

Memorials ~ Lit Writing

Eulogy for Harry R. Storar, Jr. February 2003

Whenever Jean spotted Harry talking one-on-one to someone at a jazz festival or on a park bench or at the hospital, she would say, “Harry will have their life story before long.” Sure enough, once Harry waved goodbye or shook hands with his newest friend, he had an armload of information – not for gossip or amusement, but for his personal collection of the life histories of regular folks.

Most of us have walked away from a conversation with Harry only to realize that we heard our own voices far more than we heard his. He had a gift for making people open up, for getting them to share what they were most proud of, what they most loved in the world. He could turn a conversation to your favorite hobby or sports team before you knew what had happened. He remembered the names of wives and husbands, often children and sometimes grandchildren, and would ask about them every time he ran into a friend.

But how much did we learn about him? He shared pieces of his personal story with each of us, but few can say they know Harry’s life story. To honor Harry today, I will share his life journey, and, at stops along the way, reflect the past found in the present, the Harry that we all knew.

* * *

Harry was born in Lewisville, Arkansas. You can still find Storar kin there, but Harry’s family – father Harry, Sr., mother Odell and sister Jean – moved often to follow work that Harry, Sr. could do as a carpenter. The family lived in Pennsylvania, Idaho and California’s Imperial Valley before stopping in Oakland.

Harry’s many moves, picking up from one place, planting roots at the next, may have spawned his ability to meet and get to know new people so quickly, to strike up a conversation with anyone in any place. Even at Baywood Court nursing facility, when he was weak and struggling for breath, he befriended his caretakers and therapists. And, yes, he got their life stories, too.

Harry graduated from Oakland High School and went into the Navy. World War II was nearing its end, and he was spared combat duty by the Japanese surrender. After his honorable discharge, he became a carpenter, following in his father’s footsteps, often working on the same Bay Area freeway projects as Pop. Harry was now a single man in his 20’s, living in California in the jubilant post-war era. He had many friends and fun times.

One of his regular spots was Victor and Roxie’s Club where he listened to Bob Scobey and his Frisco Jazz Band. The 1950s had brought about a Dixieland revival, and Harry had found his music – upbeat, alive, with tunes he could hum.

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He never lost his love for Dixieland jazz. Over the years, he heard hundreds of bands and expanded his interest from West Coast to New Orleans and Chicago styles and the big band sound. He also got to know the musicians and made many friends, other regulars on the jazz scene. Harry traveled by plane, car and cruise ship to enjoy Dixieland jazz festivals. He attended the Sacramento Jazz Jubilee, the granddaddy of them all, for 22 years in a row. As a member of the Friends of Jazz, he supported a monthly dance with live music in Walnut Creek.

One night, when Harry was in his early 30's, he was lying on his sofa watching a Billy Graham crusade on television. As he described to Jean years later, something Reverend Graham said struck a chord within him, and by the end of the message, Harry was on his knees repeating the prayer of invitation, asking Jesus to come into his life. Harry never wavered from the belief that Christ had died for his sins, that he was forgiven, and that he had received God's grace.

Harry's energies shifted towards making friends at church and finding ways to be of service. He combined both goals as president of the singles group at Oakland's First Methodist Church, and was responsible for paving the way for at least one marriage. Years later, he became an active member of Redwood Chapel. He taught Sunday School, participated in Boys Brigade, chaired the Building Committee and made improvements to the building and landscaping. One of his favorite activities was washing dishes after events like the Sweetheart Banquet.

No church activity had a greater impact on Harry's life than a gathering at Oakland's First Methodist Church in 1962. There, he spotted Jean Miller of Edgeley, Stockport, Cheshire, England. She had traveled through the United States with a friend and stopped in Oakland to stay with her uncle and to work for a year. Harry told Andrew that he was captivated by Jean because she was beautiful and because she was a lady. A double date was arranged, and modest, unassuming Harry, never one to push for his way, told the other man on the date, "The one on the left is mine." Jean and Harry married nine months later. They would have celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary this month.

Jean was most attracted to Harry because he made her laugh. She laughed from their first meeting until the final weeks of his life. Besides Harry's kind and caring nature, he will probably be most remembered for his jokes. He had a great memory for jokes, excellent delivery and a knack for knowing which jokes were really funny. He had a story to fit any situation. "That sort of reminds me of . . .," he would start. After the punch line, everyone laughed genuinely, never just to be polite.

The newly wed Harry and Jean forged friendships with two other couples, Ed and Betty Stegner and Jim and Shirley Blewer. Those bonds have lasted to this day. The young couples were soon young families, and they gathered every Thanksgiving and

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Christmas, rotating the hosting duties just like blood relatives. The children refer to each other as cousins and to the other parents as aunts and uncles.

Harry and Jean had three children – Andrew born in 1964, Catherine in 1965, and Alison in 1968. Harry went from freewheeling single man to family man without hesitation. He loved being a dad and he loved his children for who they were: Andrew, the straight arrow; Catherine, the tomboy; Alison, the free spirit.

The family enjoyed camping trips in their old '62 Chevy with camper shell. A trip to Disneyland, taken once Alison was old enough to enjoy the sights, was perhaps Harry's favorite vacation. Harry worked every minute that he could to support his family. His day job in heavy construction was hard on his body. He labored high above the ground building formwork for freeway overpasses. On weekends, Harry took on extra building projects for friends.

In spite of a tight budget, money was never too short to advance his children's interest in music. Alison recalls her dad making a special trip to buy a record album she wanted. When Catherine and Andrew showed an aptitude for playing musical instruments, Harry opened his wallet for private lessons and for Andrew's own trumpet, not a small purchase.

