

A reflection

Prepared for the occasion of

## **My Memorial For Me!**

Saturday, July 25, and Sunday, July 26, 2014

**My Ministry Made Visible in the Experience of Living  
with Death as a Friend**

Venues: THE CITY, & SALINA TRINITY UMC

Dr. William Elrod Salmon

The agnostics among you and others who struggle with the Christian lexicon, for the duration you read this report, please suspend your disbelief. It may be possible for you to see through the traditional language that you'll read in this paper. The foundation of my theology is to explore a secular approach. You'll come to appreciate my language formation by practicing the following when reading Christian theology and/or in Bible Study. Instead of asking, "What do you **remember** about God, Christ, Holy Spirit and the Church?" Instead ask, "How do you **experience** these dynamics?"

**To know** something is a Head Trip dynamic

**To experience** something is a Gut Trip dynamic

We may argue about what we *know* or *don't know*;

We'll accept our *experience* because it is undeniably our own.

I remain grateful  
for your gracious love, care and forgiveness.  
Thank you,  
Pastor Bill

A Hymn on living the surrendered life

**“He Leadeth Me; O Blessed Thought”**

United Methodist Hymnal #128, vss. 3 & 4

Lord, I would place my hand in thine,  
Nor every murmur nor repine;  
Content, whatever lot I see,  
Since 'tis my God that leadeth me.

*Refrain:*

*He leadeth me, he leadeth me,  
By his own hand he leadeth me;  
His faithful follower I would be,  
For by his hand he leadeth me.*

And when my task on earth is done,  
When by thy grace the victor's won,  
E'en death's cold wave I will not flee,  
Since God through Jordan leadeth me.



## **My Ministry Made Visible in the Experience of Living with Death as a Friend**

A reflection on the event "My Memorial for Me"  
Dr. William E. Salmon

### **Prologue**

The "Why" of this event cannot be understood rationally because it aspires to reveal the depth of a spiritual walk. When I get to thinking like this, I've find it helpful to turn to something that is allegorical. For many years I read, "Alice Through The Looking Glass." Let's peek in on her as she talks to the Red Rose concerning the Red Queen:

*Now speaking to the Red Rose, Alice says, "I think I'll go and meet her. . ."*

*"You can't possibly do that," said the Rose: "I should advise you to walk **the other way.**"*

*This sounded like nonsense to Alice, so she said nothing, but set off at once toward the Red Queen. To her surprise, she lost sight of her in a moment. . .*

*A little provoked, she drew back, and after looking everywhere for the Queen---she thought she would try the plan, this time, of walking in **the opposite direction.** It succeeded beautifully. She had not been walking a minute before she found*

*herself face to face with the Red Queen.* (Note: Embolding is mine.)

Like Alice, *My Event* is a visit with the Red Queen who represents the significance of my contribution to life and living. To reach her I needed a non-rational way to discover my journey to the Red Queen of Faith. My event is a venue for digging out the meaning of my life, ministry and anticipated death.

Why have this event? Lately, I've been asked this question with many forms of facial expressions: "Are you serious;" "I can't believe this;" and, "You're joking. "

"No, I'm serious." Perhaps, it can be said that I am *dead serious*.

As I've said many times in the last couple of years, I want to hear what people have to say about me and my ministry. After I'm gone, they can say anything they want. On the Sunday prior to The Event, one church member said to Beverly, "I hope Bill doesn't die before Saturday and Sunday." Beverly replied, "It won't make any difference, we have his memorial planned."

### **The Burden of Self-Awareness**

*The Octogenarian Experience--*

The question to be answered is, "What are the insights to be drawn from My Memorial for Me? The answer is that the digging was harder to do than I anticipated. I needed two weeks just to get over being tired from planning, orchestrating the event, and entertaining; I was worn out.

The first insight is that I'm feeling my age as an octogenarian and my resilience is slower. So much happened in such a short time that was so meaningful that I struggled to identify the tools necessary for the task. There is an unexpected burden to bear when I asked others to be revealing about my person and my ministry. Those who attended will remember these stories were told with irony, with love and care, and with tears.

### *Insight: Then and Now--*

As an octogenarian, it is my experience that most of us are anxious about our final transition from life to death, but few of us prepare for it. There is the *angst* that is our common bond; we are born on a down escalator and one day we'll get pushed off—that's it. In part, this is my motivation for inviting people to, "My Memorial For Me." It encouraged me to reflect on the experience of The Event.

I began my inner journey in 1948 around a church campfire near Palmer Lake, Colorado, and this is the reason I am a United Methodist Pastor. Literally, I was prayed into the ministry by Genny Jones Newton who served as our Youth Director at the First United Methodist Church in Pueblo, Colorado.

