

## **Reflections, September–October 2009**

### **Thursday, September 3, 2009**

When my mother took me to school (half-day kindergarten) for the first time in early September, 1959, I was inconsolable. Tricks and lies had to be deployed, I'm sure, so I'd let my mother out of my sight long enough for her to make her getaway.

Thirteen years later, in early September, 1972, I couldn't wait for my mother to leave, so my "independent" life at a residential college away from home could begin in earnest.

Now, early September means it's time to start thinking about the stewardship campaign. The agony and ecstasy of earlier back-to-school seasons have become distant memories.

But under certain circumstances, the gap closes quickly. The traumatized child, the cocky but clueless teenager, and a few other, earlier selves make repeat appearances, when we're expecting them and when we're not. We might imagine ourselves sophisticated, or world-weary, but back-to-school season reaches some deep and persistent layers of emotion. May God watch over students, their families, teachers, staff and administrators all over our nation as they play their roles in this yearly drama.

### **Thursday, September 10, 2009**

Tomorrow marks the eighth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. May those who died horrifically on that day keep watch over the rest of us, as we struggle to do right by them.

And struggle we do. We're still trying to figure out how to respond in Afghanistan, where the attacks originated. Aggressively, with a comprehensive counter-insurgency campaign? Defensively, through an updated version of containment?

Being unsure about what to do is not a sin. Attacks of such brutality and audacity would leave any nation reeling for years.

Forgetting, though, would bring judgment both harsh and deserved. What to do now, in Afghanistan and beyond, should engage the gifts and energy of

citizens and leaders alike. The silent vigil of the dead—not to mention the world's yearning for the blessing of peace—demands no less.

### **Thursday, September 17, 2009**

I've been thinking about Billy Brooks lately, after hearing Edward Kennedy Jr.'s remembrance of his father encouraging him to climb a hill after his leg had been amputated. Billy, a member of the church where I grew up, lost an arm to cancer at 14, and his life two years later. I was about 10, then 12, when these events occurred.

I couldn't get him out of my mind. 14 and armless, 16 and dead. He was charismatic and a little exotic, his skin the color of cafe au lait. He stood out in a church that was 95% white. His mother was strikingly beautiful and always looked sad. She used a wheelchair or braces; maybe polio had left her legs partially paralyzed, but I don't know for sure. His father's rugged good looks were, if anything, made more striking by the worry that always lined his face. I can't remember if they came back to church after Billy died.

I think of Billy and his family still, more often than I might have expected. God seemed to have singled them out for suffering. They carried their affliction stoically, but their silent self-restraint spoke volumes. Though always cordial, they held themselves at a distance. In my young mind, their being African-American heightened their set-apartness. Their depth of grief was, if not unknown, certainly not engaged or discussed in my world. Even as I tried to banish thoughts that what happened to Billy could happen to me, I felt powerfully drawn to his family. May Billy, and by now perhaps his parents too, rest in peace.

### **Thursday, October 8, 2009**

From the Rankin House, in Ripley, Ohio, you can see across the Ohio River to the places where fugitive slaves gathered to wait for Rev. Rankin to light a lamp in a second-floor window. When he did, they knew it was safe to wade or swim across to freedom (at Ripley, a century and a half ago, the Ohio was shallower than it is today). Rankin's people would have reconnoitered the area, making sure no spies or slave-catchers lurked in the woods.

Once runaways got to them Rankin's family kept them safe, defending the home by force if necessary, till they could journey further north.

On Ohio soil, and elsewhere, a nation within a nation emerged. The ideal of freedom for those held in bondage took on flesh and blood. Compromise on the issue of slavery, once an honorable political expedient, took on the color of betrayal. Crossing the Ohio to the Rankin home changed things forever.

My sister, niece and I visited Rankin House last month. We're all from Ohio. We don't think of our home state as the promised land or the birthing ground of a free people. But for those who once risked their lives to gain their own freedom, or someone else's, there, it was both.

### **Thursday, October 22, 2009**

I'm surprised, and disconcerted, by how much I don't remember. I don't think I'm experiencing the memory loss that comes with aging, because this isn't a new problem. Maybe I don't pay close enough attention to things. Events, thoughts, feelings—from my own life, and others'—just seem to slip away. Recalling them requires substantial mental effort, and sometimes it's not sufficient.

This can be embarrassing, perhaps especially (though not uniquely) for a pastor. Someone makes a shorthand reference to something they've told me about, and I can't recall it. Usually the best policy is just to ask them to refresh my memory. But I hesitate, because I know people trust and expect that I'll hold on to the things they tell me. Doing so means they're important to me, and having to ask for a reminder might imply that they're not.

So here's my advice, first to myself, secondarily to others: pay closer attention; make a special effort to hold on to what you think, feel, experience; ask for help remembering whenever you need it. Remembering binds us one to another over space and time, and binds each of us to the selves we used to be. Sometimes it helps us make sense of things that otherwise would just vex us. Hold things in your heart for awhile. Times will come when you need them, and they slip away before you know it.

### **Thursday, October 29, 2009**

One of my favorite prayers enjoins us to give thanks to God at all times, in all places, and in all things.

Hard to do, right? First of all, so many things claim our attention that we forget about returning thanks. If we have small children, we usually

remember to say a few words before eating, but the habit sometimes disappears as children grow.

Then there's anxiety, which quickly displaces gratitude.

Finally, there's suffering. How can we give thanks "in" suffering, in the place and time of suffering, and for what? A colleague of mine made it a spiritual practice to give thanks to God for ailments like a cold or an upset stomach, trusting that God had sent them for a good purpose. But he never commended giving thanks to God for a more serious and chronic illness from which he suffered—in fact, he never fully acknowledged that he had it.

We'll wrestle with these questions, and others, at Adult Forum in November: "Giving Thanks: at all Times, in all Places, in all Things." Join us at 9:30 on Sunday mornings in the Parish Hall.