

Readings 8/30/09

Senator Edward Kennedy gave a speech to the 1978 Democratic Convention in Memphis TN where he said these words:

. . . "One of the most shameful things about modern America is that in our unbelievably rich land, the quality of health care available to many of our people is unbelievably poor, and the cost is unbelievably high.

That is why national health insurance is the great unfinished business on the agenda of the Democratic Party. Our party gave Social Security to the nation in the 1930's. We gave Medicare to the nation in the 1960's. And we can bring national health insurance to the nation in the 1970's.

One of the saddest ironies in the worldwide movement for social justice in the twentieth century is that America now stands virtually alone in the international community on national health insurance. It seems that every nation is out of step but Uncle Sam. With the sole exception of South Africa, no other industrial nation in the world leaves its citizens in fear of financial ruin because of illness.

A generation after Franklin Roosevelt set the noble goals of freedom from want and freedom from fear, large numbers of Americans are deprived of decent health care and are fearful of the bills they may be forced to pay. For a very few, for whom the need is least, we have already made a start on national health insurance.

We've got national health-insurance for the rich, who deduct the cost of major illness on their income tax returns. And the richer you are, the higher the percentage of your health bill you can charge to the IRS.

We've got national health insurance for members of the Senate and House of Representatives. They give their speeches and cast their votes in Congress. And then they go out to Walter Reed Army Hospital or Bethesda Naval Hospital for the free medical and dental care that Uncle Sam provides.

That isn't fair. If national health insurance is good enough for the wealthy and good enough for Congress, then it is good enough for every American citizen in every city, town and village and on every farm throughout this land.

There are some who say we cannot afford national health insurance. They say it has become an early casualty of the war against inflation. But the truth is, we cannot afford not to have national health insurance.

Health care in 1978 has become the fastest-growing failing business in America. Costs are out of control. If we do nothing, if all we do is drift with the present system, the cost of health care in America will climb from \$175 billion this year to \$250 billion in 1981.

The rising cost of health is not just a crisis that afflicts the poor and helpless. It has hit the suburbs, too. Millions of middle income citizens face the Hobson's choice of cutting back on health or other family needs."¹

1. http://tedkenedy.org/ownwords/event/1978_health_care

Remembering Ted Kennedy: How a 1968 Speech Comforted an 8 Year-Old

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On April 7 1968, Ted Kennedy gave a speech to the Alaska Democratic Convention days after Martin Luther King's assassination, on the subject of civil rights.

I was 8 years old and living in Attleboro at the time. Lessons at school stopped and we sat watching television coverage for days. My dad was a minister who had recently run afoul of the local powers that be after an African American doctor tried to move into our neighborhood and the residents came together to pressure the homeowner into refusing to sell the house to him. My dad got upset and formed a commission to "help make it easier for black people to move to Attleboro." The church let him know that his services would probably be better applied elsewhere.

We left Attleboro for Seattle and my dad left the ministry two months after Kennedy gave this speech. I wasn't quite old enough to understand all that was going on, but as I watched the television and listened to Ted Kennedy speak in the days following the King assassination, he helped me to resolve what had happened, and what was going to happen in an important and deeply affecting way that shaped my outlook for the rest of my life. He comforted all of the 8 year-olds in that classroom, and helped me to understand why we were being uprooted and ejected from the community. He let me know that in his own way my dad had done something remarkable, especially for someone who hailed from rural Tennessee.

