

MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR KARL J. BELSER

JANUARY 29, 1972

By Rev. Dan Lion

An ancient Greek poet sang:

"Like the leaves in their generations,
such is the race of men.
For the wind casts the leaves from their branches
to earthward, and again
Others the budding greenwood each springtide
beings to birth,
So do men's generations spring up and fade
from earth."

--Homer, ILIAD

This is a richer universe than any of us dream. Thru countless eons the stars have rolled on in beautiful and undiminished speed, lighting we know not what other worlds. Here on earth the seasons have revolved for centuries, and earth has known her ice-ages. Yet seeds have not failed; life has survived, richer for all that is past, and winter yields to spring with her priceless wealth of herb and flower. Loveliest of earth's flowers is the undying spirit of man.

It may be that beyond the seen there lies a still vaster unseen world. Before the sublime mystery of life and spirit, the mystery of infinite space, of endless time, this universe of stars and light and mind, we must stand in reverent awe. This much we know--we are at least one phase of the immortality of life. Like flowers on the river's edge, we bud and bloom, unfold our season of usefulness and beauty, and scatter our treasures to the wind, bequeath our promise to the future. Meanwhile the mighty stream of life flows on, flows on to infinite new beginnings, rich and increasing, of beauty, joy, and love. And in this mighty stream we, too, flow on, not lost, but each eternally significant.

For this I feel--the spirit never does betray the man who trusts it. Physical life may be defeated but life goes on; material goals may fail of achievement and in their very defeat the spirit find a transcendent victory. In this mysterious, this infinite universe, nothing beautiful or worthwhile is ever finally impossible!

As John Muir wrote:

"The rugged old Norsemen spoke of death as Heimgang--home-going. So the snow-flowers go home when they melt and flow to the sea, and the rock-ferns, after unrolling their fronds to the light and beautifying the rocks, roll them up close again in the autumn and blend with the soil. Myriads of rejoicing living creatures, daily, hourly, perhaps every moment sink into death's arms, dust to dust, spirit to spirit--waited on, watched over, noticed only by their Maker, each arriving at its own Heaven-dealt destiny. All the merry dwellers of the trees and streams, and the myriad swarms of the air, called into life by the sunbeam of a summer morning, go home thru death, wings folded perhaps in the last red rays of sunset of the day they were first tried. Trees towering in the sky, braving storms of centuries, flowers turning faces to the light for a single day or hour, having enjoyed their share of life's feast--all alike pass on and away under the law of death and love. Yet all are our brothers and they enjoy life as we do, share Heaven's blessings with us, die and are buried in hallowed ground, come with us out of eternity and return into eternity. 'Our lives are rounded with a sleep.'"

But something continues. We live on!

"What a splendid thing it is to live on in this world after one's body has gone! Only the generous and freehanded, only the fine spirits of this life, have that luxury. It is not the rich, but those who are rich in vision, whose earthly survival is sure.'

--Wm Allen White

We may be sure that Karl Belser lives on, for countless friends, to say nothing of opponents who learned to respect him, have been changed by his patient firmness, his good cheer even under fire, his readiness to see the other side yet to hold to his own convictions firmly, his eagerness to gain a practical forward step for humanity.

He was ahead of his time, yet part of it, pulling, guiding, others forward. He had a vision of a finer future, a community, a county, and a state kept beautiful and open and planned for people's health and well-being and enjoyment. He helped as much as he was able to preserve the orchards and pleasant farming communities that surrounded the metropolitan area, that such elements of freshness and beauty might be enjoyed by our children. He was a vigorous advocate of open space, of controlled growth, rather than cancerous outbursts of all manner of clashing facilities. Subdividers, he knew, for he understood human cupidity as well as human nobility, needed to be restrained to play by the rules of the game. Thru green-belting, and other planning innovations, he protected our priceless natural heritage.

He worked with planners, commissioners, supervisors, and helped them catch glimpses of his dream. He knew how to work with people, not becoming contentious even when his views were not accepted, not lording it over those whom he defeated. His accomplishments were sound, because they were not based on the defeat of someone else.

Thanks to him we have the lovely Vasona Park, we have more open space than otherwise would have been left to us, and we have a Park and Recreation Department concerned to carry on his hopes and dreams.

For many years he was concerned with a somewhat different project, Montalvo, and for this beautiful place he helped choose and guide artists in residence and make Montalvo a cultural center for the whole area.

He did not oppose change, for he knew it was natural and inevitable, but he did his best to see that change was along rational and human lines, and that always there was a concern for order and beauty. Many a young planner came under his influence, and so his work and his ideas continue to spread.