After living 80 years, it is easy to affirm that we are different people at different times in our life. The Ecumenical Institute, my Appointment-Beyond-The-Local-Church, embraced the notion of living in Four Phases: as children, young adults, mature adults and elders. One author—lost to my memory—observed that we go through a minor crises every ten years (i.e., puberty), and a major crises every 20 years; i.e., the time when many go through divorce.

In 1972, I attended the second 30-day session of the Global Academy sponsored by the Ecumenical Institute in the Chicago ghetto. Maybe it was the intensity of the event, or it could be that we honored the local Black community by not appearing outside of the building any more than necessary, but over three days, I experienced an irrational fear. I confronted my mortality while worrying about waking up in the middle of the night and inadvertently taking an overdose of sleeping pills. My concern was not suicide, rather it was in not living to serve the ministry that I was called to serve. This may be the earliest and most serious confrontation with my own death.

The decision I made was to put the sleeping pills on my pillow, closed my eyes and prayed, "God, you have a problem. I can't handle this any more. You wake me or take me; either way I'm yours. I went to sleep and since that experience my nightly prayer is, "Lord, wake me or take me. Either way, I'm yours."

### *Insight: The Burden of Gethsemane--*

This insight appeared so unexpectedly that I was sobbing when it come to me. The occasion was Sunday night. Matt Lamb, my oldest grandson came into my office and we fell into some deep topics about faith and Christian action. As we drew to the end, I took Matt's hands in mine; I meant to pray for him. Instead, I found myself sobbing in the realization that I would now need to self-consciously carry the knowledge of what my ministry meant to all those who attended either event, as well as those who spoke in self-revelation or had expressed sentiments in the many cards and letters I received. I became aware

that ministry meant freedom to one, kindness and care to others, and deep friendship at some dark corner of their lives.

I cried out, "Lord, can you help me?"

At that moment, I felt at one with Jesus praying in Gethsemane. Since that time, I never felt troubled again nor terribly motivated to do this reflection. In a profound way, having this garden experience made difficult the writing. It is now the end of November—four months later—and I just returned to finish writing and editing this epistle.

Did I receive my answer to prayer? Yes, and Matt did too.

### *Insight: Motivation for My Event--*

In his book, Tuesdays with Morrie, Mitch Albom tells of an old professor for whom Albom promised he'd "stay in touch" is dieing with Lou Gehrig's Disease. Albom visits every Tuesday to assist his former mentor on his final life's journey. At one point, Morrie wants to attend his own memorial, and this is held in his kitchen with a few friends and colleagues reading poetry and telling stories. The publication of this book inspired many to consider such an event; we want to enjoy the journey, at least this is my motivation.

### *Insight: Meeting the needs of others—*

#### **A testimony in mail and email--**

The outpouring of email messages, personal notes and cards was deeply gratifying. Some were funny and filled with irony; others were serious because of some deed that was done.

#### **The funeral ministry--**

Early on, every local church pastor is confronted by a call from the local mortician: "The family wants you to do the service." I've never turned down such requests as the funeral is deeply ingrained in the job description of a pastor. From the first to the last funeral, I always worked hard to make this a meaningful event.

When my ministry intersects with the deep needs of others, then my method of inventing fresh ways to respond was meaningful. For instance, the funeral I orchestrated at the death of Paul Jones.

For many years, Paul's wife Judy is a family friend who shares an annual birthday card with Beverly. Years ago, I married Judy and Paul, and then I had the unique privilege of performing the marriage ceremony for their daughter. When Paul died, Judy turned to me to write and conduct the Memorial Service and Inurnment. The following is the message to Beverly written on the occasion of my wife's birthday:<sup>1</sup>

*I think of you so often and how our life-long friendship has involved Bill through the years. His service for Paul stays with me daily. His words and manner have been a comfort to me these months since September. I often wonder if Bill realizes how different his words are from what one*

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<sup>1</sup> This birthday message was similar to the card Judy wrote to me. Unfortunately, my card was lost in the shuffle. These two messages summarize the feelings of so many who care. Another card is printed on the last page of this material.

*ordinarily hears, and how they are heard by others. I still hear comments on his words and the service.*

We never know how much we have influenced the lives of others. Another friend, Ann Mickey, summarized many of the cards when she writes:

*Bill, over the years you have been that inspiration needed to go forward in all aspects of life. . . You share this compassion and courage with others in many entities of prayer, Bible study, out-reach, and mentoring children who needed extra care and understanding. You gave those individuals a chance to really be themselves and know that Christ takes us how we are no matter what. . . You have been that friend to many especially me and I am glad for the opportunity of taking this journey and furthering my life when helping others. Thank you for all that has been done and I know in years ahead those friendly words, warmth, love, enthusiasm and delight in life will be that legacy which lasts a lifetime.<sup>2</sup>*

### **Finding that Death is a Friend**

There are many kinds of death. Obviously, physical death is prominent because of its finality creates an angst within us. The other kinds of death can be allegorical and point us to other parts of significant reality.

