Remarks at the Memorial Service for Herb Lundin, 1927-1991

March 3, 2019

Rev. David Kraemer

**Reflection:**

Life is a gift. Death is a mystery.

Often we speak in these terms. Life is what we know. Life is good. Life can be rich. Where it comes from might be something we wonder about. But the fact that we are here, this is a blessing.

Death on the other hand, is not so good. Not what we know. If we wonder about where we come from, we wonder even more about where we go.

What happens to us when we die? Is death just the end of it? No more knowing. No more loving. No more stories. No more life.

For some, that’s a little hard to hear. We want to live on. We want to be reassured that we are something more than meets the eye.

We want this not just for ourselves, but for those we love, those whose lives have touched ours. When we lose a loved one, the fabric of our lives is torn. We want to know there is more, that it’s not over.

Even more than longing, we have this sense that somehow we are not just our bodies, that there is more to us, some animating force, some awareness apart from our senses, the root of our selves that makes all this possible.

We want to believe that some part of us lives on. Some soul. Does this Something, in some sense, know things? Is it distinct, individual, uniquely us? Does it go somewhere when we die, to hang out with the souls of everyone we knew when we were alive?

Or is the answer a little more general? Does this part of us flow like a tributary into a great river of being? Do our souls, our cosmic energy, our life forces, whatever you want to call it, all blend in to a big stream, that becomes the source of more life, downriver sometime?

I can tell you that the first possibility, that our unique, sentient souls, live on in eternity, was not Herb’s view, especially if you combine it with an idea of judgment day. In his own reflection on death, written several years ago, Herb writes: “believe me when I say I have trouble comprehending a bodily return on some rapturous day to be judged in front of billions – hundreds of billions – hundreds of hundreds of a billion trillion souls who have lived on earth subsequent to the time of the big bang. I have trouble comprehending standing in a line of all these people waiting for some judgment guy to look at deportment cards to decide if I was good or bad.”

Life is a gift. Death is a mystery.

Here’s a paradox. What if we thought of life as the mystery. And death as a gift.

I am just a little concerned about saying this at a time like this. Because I don’t know how everyone here will hear it. But I think that in this case, there is some real truth in the question.

Herb struggled in his last months, with memory loss and cognitive functions. I think he could feel what was happening to him, even as he could not put it into words. For a man whose life was marked by a probing mind and quick wit, this was very hard. Death in this case, did come as a gift. As grace. That is what Meg was singing, when he died, Amazing Grace.

But I think that even more, his life stands as evidence of this turn of thought. Life as a mystery. Life as a challenge. Life as something to be met with curiosity, and an open mind.

Hypothetically speaking, he would say, what if we considered life as the mystery, death as the gift? This is the kind of question that Herb loved. It is the kind of question that I believe brought him, and Dona, to the Unitarian Universalist church.

I know that the Catholic faith of his childhood never completely left him, even as he left that church. It was the questions that brought him here. The hypotheticals. As we say, even to question, truly, is an answer.

Herb took on life as a challenge, as a gift, as a mystery. In its completion, his life stands as an example, one more lesson from the teacher.

In both life and death, there is grace.

**Eulogy**

The quality of the material available to write an interesting account of Herb Lundin’s life is a wonder. Where to start? With his poetry, or his caricatures, or his ability to write backwards, in cursive? With his practical jokes, with his hypothetical question, his love of cooking, and camping, or his wry sense of humor?

I came to know a man with a tan overcoat and a determined smile, shuffling up the ramp every Sunday to take his chair in the second row. There used to be a sign on that chair, “Reserved for Herb.” I think he didn’t really like it. But other people put it there because they knew who he was.

In a little over two years, and even since his death, I have come to know a quite a bit about him, and still there is so much more.

Herb was born on February 7, 1927, in Niagara, Wisconsin, way up north. In conversations with him he spoke of Fish Fries on Friday, and the paper mill, and the nuns of his Catholic upbringing. He was an Eagle Scout and a good student. It is probably not surprising that he was an altar boy.

His daughter, Martha, has put together a great obituary that marks all the chapters, and also gives us insight into her father’s character.

Here are a few details:

Herb graduated from high school a semester early, so he could enlist in the Navy and serve in WWII. But he never got a chance to join in combat. After training an aviation radioman and naval air crewman, he was stationed stateside, waiting to be shipped out, when the war ended.

He returned to Wisconsin, attended Oshkosh State Teachers College, met Dona, who was still in High School at the time. He graduated with a degree in secondary education in 1950, and then worked for the Milwaukee Cheese Company and for the AAA International Travel Department.

On June 6, 1953, Herb and Dona were married in Oshkosh. It was Dona who got his first teaching job, at the high school in Gresham.

In 1958, Herb and Dona moved to Boulder, Colo., to complete his master’s degree in geography. Then to Syracuse, N.Y. for four years, where Herb earned his Ph.D. In 1962, they returned to Colorado, and Herb taught at the University of Northern Colorado. And in 1964, they came to Whitewater, Wis., where Herb spent 26 years teaching and working in administration at the University of Wisconsin campus there.

He taught historical and Wisconsin geography to hundreds of students over the years, led three student group tours to the Soviet Union in the 1970s and was the winner of the 1971 Excellence in Teaching Award.

By all accounts he was an excellent teacher. Dona shared with me an email string received by her daughter-in-law, Aggie Lun, from a former student, who writes that he never missed one of Herb’s classes. I want to share just a line or two:

He writes that Herb’s classes “were always too good to miss. He truly was outstanding in the classroom – engaging, wryly humorous, and seemed like “one of us,” not a know-it-all. Undoubtedly the world is a better place because of him.”

What I know of Herb was his challenging mind. He knew a bit about Unitarian Universalism, its structure and politics, and he knew what he believed, too. Even in a faith marked by questioning, Herb put us to the test. But in our conversations, which I really loved, he always came at his questions in a deceptively humble way. I think I know just what that student means about not being a know-it-all, even though he knew an awful lot.

In a few minutes we will hear more of Herb from people who knew him far better than I did. They will have more of the quality material that was the stuff of Herb’s life. But just in case they don’t mention these things, or even if they do, I want to share a few things that I learned that struck a chord with me.

One was his love of cooking, which produced many, many delicious dinners, and a few that didn’t work out. Peanut butter chicken, for one. Or Sweet and Sauer Sauerkraut, which sounds like it might work, but not. Or marinated mud hens. I have hunted waterfowl for a good chunk of my life and I can tell you there is no way to make a mud hen taste good. But that did not stop Herb from believing that he could.

Dona tells one last story of driving around the country roads around Syracuse and coming upon a cemetery, where the inscription on one woman’s headstone read: “She done what she could.”

That stuck with Herb. And I think that’s a good note to end on. Herb Lundin was a genuine, unassuming, curious, challenging, and widely accomplished man.

He done what he could. And then some.