So this man, always modest and humble, yet still very much a man, architect, planner, visionary, professor, UN expert in a foreign land, cultural enthusiast, has left his stamp upon us all, and we are immeasurably enriched.

A friend wrote of him:

"We who associated with Karl over the years always will recall his gentleness, his artistry, his ability to identify with elements far removed from his own background. Our own humanness was broadened thru knowing him." --a beautiful tribute by Pearce Davies of the Quest Club

In such times of trial we turn for strength and light to the poets, for their language of metaphor, of allusion, awakens our own best thoughts.

John Holmes wrote:

"Death this year has taken men
Whose kind we shall not see again.
Pride and skill and friendliness,
Wrath and wisdom and delight,
Are shining still, but shining less,
And clouded to the common sight.
Time will show them clear again.
Time will give us other men
With names to write in burning gold
When they are great and we are old,
But these were royal-hearted, rare.
Memory keeps with loving care
Deeds they did and tales they told.
But living men are hard to spare."

A poem by Robert Frost entitled "A Soldier" seems appropriate:

"He is that fallen lance that lies as hurled,
That lies unlifted now, come dew, come rust,
But still lies pointed as it plowed the dust.
If we who sight along it round the world, See
nothing worthy to have been its mark, It is

because like men we look too near, Forgetting
that as fitted to the sphere, Our missiles
always make too short an arc. They fall, they
rip the grass, they intersect
The curve of earth, and striking, break their own;
They make us cringe for metal-point on stone. But
this we know, the obstacle that checked And tripped
the body, shot the spirit on Further than target
ever showed or shone."

And from Mary Stuart Komenda:

"I know not how these came to be:--
The crystal beauty of a lovely star
Poised for a fleeting moment on a bough;
The wheeling planets' nightly swing
'Twixt sun and sun, nor how
The whirling nebulae fling dust and fire afar.
I cannot guess why constellations rise
And, by the selfsame Power, set
In jeweled splendor in the winter skies;
Unless, perhaps, the compelling Cause
That flung them there,
Brought Man up from the slime and mire
Of Saurian seas, and set his purpose higher
Than the stars, and crowned him with a soul that's
free!"

And so I say to you, be of good courage, for although you
may not escape sadness, it is because the life that has
departed was rich and sweet that you are sad. And whatever
has worth and dignity and beauty is not lost. Nay, this is
the testimony not only of the ages since the dawn of time,
but this is the message of the test-tube and the telescope,
of electron and galaxy, of formula and equation, of seed
and bud and flower and seed again, even as prophets have
proclaimed, and poets sung, that nothing is ever lost, but
that all things change and move throughout eternity.

And dare we not believe that life itself shall be
conserved, though bodies die and pass into the earth;
yea, and that spirit through the crucible of mortality is
not destroyed, but purified, enriched, and made more
great?

Meditation

In the quiet of this hour, we once more would renew our faith in the worthfulness of life, and in the grandeur of the human spirit.

Children of a common mysterious origin are we all, flung up by forces beyond our comprehension, fragments of some inscrutable but wondrous Power. We are likewise co-partners in a common mysterious Destiny.

Here on a little planet-island, in a vast ocean space, for a brief moment in a vast expanse of time, we are brought together by some Cosmic Coincidence, and whether we like it or not, we must live together and make the best of a common lot. If we have wisdom, we shall strive "to be comrades in the quest for the high places of life." We shall perfect the art of helping one another, and the science of mutual understanding: We shall continually keep our faces toward the Light. We shall gladly shoulder our share of duty, however far we may be from solving the riddle of its meaning. We shall realize that we are the indispensable link between the world that was and the better world that is to be. We shall resolve to pass on the torch of knowledge, at least undimmed, and if possible, with even brighter flame. We shall bequeath to those who come after a better and a kinder earth than we have found.

And when we are done with this life here, may we confront the mystery of death with hearts courageous and unafraid-- ready to quit this planet like self-respecting heroes-- confident that whatever good lies beyond will come to us as surely and as inevitably as ocean tides come to the remotest shore.

Amen

Now I offer a final word from Frost, to steady us in the days ahead. It is from the poem "Choose Something Like a Star":

The Star
"...asks a
little of us
here. It asks of
us a certain

height, So when
at times the mob
is swayed To
carry praise or
blame too far,
We may choose
something like a
star To stay our
minds on and be
staid."

Benediction

Now may the peace of God, which passeth all
understanding, that peace which the world can neither
give nor take away, be and abide with you, to comfort,
to strengthen, and to bless, this day and forevermore.

Amen

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