#### *The Vocation and Death*

It was a kind of death when I received a call into the Christian ministry at Pinecrest Camp. Around the Friday night campfire, my awakening was experienced as a death; I died to a childhood and awakened as a teenager who accepted the responsibility of preparing for a profession. The result was that my parents sent me to St. John's Military School—in Salina, KS—for the purpose of preparing me academically for collage at Kansas Wesleyan University.

This leap is greater than can be indicated here. I was the only boy in six generations and spoiled rotten. My academic career was poor and I repeated the 8<sup>th</sup> grade in order to mature.

The final academic report is that I earned a Masters of Divinity and a Doctor of Ministry degrees and published three books on the New Testament with 7 other books ready for editing. Honors given me by Kansas Wesleyan University are the "Service Award" (2001), and the "Outstanding Achievement in Your Career Field" (2006).

#### *The Baptized and Death—*

Sometimes people questioned my understanding of death suggesting that I treat death as a simile or a metaphor. Such is not the case. As we go under the waters in baptism we literally die a physical death. As we come up out of the water we are literally reborn into a new relationship with the Meaning of Life.

Metaphors and allegories are needed to describe the significance of the baptismal event. In my baptism, I died to the notion that my physical nature defines me. In rising out of the water, I embraced

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the theology that I died to the things of the world and was raised to live dependently on God

During the many funerals and memorial services, death and I have been colleagues. Each turn of my life either has been a conversation or a confrontation with death.

### *Insight: A dead man walking--*

In this way, I am a dead man walking; I am dead to the Life as a victim and raised as a victor because I define my Life through Christ and the profound freedom for living the sacrificial lifestyle: All is GOOD, All is RECEIVED, All is FORGIVEN, and the Future is OPEN.”<sup>3</sup>

Notice that this formula is based on the affirmation that, “All is GOOD.” When the word “Good” is used in this way it is not a moral category. Rather, it is based on the reality of our human experience.

### **Making friends with the Death Angel**

One of the messages my memorial serves is that death is our friend unless we make it something fearful. Our Christian faith-story is that God appoints a Death Angel to minister to us as we make the final transition from whatever lies beyond. This service is provided even to those who are unprepared to appreciate the experience. The Death Angel is our friend; all is well. It is when we choose to fight the Death Angel, that we are fearful because Death never loses. The lesson is to make friends with your Death Angel. I did.

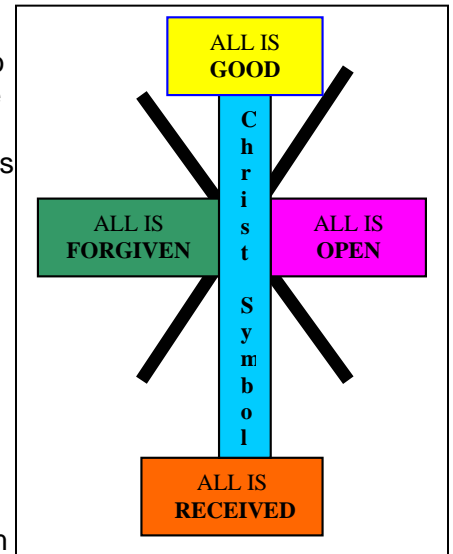
An awareness of this lesson began many years ago when studying a book by Carlos Castaneda, “The Teachings of Don Juan.” Don Juan reports that in a quick look over your left shoulder you can see Death. When you ask Death, “Am I dead yet?” and Death says “No!” You’re not. On the other hand, when you ask Death, “Am I dead yet?” and Death says, “Yes! You are!”<sup>4</sup> Death never lies to you. This is one reason why death is a friend.

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### *Insight: Are we Victors or victims?*

Making Death a friend is supported by a philosophy of being a victor or victim, it is a common experience that we allow our situations and circumstances to define us: For instance. I have a sunburn. Am I a victim of a sunburn? No, the sun is just doing its thing. Our sunburns are the result of bad judgment. The faithful response is to affirm that we are children of God who make bad judgments. As a faithful disciple I learned to define myself by my relationship to God.

