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Ted Kennedy's well-lived life

by Patrick Whelan



People standing in line alongside Boston Harbor as they waited to file past the casket of U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy Aug. 27, 2009. (CNS photo/Adam Hunger, Reuters)

A year ago today, people in Massachusetts and around the world mourned the death of Senator Ted Kennedy in a manner reserved for few Americans. Tens of thousands stood respectfully for hours, spontaneously forming lengthy lines along the shore of Columbia Point on Boston Harbor for a chance to walk past his casket. It was a testament to respect for a special moment in history, but more poignantly to a deep sense of personal loss. A member of the family had died, and the grief was evident on the faces of people who sacrificed hours to be together there. "He was out there every day, fighting the fight for us -- especially for our health," the Rev Jesse Jackson told me, as he signed the guest book. "And look how much these people loved him for it."

Senator Kennedy was the only one of the four brothers who was not taken in his youth. But even at age 77, after 15 months of crossing swords with cancer, he seemed at the height of his game -- a pivotal figure in the victory of Barack Obama and a key player in the impending healthcare debate. Why at that moment, many people asked. Why do bad things happen to the people we need the most?

Senator Kennedy dwelt on this issue in the closing pages of *True Compass*, his autobiography, which

arrived on his doorstep the day he passed away last August. Recounting reflections he shared at a Senate prayer breakfast only three months after the death in 1999 of his nephew, John Kennedy Jr., Senator Kennedy said, "Every single one of us, if we are awake to the brokenness of the world and of our lives, wonders at some point, 'How could you allow this, O God? I believe, but help me in my unbelief!' And these questions, this wonder, this pain and this pleading know no bounds of faith -- for the simple, hard fact is that God plays no favorites; that we all suffer; that we all die; that, at one time or another, we all shake our fists at God; and that, if we are lucky, we all come home to God in the end." He went on to quote Thomas Carlyle, who said, "I had a lifelong quarrel with God, but we made up in the end."

His book weaves a chronology of his life, and it is easy to hear his deep laughter as he relates a long parade of family adventures and 47 years of campaign tales and historic legislative battles. But his optimistic prose is punctuated with moments of despair, and a theme develops in which self reflection is followed by a healing rededication to the humanistic causes of his life. He quotes his father as saying, "When one of your children goes out of your life, you think of what he might have done with a few more years, and you wonder what you are going to do with the rest of yours. Then one day, because there is a world to be lived in, you find yourself a part of it again, trying to accomplish something -- something that he did not have time enough to do. And, perhaps, that is the reason for it all. I hope so."

They say experience is what you get when you don't get what you want. But Senator Kennedy had a talent for turning personal experiences into collective dividends. As a young boy living in London, he witnessed the preparations for World War II -- and he became a pivotal leader opposing the rush to war in Iraq. Cancer threatened the lives of two of his children, in 1970 and again in 2002 -- and he became a leading figure in setting aside new funding for the National Cancer Institute, and laying the groundwork for national health reform. His office received countless threats to his life over the years -- yet he made peace in Northern Ireland one of the causes of his life. He was villainized because he took an alternative and more humane approach to grappling with the moral aspects of abortion -- yet he quietly organized a meeting of Democratic senators with the highest-ranking cardinals and bishops of the church in search of common ground. He was a consummate vintner of lemonade, in an often bitter, lemon-filled world.

He spoke quietly many times of the role that religion played in dealing with these struggles, and he wrote, "My faith, and the love of following its rituals, has always been my foundation and my inspiration. Those foundations have been shaken at times by tragedy and misfortune, but faith remains fixed in my heart, as it has been since my childhood days. It is the most positive force in my life and the cause of my eternal optimism."

In his homily at Senator Kennedy's funeral last August, Fr. Mark Hession spoke about this relationship between faith and suffering, tied in with the mystery of the Eucharist ("Isn't he brilliant?" his parishioner Ethel Kennedy declared the other day with a big smile). "The faith which had sustained a visible and historic presence," said Fr. Hession, "now became the faith that teaches us how to see this life in light of the next life. The gift of the Eucharist, which Jesus promised would nourish us in this life, and would carry us to eternal life, became a source of even greater strength and comfort for Ted and Vicki."

In this time of division within the church, it is often forgotten that the Eucharist in the first centuries was considered the sacrament of non-violence -- Jesus setting an example of great personal sacrifice, and urging his followers to "do this in remembrance of me." Every baby who's ever had blood drawn at the pediatrician's office thinks he has suffered more in that moment than any human in history. But as we mature, we realize that there may be a purpose for the instances of suffering in our everyday life. This Christian view, of redeeming ourselves in both the good and the bad, is largely counter-intuitive in a world that encourages us to look out for ourselves first and foremost. But heroic figures like Senator Kennedy remind us that faith and suffering and redemption are all woven together in the tapestry of any

Catholic life that is truly well-lived.

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