

Eulogy for Walter Raff

Unitarian Fellowship, Regina, Saskatchewan
June 24, 2010, 2:00 pm

Please permit me to introduce myself. My name is George Maslany and I am the University Librarian.

I wish to welcome you all to the solemn and sad occasion of the Memorial service for this most remarkable man — Walter Raff in order to pay him our final respects.

While I knew Walter for many years, I regret to say, not very well.

Accordingly, preparing and planning this presentation proved a major challenge for me, because I wanted to do something with which he would have been agreeable, were he here to experience it.

An aside here is that I wish we all had more opportunities to share our appreciation of one another while we were still around, rather than regret, as in this case once again, of having put that gesture off until after the opportunity to do so had passed.

I started by reflecting on Shaw's oft-cited dictum — 'don't do unto others as you would have them do unto you, as they may have different tastes'. I was at the serious disadvantage of not knowing what 'his own' tastes for such an event might be.

I wanted to be careful to put together my best guess of what he might have wanted for himself, rather than what I might have wanted to be done for me.

What I felt confident about was that I knew for sure, that he regarded himself as a man with simple tastes who invariably eschewed any pomp and ceremony — accordingly we've declared the area at this time as an Elgar-free zone.

In any event I have made my best effort to offer what I believe might otherwise have made him smile.

First and foremost I know, with certainty, that he would have wanted me to take this opportunity to recognize the important role in his life provided to him by Ilya Silbar Margoshes and Berkes Brown, both former professional colleagues and at the same time life-long friends. They are both to be wholeheartedly commended for their conscientious and unselfish devotion to, so faithfully, serve his best interests, care for him and provide him with companionship throughout the years, including his final ones. Their dedication to him undoubtedly had an important impact on his well being and quality of life. While not related in any way to him, they were in some many ways effectively his family.

This brings me to a pondering of John Donne's well know poem which in so many ways reminded me of Walter every time I heard it.

'No Man is an Island'

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as
well as any manner of thy friends or of thine
own were; any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

At first blush one might contend that at least in Walter's case, John got it wrong. There might well be exceptions to his rule and Walter would serve as a prime example of one. Yet digging ever deeper, and especially considering the relationship he had with Ilya and Berkes, one realized that these important people in his life served as pathways to the mainland of society and thereby offset his seeming insularity.

To be sure once again, even in Walter's case — No man is an island.

I want at this point to recount on what has proved the most extreme of ironies that based on my own catholic heritage, I feel compelled to publicly confess. Ever since I was a fledgling faculty member, I took it upon myself to rattle the cages of countless head librarians warning them that they had better do something of substance to provide recognition to this gentleman or they would likely have to face the consequences and scorn associated with leaving doing so until it was too late. Nothing much of the sort I had envisioned ever happened so fast forward to the present and the issue becomes my own.

I am embarrassed to say that all those things I warned might happen, if something wasn't done while he was still with us, fell on my own shoulders. In the end it was I who was the one who failed to provide him with the recognition he so deserved, when he could have still been around to appreciate it. Billy Shakespeare would comment here that once again — 'the engineer has been hoist in his own petard'.

Who was Walter?

I could recite the notice provided in his obituary but that would tell you more about where he's been and what he's done and when, than who he was, and it is the latter I want to provide you with an image of.

To the point he represented to many of us who encountered him as the epitome of an enigma. As a result accomplishing this portrait of him was no mean feat.

After considerable spinning of my wheels I finally figured out that I might be able to address this challenge by resorting to my academic expertise — related to teaching in the area of research methodology which admittedly I had to really stretch the boundaries of here. So three threads I want to pursue which I promise eventually to tie together at the end.

First of all there was China-watching in the '60's — virtually no pics, only one found was of him alone. Secondly there was the case of medical exams of ladies of stature in 19th century England. Thirdly there was the case of Francis Bacon's friars.

I finally resolved that the only way I could figure out what he was all about was to examine and reflect upon **what he did**.

Walter was what he was and what he was is, simply put, what he did. And what he did was to serve each one of us here in one way or another. And that service was as a librarian — truly as the consummate librarian.

He lived that role.

He inhaled and exhaled it in every breath.

He exuded it from every pore in his body.

Not just for a brief moment in time,

but incessantly and perpetually,

up to the very end of his existence when he could no longer perform this role.

But even after his own death his will to further that institution is reflected in the sizeable financial contribution he left to the Library to perpetuate his life's interest and passion and leave that as his legacy.

This brings me to an exchange I recently had with my dear wife, who regards me as one whose 'best before' time is either fast approaching or has already passed. To make her point she asked me to ponder being on my death bed and wondering whether I could conceive at that time of my last wish being that I had another day at work.

Ask Walter the same question and undoubtedly he would have unhesitatingly and unflinchingly responded — 'what's your point' — of course.

Another quality of him which was so astounding as to be incredible was his literally encyclopedic recall. I took the president Vianne to visit him — he knew the names of all of her children. I don't know the names of her kids — probably should learn them. He knew my own kids' names.

I desperately sought to find a suitable name to describe these convictions he so visibly manifested, to reflect what he so strongly believed in, what he stood for — and finally found it. It was one of those eureka moments where I

recognized that all along I had been going hungry here because I had been searching for the food under the plate when it was lying on top of it.

The word I was searching for to best describe who he was — was, Librarian — pure and simple — fully completely — through and through.

Please keep in mind the meaning I have in mind for that term is not just a keeper of books but instead entailing an embracing of all that these printed materials represent the sum total of all that has been recorded by humanity and making those materials available and accessible to those seeking them.

At this point the words of another poet come to mind. That I believe well represents what he stood for. It's something I wrote as a teenager — a young sergeant during a lull while we were out on maneuvers — a so-to-speak peace time variant of a John McCrae wannabe. It was one of those times I was contemplating my own finality but delighted to present it here instead, or more accurately, before it gets used once again.

Be with us and we with you together we shall live to do
To o make our world
To raise our kind
To die
Yet live forever
Through those we leave behind

Walter was all of these things and as a result we, in turn, are the products of his endeavors as well as 'those **he** leaves behind'. He has charged us with the duty of doing unto others the same as he had done onto us — a sentiment that I trust reverberates into perpetuity.

Walter has left us with a lasting legacy of the example of his own life that I trust will exhort us to emulate the powerful example of service he provided us. That example was one of unwavering and complete commitment to a cause — his own being to selflessly serve as the medium to connect us to the written word in all of its manifestations. Admittedly and realistically none of us will

come as close to this ideal as he has evinced — nor would I suggest should any of the rest of us even try.

Thank you

At this point I would like to invite Berkes to step forward to share his own reflection of Walter with us.

After that we'd be pleased if anyone else present here today would like to come forward and do the same.

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I invite any of the rest of you here to step forward should you wish to share your own offering at this event.

George Maslany