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Kennedy remembered: 'finding meaning, value in defeat and loss'

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 26, 2009

(CNS photo)

Sen. Edward Kennedy will always be remembered for the closing words of his address to the Democratic National Convention after he lost his bid for the party?s presidential nomination in 1980: ?For all those whose cares have been our concern, the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives and the dream will never die.? It is fitting that his finest rhetorical moment in a life of superlative oratory came after the one election he lost.

For it was Kennedy?s most Catholic attribute that he could find meaning and value in defeat and loss. Indeed, to give voice to hope and to dare to dream after losing one brother to war, two brothers to assassins? bullets, a sister to a plane crash and another sister to a distorted notion of therapeutic treatment for the mentally disabled, those words were a human accomplishment, not merely a rhetorical one.

Much the same can be said of Kennedy?s entire career. Few facets of the relationship between the citizenry of America and their government were not touched by legislation Kennedy wrote, sponsored or voted for, and in most instances that relationship was bettered for having been touched by him. In the 1960s, black Americans benefited from the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act and the poor and the elderly benefited from the adoption of Medicare and Medicaid.

In the 1970s, Title IX opened up opportunities for women that had been inconceivable even a decade earlier. In the 1980s, he championed the rights of workers and government assistance to the needy when they were under attack from the Reagan administration, and he led the way in securing funding for the treatment of HIV/AIDS. In 1990, he was a cosponsor of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which revolutionized the way our society treats the disabled. Later in the decade, Kennedy championed what has come to be known as SCHIP, providing health insurance to poor children. He defended the dignity of immigrants when his political opponents tried to demonize them. When Kennedy said, ?The work goes on,? he meant it.

The cause endured as well. Kennedy said that ?the cause of my life? was the fight for decent, affordable health care for all Americans and he continued that fight even as his own strength weakened in these past months. He

acknowledged the life of privilege that provided him with the best of care and cried out against the injustice that prevented those less privileged from getting any care.

Perhaps his final gift to the nation will be that his death will change the political debate about health care, which has been hijacked by lies, distortions and fear-mongering in the past month. Just as his brother Jack?s death changed the debate on the Civil Rights Act, turning it from a forlorn hope to a monument in memory of the recently deceased president, perhaps Ted Kennedy?s death will cause his former colleagues in the Senate to finally, at long last, reach agreement on health care reform.

The dream of which Kennedy spoke was the liberal dream and liberalism has fared ill in the years since Kennedy?s 1980 speech. The Reagan Revolution was premised on the belief that government is not the solution to our nation?s ills but the problem. That undemocratic sentiment was anathema to Kennedy?s career and worldview and he led the opposition to Reaganism when it attacked workers? rights, government assistance to the poor, and progressive taxation, to say nothing of its belligerent foreign policy.

Teddy, unlike his brothers, was given the gift of length of years so he was able to witness the demise of Reaganism, when the trainwreck of spread-eagle capitalism brought the nation?s leading corporations hat-in-hand looking for bailouts from the federal government last year. He took no delight in the pain and suffering caused by the economic meltdown and he was ever averse to adopting an ?I told you so? stance. Ted Kennedy did not keep score, which is one of the reasons he earned the reputations of simultaneously being both the Senate?s leading liberal and the senator most likely able to forge a bipartisan consensus on any given issue.

For Catholics, the Kennedy legacy was an ambivalent one. His brother had broken the glass ceiling of the presidency, putting a final nail in the coffin of organized, political anti-Catholicism. But he did so by assuring the nation that his religion was ?private? and would not affect his conduct in office. This distinction proved as improvident as it was philosophically untenable and it laid the groundwork for Ted Kennedy?s greatest political failure, his inability to include the unborn among the voiceless for whom he was a voice. Had Kennedy maintained his pro-life stance he might have kept his party, and the nation, from its easy embrace of abortion rights.

That failure cannot be minimized but neither can it be allowed to cancel all the good that he achieved in his many years in the Senate. When he spoke of ?those whose cares have been our concern? he was speaking of us all. This child of wealth cared deeply and effectively for the children of poverty.

This man of learning cared deeply and effectively for the educational opportunities of all. This senator who mastered the halls of power cared deeply and effectively for the powerless. He endured unimaginable sufferings, some of them self-inflicted, but instead of growing hard or bitter he grew more compassionate and sensitive. He made a difference in the lives of his fellow citizens and in the life of the nation, almost all of it for the good. To say that he will be missed is a commonplace. He, and his work, must be remembered, not just missed, and remembered as he would want, as a prod to further action on behalf of the social justice for which he fought all his life.

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