

“Where were you...” Thoughts on John F. Kennedy and his Memory

November 24, 2013

Hanging from a chain on a roof, that's where I was. It's true, as every television and radio station has been telling us over the last several days; those of us my age *do* remember where we were when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. And, as I think back on it now, I am shocked at the cavalier nature of my response when I heard the news and I wonder at my lack of understanding of the significance of the event.

I was hanging from a chain on a steep roof in Anaheim, California, the home of Walt Disney's Disneyland amusement park. I was eighteen, between high school and college, and had taken a job at a factory where orange peels from the Sunkist juice plant were run by the ton through a great screw conveyor, dried, and turned into pectin. On that particular day though, my boss had told me to go up on the roof which I was to paint with aluminum paint, and, because the roof was so high and the pitch so steep, I was somehow strapped or tied to a chain anchored at the peak, and so I dangled against the corrugated metal. Sometime in the early afternoon a man came by and hollered up at me, “The president's been killed,” and walked on.

All alone on the roof for another few hours, until someone came by to tell me to knock it off and freed me from the chain to go home, I had no one to talk to, no one with whom to process this information. When the fellow had first shouted to me I had thought, “Who cares?” or maybe “So what?” In my mind Kennedy, a Catholic, a fabulously rich man, and a politician, represented all that I had been raised to despise. My Dutch, Calvinist paternal grandfather, an immigrant baker, a socialist, and the biggest intellectual influence on my young life, loathed the Catholic Church and the Pope, who, he said, took the pennies of the poor to build gold encrusted cathedrals and palaces for the prelates. Worse yet, the president's father, Joseph Kennedy, was a plutocrat who had made his money in steel and booze and owned that great palace of capitalist commerce, the Merchandise Mart, in my original hometown of Chicago. I knew too that Kennedy was a Democrat, head of the party of the Solid South where white racism ruled. The party too of Chicago's corrupt political boss Mayor Richard J. Daley, a man loathed by my family. No, Kennedy's death did not move me.

And as my Japanese pocket transistor radio kept reporting, Kennedy was not the first president to be assassinated. Lincoln, a hero for his leadership of the North in the struggle against the South and slavery, had been assassinated by John Wilkes Booth at the Ford Theater. Now that, I thought, was a real tragedy. McKinley, the Republican imperialist, had been assassinated by an anarchist, and, I thought, it would not have been so bad if others of his ilk—Teddy Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Calvin Coolidge—had also been eliminated from American history.

I was living at the time in a home for senior citizens, on the second floor which, because it had no elevator, and so could not legally be rented to men and women in their sixties and seventies, like those who lived in little apartments on the first floor. I had been there too short a time to have formed any friendships with the old folks, so I just climbed the stairs and, exhausted from throwing hundred pound bags of pectin, passed out. No nightmares of Kennedy's assassination disturbed my sleep.

The next day I was back at the pectin factory in my usual post where I worked all alone at the bottom of the funnel where the tons of dried orange peels, carried by the conveyor from the juice plant, then dried by the great blower and reduced to flakes poured out of the funnel's mouth to be

captured in hundred pound canvas sacks that I sewed shut with the heavy hanging Singer machine before I piled the bags on pallets—five bags to a layer, four layers high—and then picked up the pallets with the forklift, drove them across the street, and stacked them three pallets high in the warehouse. All of this was done by me alone. Like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, I raced back from the warehouse to the funnel, from the funnel to the warehouse. Sewing bags, stacking bags, driving the forklift and stacking pallets. It was hell. Kennedy's assassination the day before must have been somewhere in the back of my mind, maybe, I guess. Though that morning, failing to execute a turn correctly, I drove the forklift into a wall of pallets causing an avalanche in the warehouse that could have killed me. Throwing my hands up in exasperation, I walked to the office, quit, took my check, returned to the senior citizen home, packed up my few things, and went back to my mother's home in Imperial Beach, California. I had failed at my first real job. I was still a kid with the right of return.

My mother, a grocery clerk, a member of the Retail Clerks Union, and a Democratic voter, though a woman who did not generally hold politicians of any stripe in high very esteem, told me she felt sorry for Mrs. Kennedy. I found my friends, many of our friends, men and women in their forties and active in the local Democratic Party—a real rarity in San Diego County—still distraught, the women weeping and the men shaking their heads somberly though the assassination that had happened two or three days before. They were not just sorry for Mrs. Kennedy. The assassination of Kennedy had been a blow against their leader and their politics. While I liked them, I had never understood their political commitments and now couldn't understand their distress and their grief.

Fifty years later, I am rather embarrassed and ashamed at my reaction. After all a man had been killed, his wife widowed, his children left fatherless. Today, a husband, a father, and a grandfather, I can better appreciate the personal tragedy that was involved. When during this past week I saw Jacqueline Kennedy and her children on television, images we have all seen dozens of times before, a tear came to my eye. My grandfather's anti-Catholic prejudice, I now realize, kept me back then from realizing that the election of the Catholic Kennedy, much like the election of the African American Barack Obama, had represented an expansion of American religious toleration and of democracy, no matter what his politics. Thinking back on it, I am sure that those older friends of mine, few of whom are still living, were concerned because they didn't know what to expect from Lyndon Johnson, and living in Southern California, in Goldwater country, they were worried about a right turn in the not too distant future. A callow kid, I hadn't gotten any of that.

I am sure I didn't grasp the gravity of the events of the time. The country's leader had been shot and killed, a sign that something was profoundly wrong in the body politic that claimed to be a secure democracy. But, of course, we had known that before Kennedy was killed, known that something was rotten in Denmark. And it hadn't begun with the assassination. Like my contemporaries, I had been watching the struggle of the African American civil rights movement on television every night, well aware that Kennedy was doing as little as possible on that issue for fear of losing the Solid South. I had been reading the radical *Liberation* magazine since I was fourteen years old, a gift from my absent father, so I was well aware of Kennedy's role in the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, an attempt to smother the revolution and prevent Cuba from gaining its independence. Just a year before, we had lived through the Cuban missile crisis, the most dangerous moment of the Cold War standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. I was well aware that Kennedy was a Cold War warrior, as deeply committed to the capitalist-Communist division of the world and the anti-Communist crusade as Truman and Eisenhower before him.

Later after Kennedy's death, there was the creation of the Camelot myth, Kennedy enshrinement in popular memory as the handsome young king surrounded by a court of Sinatra, Monroe, Bernstein, Mailer, and the rest, the liberal's world of culture. None of that held any fascination for me, because after the assassination came Lyndon B. Johnson, the expansion of the war in Vietnam, the carpet

bombing, the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese being killed, as well as tens of thousands of Americans. That, for me, remains the Kennedy legacy.