My dad was a pretty modest guy who never really boasted about his accomplishments. He died when I was a teenager. It wasn't until after his death that I learned he had been in the Ph.D program at Boston University with Martin Luther King in the early 50s.²

2. <http://firedoglake.com/2009/08/27/remembering-ted-kennedy-how-a-1968-speech-comforted-an-8-year-old/>

Summer Gleanings

Rev. Deborah Mero

August 30, 2009

UFWC

All summer as we welcomed new kittens into our house and did some traveling to various places I tried to do so mindfully, thinking of this day and my intention to share my gleanings with you. The purpose of time away is to recharge, learn new things, have time for deep insights. As I began to write them down over the last two days I realized that my mind kept wandering to and focusing on the loss this past week of a man who was my Senator for 20 years or so. I couldn't keep myself from watching his memorial service on Friday night and the funeral yesterday. It was a rite of passage for me and for the country that I did not want to miss. Last year as he addressed his party's nominating convention and was visibly weakened I made the observation to my husband that the country has never seen a Kennedy age and it was apparent that his days were waning. Yet even at that, he was a force, larger than life. In the midst of my task of organizing my gleanings I realized that this moment in history was far more relevant than I would have imagined. The public mourning and tributes took over my time and my thoughts and as I watched, they made me aware of what I had needed and found in ways small and large as the summer passed. I had not quite tuned into those feelings until this week. The word that did not present itself but was subliminally always there was "hope." Hope has been something I've felt a lack of many times over the past several months, but in hearing the tributes, one after another honoring the man who served me, the people of Massachusetts, the country, and dare I say, the world over the past 47 years through challenge and tragedy, hope was the thread that kept weaving itself through every every story, through every reading whether it was actually said or not. For the first time in a long time, the word liberal, a hope filled word, was used unapologetically to describe a man who did so much for so many. Though he was my senator in Massachusetts he really was so much more. This past week has shown us as much.

One of the readings this morning was written this past Thursday by my friend Jane. Jane is a preacher's kid from Massachusetts, American Baptist, I think. She's shared that part of her story with me before. She also shared with me and with her online readers a sermon her father wrote back in the late 1960's which put hippies in a positive light and encouraged his flock to be "turned on" to God and to the humanity of one another. The sermon, she said, "probably helped him out the door" of the church he was serving. But the story about her as an uprooted eight year old was new. Posted with the story was a recently found film of an address Ted Kennedy gave in Sitka Alaska just following the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. His brother Bobby was supposed to go to Sitka but as Atty. General he needed to attend to the riots that were breaking out after King's shooting so Teddy went instead. It is a stunning piece of archived film that shows Senator Ted Kennedy at his best. Upon the murder of the civil rights icon, he was unsparing in his words:

"What has become of our land? What disease has affected us as a people? How many good men must we give? A common man of the street, holder of a noble prize, and even a President of the United States, before we face the fact that the weakness of our society is the weakness in ourselves within each and every one of us who are complacent, who are doing well who realize the comforts of material gains and who are above all else apathetic? Where is the moral strength within us, the qualities of character that we attribute in stories to our children of the American heroes that have gone before us? I for one do not feel that we are any less than our forebears. I for one, do not feel that there is anyone within this room who has less courage less conviction or is any less dedicated to the American dream than generations past.

But I do feel that in a few short years we have let events master us rather than we them. I do feel that in our great history we have fallen into a lapse. We have refused, each and

every one of us, to exercise the talent and character bred into us, and as a result in a land that was created on the Judeo-Christian ideals of love and brotherhood we let the haters take the lead and we are paying that price today as we have paid for it many days and nights in this difficult decade.

it is not until we recognize that hundreds of years of oppression must be accommodated not by the least we can give but by the utmost we can give, will these nights of sadness and fear end. It is not the bigot among us who has brought us to where we are for men of goodwill ignore him It is not the racist among us who has brought our society so low because it is easy to see and discount him. We are where we are because all of us are passing through life with our own personal blinders on. We favor civil rights bills and feel a warm glow in our heart when we hear the eloquence of a Martin Luther King. We cluck our tongues over the agitators in the streets and call them outside troublemakers or ne'er do wells. In essence we are all decent men and women of good faith and we are all very busy with our careers and with our families. All too busy with our own concerns to fight injustice to fight poverty and to fight ill will in the immediate world around us.

