

Journey of Awakening – 41: Joe Died This Week

By Milan Hamilton, November 18, 2011, published in “Mellow Milan’s Musings” blog

October 1977. I had just returned from my second week in October foray in Maine on the Town Meeting Circuit. The weekly gathering of the TM campaigners was to be in my home base at the Boston Religious House. I was greeted by a somber group including my wife, Linda with:

“Joe died this past week and all the Houses will have a celebration of his life on Sunday!”

Joe Mathews, Dean of the Ecumenical Institute/Institute of Cultural Affairs, formerly on staff at the Christian Faith and Life Community of Austin, Texas, before that on the faculty of Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, and prior to that a Chaplain in the United States Army during the Second World War, was a 66 year-old visionary and transformative force in the 20th Century church renewal movement. The impact of his life went far beyond the confines of the institutional church and the constraints of his Methodist evangelical background. Joe was an iconoclast, a revolutionary thinker, a master teacher, and a plumber of the depths of the human spirit.



Stories of Joe abounded in our Order and among those who encountered him, whether on the seminary or college campuses, in the courses he taught to local church pastors and laymen, or in the many denominational and ecumenical gatherings at which he was invited to speak. There was the time he was to speak to a large gathering of church folk. The time came for his sermon and everyone in the congregation waited for 5 minutes, then 10 minutes, then coming to the conclusion that Joe was late, or not coming. At that point a faint voice was heard from behind the pulpit: “Grace be unto you and Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!” Joe proceeded to give his entire sermon from the enclosure under the large pulpit.

Another time Joe was speaking to a large assembly of leaders of the church in Seoul, Korea. He was warned by one of his Korean colleagues that Korean Christians were some of the most conservative in the world, and knowing of Joe’s propensity for using profanity in order to shock the people of God out of their lethargy, he cautioned him to be careful in his speech. Joe nodded and then took the podium. Looking out over the congregation and making eye contact with as many as he could, he stood silent for several minutes and then let out a booming expletive as the first word out of his mouth, drawing it out so there could be no mistake which word he was using. And of course it was the “F---” word.



These are of course just a few of the apocryphal stories that were told among us. I was not there so I am only reporting it as I heard it.

I first met Joe Mathews when I was teaching at the University of Nebraska, Cotner School of Religion. It was 1966. A campus minister friend invited me to attend a lecture sponsored by United Ministries in Higher Education and the campus YMCA. This was, I later learned, part of a speaking tour on college campuses all across the nation, preceding the offering of weekend courses, called Religious Studies I: The Theological Revolution of the Twentieth Century. Joe was an impressive presence and a powerful orator. To be honest, I only remember one line from his lecture that resonated with me and stuck in my mind:

"There is only one absolute! And that is that there is NO absolute!"

Having majored in philosophy and theology this appealed to me as a self-styled seeker after truth. After the lecture I got a taste of the Joe of the apocryphal stories and added a personal one to my collection. My campus minister friend invited me to his campus church office for a conversation with Joe and a handful of pastors and lay leaders. There were two women in the group who were probably in their late sixties. Joe was waxing eloquent and answering questions. One of his favorite descriptive names for the clergy of the time was "little old ladies of both sexes." He used this term in responding to a question and then, realizing who his audience was, leaned over toward the two ladies and lightly touching one on her hand said: "I mean that in a kindly way." Joe could be repulsive in one minute and then totally win you over in the next.



Most of the men in our Order and many of the women wanted to be like Joe. Hell, we wanted to BE Joe. So we all adopted his little idiosyncrasies, his teaching style, his mannerisms, even his slight stutter when he seemed to be searching for the right phrase but was really setting you up for a point he was about to drive home. Not that we were all little robotic Joes running around the globe. Joe would not tolerate inauthenticity and did not welcome our devotion. Joe wanted to thrust his one life into history and encourage each of us to do the same in obedience to the one mysterious force that gave each one his/her life and would one day as he put it "stomp you into the earth as a bull pawing the ground." Joe was a man of his time and a man for all time.



I did not know Joe personally as many in our group did. So I did not come to love the man as I am sure those close to him did, warts and all. I only remember one other encounter with Joe. It was in the middle of the Town Meeting campaign and we were in Chicago for a meeting of campaign leaders. I was asked to give a report on how the California contingent was doing. We were in the "great hall" on the second floor at the Kemper building, so named because this 8-story ancient office building had been a gift to the ICA by Kemper Insurance Company. After my report I walked to the back of the room and had to pass right by Joe. He always sat in the back of the room by the door. Our eyes met for an instant as he looked up just as I approached and his lips curled into the slightest of smiles, sort of half-way between a grimace and a smile actually. I got the distinct feeling that even though I did not know Joe, he knew me. And I knew in that momentary encounter that my life was approved. All of my past screw-ups and all of my attempts to be somebody, the self-perceived victories and defeats, the betrayals, all of it was OK as it was. The approval I had been seeking from some father figure my whole life was freely given. Joe released me from having to go on seeking approval. That was Joe's gift to me.

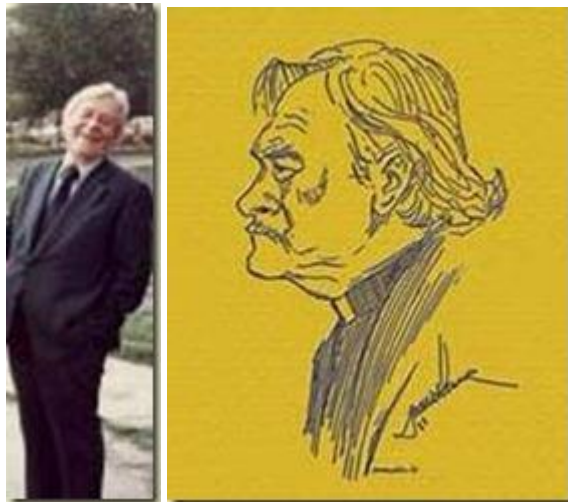
But Joe, like all of us, was mortal. He drank too much. He smoked too much. He drove himself far more than he was ever accused of making demands on others. He got cancer. Joe had a back pain while on a trip to India. He went to a friend of ours who was a nurse in New Delhi who advised him to see a doctor as soon as he returned from this trip. Not long after that he got his final diagnosis. He died in his apartment during a meeting of many of the priors of the Order so that many of his friends and colleagues were able to say their farewells. His wife Lyn and sons and his brother Jim, a Methodist bishop in Washington D.C. were with him.



Those of us who were out on the Town Meeting circuits were informed of Joe's death on that October weekend. We held a memorial service around our dining room table with a meal and communion service, as did those others in Religious Houses in the 50 or so nations that were now part of the Order: Ecumenical, the Ecumenical Institute and the Institute of Cultural Affairs.

Following the weekend we were all sent out to continue our work on the mission of facilitating human community and helping people to see that their lives counted.

And Joe would have had it no other way.



Joseph Wesley Mathews—A 20th Century Phenomenon

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