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When the Poll is Called Up Yonder

Ken Briggs | Nov. 25, 2011 NCR Today

My friend George Gallup Jr. died this week.

He was a fountain of benevolence and cheer, a welcoming and winsome presence. He wrote with grace and charm, spoke melifluously and schmoozed with panache.

These gifts drew on a reservoir of what was, I believe, a Christian vocation that summoned him to Episcopal ordination during his college days at Princeton.

Soon after graduation, he turned away from that ambition to return to his father's famous polling research enterprise where he he channeled his vocational bent into decades as an evangelist for American religion both within the Gallup Organization and as a cure for personal souls.

He made religion integral to a highly political survey operation. Though his father wasn't much interested in religion, his open mindedness gave George Jr. an opening. The son also inhereted his father's generosity and tolerance.

The son was a dutiful keeper of the Gallup flame, safeguarding its integrity and devotion to the principle that democracy depends for its existence on ability and an awareness of public opionion as a political force to balance the array of special interests.

George Jr. took as his life work the cause of reminding his many readers of the influence and variety of spiritual traditions. His books were largely arguments in celebration of religious beliefs to which increasing numbers of Americans were becoming indifferent or hostile.

In that manner, he sustained his call to proclamation. Though he was the loyal son of a famous scion, helping keep a trustworthy face on an institution that became a household word, my sense was that he retained that longing to serve as a minister in a parish.

It is no disrespect for the valuable work that he did to say that he would likely have been a wonderful rector. His demeanor was ministerial, if that translates into anything more than my subjective impression. There were traces in his voice of regret for having held back or having felt held back.

He was in some ways constrained by the battles over women's ordination and openly gay clergy. By disposition, he was inclined toward inclusivity and renewal of understanding, both of which led him to approve both expansions of tradition. But he also felt pressures to please far less liberal elements in the church.

Like all vocations, his was refracted by circumstance and disruptions, I suppose, but was no less compelling than any other. His calling, like all others, ran the risk of compromise and diminishment, but it remained vital and fresh in every new handshake and each heartfelt response to suffering.

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