As a United States Senator my message to you today is very simple. we only delude and mislead ourselves if we feel that we lift a personal burden from our shoulder if we feel that passing a decent piece of legislation, important as that is, if we feel that legislation can be our only response to our fellow men who are deprived. Beyond that I would say that no matter how the most difficult questions of Vietnam are, no matter how we meet the future challenges in the middle east, no matter how strong the controls we develop over the horror of atomic weapons, and no matter how we face the domestic problems of health for the poor, education for our young, and decent housing and better roads for the more distant parts of America. No matter how well we do these things they will only be the epitaph of a great nation that could not bind its own wounds within itself and as a result lost itself.

If laws do not meet the need, and they don't;
 If speeches will not meet the need and they won't
 If marches and demonstrations won't meet the need and they won't
 Where are we to turn?

We can only turn to ourselves. For in a moment of national crisis such as we are experiencing now that is all that is left. Men in public life to be true to themselves must be more candid with whomever they speak regardless of the political consequences. Our ministers, our priests, our rabbis must be more relevant in social sermons with their flock no matter how many unhappy people they will make. Our educational institutions and our teachers must see to it that America's young are not shielded from the realities of their society but are educated to meet the challenges that will soon be theirs.

And in our homes as parents we have our own responsibility to wipe away cynicism and to introduce the understanding that we wish to see future generations exercise so they will not suffer as their mothers and fathers have suffered."³

The nation was in the midst of crises little different from the ones we face today with the war in Vietnam raging, poverty, income disparity, and racial strife and violence. His message of rising to the challenge of changing our hearts and souls is every bit as necessary now as it was then.

3. transcribed from video: <http://tpmtv.talkingpointsmemo.com/?id=3286050>

A scant two months later, Ted Kennedy was called upon to give the eulogy at his brother Bobby's funeral just as Bobby had given the eulogy for Martin Luther King, Jr. He understood the challenges facing our country better than most and throughout his life he reached out to build bridges, to forge relationships and find ways of making life more decent for working class people. It was impossible to know at the time that the words Ted Kennedy spoke about his brother were words that could so easily be applied to his life as well. Many of us remember his closing remarks:

My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life; to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it. . .

As he said many times, in many parts of this nation, to those he touched and who sought to touch him:

"Some men see things as they are and say why.
I dream things that never were and say why not."⁴

Ted carried so many of the dreams of his brothers to fruition. He championed health care for children with the CHIP bill, pushed the Americans with Disabilities Act; the raising of the minimum wage was his battle, as was the Civil Rights Act; he worked on behalf of immigrants rights, cancer research, fighting apartheid, providing AIDS care, mental health benefits, education and the Serve America Act. The Family and Medical Leave Act was his too, along with hundreds of other laws not as well known. And each of those laws began with a story, a person, a need. Yesterday his son, gave what was probably the most touching tribute of all:

"When I was 12 years old, I was diagnosed with bone cancer. And a few months after I lost my leg, there was a heavy snowfall over my childhood home outside of Washington, D.C. And my father went to the garage to get the old Flexible Flyer and asked me if I wanted to go sledding down the steep driveway.

"And I was trying to get used to my new artificial leg. And the hill was covered with ice and snow. And it wasn't easy for me to walk. And the hill was very slick. And as I struggled to walk, I slipped and I fell on the ice. And I started to cry and I said, 'I can't do this.' I said, 'I'll never be able to climb up that hill.'

"And he lifted me up in his strong, gentle arms and said something I will never forget. He said, 'I know you can do it. There is nothing that you can't do. We're going to climb that hill together, even if it takes us all day.'

"Sure enough, he held me around my waist and we slowly made it to the top. And you know, at age 12 losing your leg pretty much seems like the end of the world. But as I climbed on to his back and we flew down the hill that day, I knew he was right. I knew I was going to be OK.

4. http://tedkennedy.org/ownwords/event/1978_health_care

"You see, my father taught me that even our most profound losses are survivable, and that is — it is what we do with that loss, our ability to transform it into a positive event, that is one of my father's greatest lessons.⁵

A deeply flawed man who had many tragedies and many personal failings had to learn how to turn pain, tragedy and mistakes into something constructive, something that would be of use, of benefit, turn grief into hope. It is a lesson for us all and easier said than done.