Harry told me that Andrew had great tone from the start, something he as a music lover could recognize. He supported Andrew's career as a music teacher and musician. How many parents in this age would encourage a child to make a living at music? In return for his father's support, Andrew performed in concerts, church services, musical plays and, finally, in Dixieland groups and big bands, playing the music that Harry loved most.

Harry retired from carpentry in the early 1980s and worked as a title company courier for 12 years. The job was tailor-made for him. He drove from office to office meeting people, winning them over. Someone once proposed that the title company hire a salesperson to maintain customer relations. The boss said, "No," because Harry was the best sales rep they could have.

He suggested that Alison work for the title company after she graduated high school, and the job turned into her career. Harry was pleased that she had moved up in a steady industry. Alison also felt her father's strong support when she decided to buy her first house while she was still single.

Harry told Jean that he was proud of his children and happy they had grown into caring, responsible adults. He was glad to have seen both Andrew and Alison marry people he respected.

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Andrew and I married in 1995. Harry did not have a prefabricated concept of what his son's wife should be, and I appreciated that. He valued my work and often said that writing was the hardest job anyone could do. This from a man who used to work several stories up on narrow wood pathways. Harry and I liked to read crime books. We loved justice and shared the belief that evil is real. We had common political views. Each of us appreciated simplicity. We shared a need for alone time, which surprised me given what a people-person Harry was.

Some of our best conversations came about as I drove Harry to medical appointments. Of course, he always asked about my work, my dad or what books I had read lately. Once in a while, I got to hear what Harry really thought. Whenever he started a sentence with, "Don't you think," he was voicing his own opinion. "Don't you think a green Japanese maple tree is prettier than a red one?" "Don't you think they ought to make more movies like *The Sting*?"

Alison married Bill in 2000. It was the perfect wedding service for Harry – no tie required. He pushed through the pain of a gout attack to walk Alison down the aisle. Bill and Harry had much in common, especially a knack for home projects. Harry gave his son-in-law many of his old tools and delighted in finding new tools to give Bill as Christmas gifts. Bill told me that Harry made him feel comfortable from their first meeting. He thought of Harry as a second father, and wished he had had more time with him.

The most difficult event that Harry endured was Catherine's death in 1979 at age 13. Catherine came down with what would look like anyone to be the flu, yet within a few days, she was gone. Harry's heart was broken – emotionally and, perhaps, physically.

In 1994, Harry had a heart attack. Then, an angioplasty dislodged plaque that damaged his heart. Doctors proposed bypass surgery, and Harry was confident about the procedure because he had friends who had done well after the surgery. But in his case, after the bypass was completed, his doctors could not restart his heart. They finally succeeded, but Harry lay in a coma for 40 days.

He recovered and regained some strength. Then, a few years later, he suffered a stroke. A heart medication side effect made his lungs permanently fibrous. He fought osteoporosis, back pain, fluid retention, loss of appetite, loss of energy and labored breathing.

I tell you all this not to make you sad, but to fill you in. Because I know that every time you asked Harry how he was, he said, "Pretty good," "OK," or even, "pretty OK." When I heard that last one, I figured he felt awful. But no one can remember hearing him complain. A heart specialist at Stanford said that Harry was one of the bravest patients he had known.

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In spite of all these physical challenges, Harry once said to me, "I wouldn't change a thing about my life, except for what happened to Catherine."

In spite of how he felt, Harry asked each of you how you were feeling. In spite of losing a child, he asked each of you about your own children.

* * *

Today's scripture reading from Corinthians is often heard at weddings. Its description of love provides a good, if lofty, goal for a marriage. But the original Greek word for love used in the scripture didn't refer to the love for one person, but, according to my Bible footnotes, "a selfless concern for the welfare of others, a will to love in obedience to God's command."

Harry would be the first to say he was not perfect, but he provided us with an example of a human being striving to embody this kind of love.

Harry was patient. Harry was kind. He did not envy, he did not boast, he was not proud. He was not rude, self-seeking or easily angered. He rarely kept record of wrongs. When he did, they were the misdeeds of people in power who abused their position for personal gain. He did not delight in evil. Though, he did admit to me that he liked to watch baseball games hoping that certain teams would lose.

Harry always protected, always hoped, always persevered. Harry never failed any of us.

I had the opportunity to hear Harry speak about his spiritual beliefs. "Don't you think," he said, "that if you follow the Ten Commandments, you'll live a good life?" "Don't you think that there's a right and a wrong?" "Don't you think that's a good hymn?" he said on hearing "God of Grace and God of Glory." He added, "That gets it said."

The saying goes that if you don't have your health, you don't have anything. In his final weeks, Harry said to Alison, "If you don't believe in God, you don't have anything."

Perhaps he understood that he would not regain his strength this time. That health was no longer the issue. Perhaps he was preparing for a new life, seeing the many friends who have gone before him: E. S. Landers, Manuel Florence, Jim Blewer, Bill Endres, Betty Stegner, "Ski" at Western Title, Bill Tracy, Steve Woodard and others. Not to mention Bob Scobey, Wally Rose, Clancy Hayes and a host of jazz greats. Most importantly, his daughter, Catherine.

How can I sum up who Harry R. Storar, Jr. was in this world? I could say he was a man who loved his family and the flag, Dixieland and desserts, warm, sunny days and the Rush Limbaugh show.

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All that is true, but he was so much more than that. Stand in front of Harry's picture here at the podium. Line up your face with Harry's until you see both him and yourself. Harry was his own man, and at the same time, he reflected back every person he met. Not like a perfect mirror held under bright stage lights. But the way this glass creates a soft outline with your positive features most prominent and the wrinkles and hard edges nearly invisible. Harry was our most flattering mirror.

Please share your reflections, your memories of Harry with each other at the reception today. Perhaps tell a few of your favorite Harry jokes. Then, try to learn something new about every person you talk to. That's what Harry would have wanted.

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