One of my favorite stories is about a jogger who passed me while I was out running. The man was running on a prosthesis. Later at the YMCA as we shared the shower, I asked him, “Why do you run?” He thought a moment and said, “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” I replied, “I’m a pastor and I have



<sup>3</sup> This theology is the bed rock of OE/ICA: *The Institute of Cultural Affairs* and the *Order Ecumenical*.

<sup>4</sup> This dialogue with death is from memory and is not a direct quote from the book.

heard it all.” He said, “My running time is my praying time.” I affirmed that I used my running for the same purpose.

Then, I inquired, “Doesn’t it hurt to run on your prosthesis?”

The man looked down at the floor for a moment, and then he raised his eyes to mine and said, “Yes, it does hurt, but I use the pain to remind me to pray.”

Can you hear the Good News in his reply? Here is a man who chooses to use his circumstances rather than allowing his circumstances to use him. When life handed him a lemon he made lemonade.

The reason this story is relevant is that death is circumstantial and inevitable. We could despair, and many do, or we can choose to make lemonade and drink in the tasty brew of death. We only get one chance, so we’d better get it right.

### **Digging out the meaning**

In order to dig out the meaning of my experience with death, it is necessary to use Christian symbolism in the context of my self-story. One fundamental is that the gift of life is the activity of what Christian linguistics means by a “gift of the Lord.” In like manner, the “gift of death,” is the activity of what the Christian tradition means by a “gift of the Lord.” Either way, life and death are affirmations of our relationship to our Meaning Giver, the Lord of our life, the experience of Perfect At-One-Ment, and/or The Guarantor.

### **My sister is present at My Event--**

Lois Printz, my sister, died in February, 2014. She died at a military retirement center in Yountville, California. She was 86 years old. Beverly and I visited her about two weeks prior to her death. What a girl! While we were not close in age, she was 6 years older than me; always we were close emotionally. Susan (Printz) Dupart, Lois’ older daughter and her husband Peter, planned to attend My Event. She suggested that a portion of her mother’s ashes be brought to Salina to participate posthumously in this event. I jumped at the chance as another demonstration dealing with death.

We set up a make-shift altar, with a table scarf, candle and a poster with Lois’ pictures. The ashes were kept in a small, clear vile and placed in a small dish. One of our guests picked up the vile and asked Susan, “Is this incense?” “No,” replied my quick-thinking niece, “That’s just my mother!” This is why I anticipated Susan’s participation. She thinks a lot like her Unk the Hunk.

What is learned is that it is possible to be closer in death to special people than when they are alive. Lois is no longer absent in distance, she is in my heart --in my emotional innards—where she occupies a special place. I can talk to her because of the closeness we share as sister and brother.

### *Insight: My Meditative Council--*

Another aspect of this is that death helps people find their place on my meditative counsel. Along with my sister, my father is there along with John Wesley. At any moment, I can have inner-conversations with these people asking for their advice and council. I confess that I seldom follow their advice because I

seldom followed it when they were alive. None-the-less, I welcome their daily presence.

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*Insight: A little fun with my friend Death—*

It is this philosophy that I used in choosing to get a tattoo. I've donated my body to the **Kansas University Medical School**, and it seemed appropriate that when the assigned med-student turns me over that s/he be greeted by a purple **Kansas State Power Kat**. Around this image is the statement, "Last Laugh."

## Epilogue

There is another phrase in the funeral ritual, ". . . Blest be the Lord!" This phrase is a statement of Thanksgiving. I have lived most of my adult ministry affirming that the meaning of my life is not found in me, it is found in God to whom I owe allegiance. Apart from this Mysterious Presence I am nothing. As a devoted son—prodigal, no doubt—I affirm that:

- I am All that I can be;
- My Exemplar is my brother Jesus;
- Both birth and death are given to me as gifts;
- I exchanged living *independently* from God to living *dependently* on God.

The hymn of Isaac Watts and John Wesley confirms<sup>5</sup>

I'll praise my God who lends me breath  
and when my voice is lost in death,  
praise shall employ my nobler powers.  
My days of praise shall ne'er be past,  
While life and thought, and being last  
Or immortality endures.

Inner Peace, yawl!

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<sup>5</sup> "I'll Praise My Maker While I've Breath. UMC Hymnal # 60

Dear Bill, pastor + friend,

I was unable to come to your living memorial service, but I did want to tell you how much Jim + I have been enriched, for years, by your friendship and knowledge: - Wednesday night services, where we found new friends and rituals (communion served by

- believers to believers, etc.)
- classes of new insights into belief, religion + expanded thoughts and vocabulary.
- learning new ways to show love and caring to the "man on the street we meet."

Please know you have made indelible impressions + knowledge for me + others. Jim + Andy  
May God's peace be with you!!