Ted Jr.'s cancer was one of the catalysts that moved the Senator to fight for health care for all. The work began when his career began. I read to you what he said over 30 years ago and since then he continued to say over and over again that decent affordable health care for all Americans was his life's passion and work.

There have been monumental forces trying to thwart Ted Kennedy's dream but for the first time in a long time I have hope that it may happen. Two weeks ago I was in Pittsburgh with my friend Jane and a couple of thousand other activists. Health Care reform and making sure that there would be a decent affordable public option—a plan similar to Medicare for all who want it— was one of the hottest topics of discussion and activist effort. Since then there have been 65 congressmen and women who have signed a letter demanding that there be such a plan in any bill that comes through conference or they will not vote for it. We, the citizens are both putting pressure on those legislators as well as encouraging them with campaign contributions to hold firm. My friend Jane is leading the charge. We have more hope than ever that we may well succeed in our efforts. Senator Kennedy's death has both inspired and energized us, and we hope the progressive caucus will follow through on their promise. They know the people are watching and we care.

In their stories of their uncle and father both Caroline Kennedy Schlossburg and Teddy Jr. talked about the delight the Senator took in leading family history trips to sites all over Boston and New England as well as to Civil War battle sites and other historic parks and monuments. To understand our nation, its hopes and dreams, a grounding in history is absolutely necessary and best to start young. We visited some of the places they spoke of this summer, Gettysburg, Fort McHenry in Baltimore, and Colonial Williamsburg. While there I watched families giving their children the gift of history and perspective on how we came to be the nation we are. Experiencing the Declaration of Independence spoken aloud by characters who were living it was moving. Seeing children taking it all in and asking questions and learning about the birth of our country was inspiring. It gave me hope. Seeing and hearing the words of the young generation of Kennedys also gives me hope.

I wish I could say that I had a personal connection to Senator Kennedy other than conversations I had with his legislative aid who dealt with women's health issues. But through a friend Ralph and I were privileged to attend the tribute to Sen. Kennedy in Boston at Symphony Hall during the the Democratic Convention five years ago. He was surrounded by his entire family and so many of his friends and allies it was a joyous occasion. The outpouring of love and affection for the Senator was electric as was the finale when he conducted the Boston Pops in Stars and Stripes Forever. His face was awash in pure ecstasy and delight. And then the balloons dropped. It was magic. Two nights ago at the memorial celebration, when Brian Stokes Mitchell reprised a song he sang at that concert, "The Impossible Dream", I heard those words in a whole new context. If ever there was a man who embodied the words of this song, it was Ted Kennedy.

5. <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5ixPA5zZMD5ZdKq0-zufAcCwJ5ONwD9ACNO0G0>

To dream the impossible dream
 To fight the unbeatable foe
 To bear with unbearable sorrow
 To run where the brave dare not go
 To right the unrightable wrong
 To love pure and chaste from afar
 To try when your arms are too weary
 To reach the unreachable star
 This is my quest
 To follow that star
 No matter how hopeless
 No matter how far
 To fight for the right
 Without question or pause
 To be willing to march into Hell
 For a heavenly cause
 And I know if I'll only be true
 To this glorious quest
 That my heart will lie peaceful and calm
 When I'm laid to my rest
 And the world will be better for this
 That one man, scorned and covered with scars
 Still strove with his last ounce of courage
 To reach the unreachable star.⁶

The quest for decent affordable health care to be available to all Americans is a moral one. It was the life's work and passion of the man the country lost last week. There is hope that this can be accomplished but we must make it happen. That we are facing the same obstacles we had in 1978 shows us how far we have yet to go but it can be done. The cause has lost it's champion. It is a profound loss. But he taught us that "even our most profound losses are survivable, and that is — it is what we do with that loss, our ability to transform it into a positive event." Senator Edward Moore Kennedy was true to his quest. It is time for us to take up the work and carry on.

6. Lyrics to "The Impossible Dream" at Reel Classics