

WENDY WHITE'S EULOGY
"A well lived life"

7/16/10
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What words do I use to break the silence and speak for this life we are here to remember?

Our words are normally spoken to each other and in a world filled with a future.

But today I speak words out of silence and to the absence of one we love and admire.

Few of us know or want to know how to do this. Wendy knew that this would be difficult for me, so knowing her as we do, what do you guess she did? She helped me choose what to say.

The Eulogy

I can feel the silence, can you? I can experience the absence, do you? We are here to fill this vacuum with good words about our beloved Wendy, for that is what a eulogy is: literally 'good words'.

But you know Wendy! This would embarrass her. Norb, I want you to speak good words, but not about me—eulogize my family and friends.

So I am here not only to speak 'good words' about her, but to speak 'good words' from her to each of you.

Wendy was certainly a 'grace', a gift to all of us, but what she would want to say to all of you is how you graced her life. She often said to me, "Norb, tell them that story about 'grits'. It is for me a parable."

The parable

When I came to Arkansas in the mid seventies, a Yankee no less, I went to breakfast at a local mom and pop diner. I ordered bacon, eggs and whole wheat toast. When my order arrived I saw this glob of white stuff on the plate---so I said: "What is that white stuff? I didn't order that." To which this tall blonde waitress replied, "Honey, them is grits. You don't order grits. They just come." And Wendy would giggle all over. "This is the story of my life. I have been graced by so many, who came into my life as surprises---unexpected, undeserved. What we in the Christian Tradition call 'grace'. Tell my parents, my sister and brother, and all my friends----you are my grits."

Norb, she said, we walk among such miracle moments, graced moments everyday but seldom take note of them---until they are gone. Learn to open your eyes and see the splendor of what is, both good and bad. She was no Pollyanna.

And I remember her pausing and saying emphatically: “And, Norb, this often means experiencing the pain that comes from seeing clearly just what is.” She knew this pain and she did not flinch. (It is interesting to me that the word “to mean” comes from the same root as “to moan”. Meaning does not come easy.)

Her honesty allowed so much to appear and be acknowledged. One afternoon she came into my office and we spent the afternoon responding to what she had thought about and written on a scratch pad. Now listen to this, from a college sophomore: “There is a dread of what is happening to our future that stays on the fringes of awareness, too deep to name and too fearsome to face.” If you are honest, this is a thought all of us have had.

Wow! She had what is called ‘lucid perception’. Her honesty allowed her to be content in the world, “Norb, this is just the way it is,” but not content with the world, “Norb, this is not the way it ought to be.” She raged against the coming of the night and then spent time with me reflecting on the phenomenon ‘rage’. “Norb, help me see it, allow it to come out and acknowledge it.”

There just was nothing that came at her that she did not want to see for what it was, whether good or bad. She loved the line from Keats in which he said, “Don’t let anything be unacknowledged.” Isn’t this what you felt when you were with her---recognized, acknowledged for who you are? Aristotle said that a ‘flourishing’ human being is one who welcomes what comes into one’s life. She could talk about ‘absurdity’ as insightfully as she could talk about ‘love.’ And so she lived a rich and full life because she allowed so much to appear to her discerning mind and open heart.

I have favorite places where I like to go to be refreshed, stimulated, inspired, (Don’t you?) places that wrap around me so that I feel secure and where I can be and do my best. My memories of Wendy are such a place.

Wendy would say to you today, “I know that many of you are sad because you know there was so much I wanted to do and experience, but never got the chance. But let me speak to you. How should a life be evaluated? By what you have, what you get? Some people are lucky and get most of what they want and we say of them: Wow! She lived well, meaning Wow, how lucky she was. And a lot of people are clearly more lucky than me. But such a life is at the mercy of what happens to you,” she said.

There is a difference between a life that goes well because of what one gets by fate, luck, or grace and one that is lived well, a life exhibiting the virtues we identify with a good human being. Having a good life is dependent on external considerations; being a good human being is dependent on your character, your virtue. (The word ‘virtue’ literally means ‘efficiency at’. A virtuous person is one who is efficient at being human, as Wendy was.)

And I would say to Wendy today what I often said to her, “Such a life fills me with awe, Wendy---as yours does, a well lived life.” See the difference?

For what does a good life, a well lived life exhibit? Can you tell me what the virtues of a well lived life are? She could and she would tell you straight out. I hear her say: “ Norb, here they are:

Honesty Don’t say more than what is warranted. Let what is appear. Nothing is hidden, just not noticed, and her honesty allowed her to see so much.

Courage Don’t we all need a lot of this?

Compassion “How can I not feel compassion for all that is? After all, I know what suffering and pain is.”

And the Christian virtues, Norb

Faith A trust that who I am and what I did is not lost.

Hope That on some level we can make things better.

Love To will the others physical and spiritual growth.

(Much of the Bible mistranslates the Aramaic word for “love” when it should be “share”. Sharing all that you have is the commandment and one that Wendy was willing to follow. “Share” is an action word that involves an imperative to do something for the other, even if we don’t love or approve of that other. Wendy understood this distinction.)

Norb, what are those words that you love from Reinhold Niebuhr?

You mean:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.

Yes, Norb, and say to everyone present: Keep the faith in such a vision. Keep the hope for a future full of surprises for the Common Good and keep the love we have for each other that can make this future possible. In this faith, hope and love, we are not alone.

We all have what we will remember of her. For me it will be her passion to do it all, her rage at what was denied her and in spite of it all, exhibiting a well lived life. She fills me with awe at her huge capacity to take it as it came to her, a beautiful well lived life. Good startles us when we see it. It is unexpected. Wendy startled me from the first day I met her.

And now her life enters the all of IT, forever what it was---it now is there forever.

But Wendy wants to fill the silence we feel today with her final words.

Norb, I hope that I will be able to say this to my parents, my sister, my brother and to all of my family and friends before I die, but if not, will you say it for me? (I should have included all the medical people who gave so much to her.)

Norb: “Sure, and what is that?”

Wendy: It is this: “All of you, you have been so good to me. You have graced my life. You are my ‘grits’. I didn’t order all of you, but you came unexpected and undeserved.”

And those words we read together, Norb, from the Christian Mystic Meister Eckhart,

“If the only prayer you said in your whole life was ‘thank you,’ that would be sufficient.”

From Wendy to all of you: “Thank You”

REST IN PEACE, WENDY. YOU LIVED A WELL LIVED LIFE!

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