It named the minister: Rev. Max Gaebler. Next stop was the white pages. There was a home phone number for Max and Caroline Gaebler.

Looking back I can't quite believe how brassy I was. I dialed the number. Max answered the phone. He didn't know me from Adam. I made my pitch: I'm a campus minister up in Stevens Point. I'm considering a switch to the UU ministry. Can I come and see you and talk about it?

I'll cherish Max's response for the rest of my life. He acted like this complete stranger, who had rung up his home phone, had made his day. After a few more minutes of conversation he was actually showing enthusiasm about my becoming a UU minister.

We met a couple weeks later on a subsequent trip I made to Madison. Max gave me the view for 30,000 feet of the UUA and the UU ministry. He put me in touch with the powers that be (or were) in Boston at that time to get my credentials moved from the American Baptists to the UUs. But above and beyond all that he took a real interest in what had brought me to the point where I was at that time—and what my hopes and aspirations for the UU ministry were.

I decided to pursue my MSW studies at UW Madison just to keep that possibility alive. And when I made the move to Madison—with the woman I would later marry I should add—Max even gave me a job. He got a grant to fund a UU campus ministry program out of the Madison Unitarian Society—and he hired me for the job. He became both my mentor and my supervisor.

After one year in Madison, I knew the UU ministry was my next step. I left the MSW program. With Max's help I got a half-time campus ministry position at the University of Illinois, which was run out of the UU church there in Champagne-Urbana. While I was there I got myself fully credentialed as a UU minister, and moved on to my first settlement up in Rockland, Maine. And the rest, as they say...

Would I have made it into the UU ministry had I not met Max? Well, probably. But the important thing is that I found someone who believed in me just at the time when I needed it, and who helped show me the way into the next phase of my life. We kept in touch over the years. Max and Caroline took summer vacations in Maine during my ministry in Rockland, and they made it a point to come through town so we could have lunch and catch up on our lives.

I last saw Max about ten years ago when I drove up from Chicago where I was on sabbatical as the minister in residence at the UU seminary there in Hyde Park. Caroline had become quite frail by then and Max had become her caretaker. She died shortly thereafter. Now someone, I presume, is a caretaker for Max in the closing stage of his life.

There are any number of ways we can measure success in our lives; most of them having to do with the things we achieve by way of career and family—by what we accumulate and what we have to show for ourselves. That’s all well and good and even necessary. Indeed, they are among the yardsticks for success that I use.

But when I probe a bit deeper as to what it means to live a successful life I think about people like Uncle Don and Corky and Max. They each had their measure of worldly success, for which—I trust—they were rightfully proud. But the true measure of our lives is about how we touch and guide and nurture the lives of others as we are given opportunity to do so. That is what the three people I’ve spoken of today did for me. I can only hope I may have done the same for others.

I leave you then, on this Memorial Day Sunday, with the words of Maya Angelou that are on the cover of today’s Order of Service: “People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.” Much of the preciseness of the words and interactions I had with the three folks I’ve mentioned has faded—but their impact, my recalling of how they made me feel, remains as strong as ever.

We need those who will guide our feet and hold our hands and search our hearts as we run our race. Let us be mindful of them on this day.

Stephen Edington
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