

ART WILMOT: THE OTHER LIBERAL ART

I'm not sure it was meant as a compliment.

The "liberal Art's" label was applied by a conservative Presbyterian minister at a meeting of Corvallis clergy. I'm sure he wouldn't like being labeled conservative any more than we liked being labeled liberal. Labels are ways we put people into boxes.

We laughed about it. Both of us have been excluded from ministerial associations because we didn't fit the creed-boxes of others.

I was always honored to be in a box of the same label as the other Art.

He was younger than me but we had common history of sorts. He went to Franklin High in south Seattle while I attended Roosevelt in north Seattle. He also attended the University of Washington several years after my graduation. Art attended the Presbyterian Church on 15th NE while I attended the Christian Church one block away.

The conservative Presbyterian minister was preaching about the theological failings of the Unitarians around the corner. Art decided to hear for himself. He agreed with the Unitarians more than he did the Presbyterians.

While neither of us applied "liberal" as a label for ourselves I like to think that both of us agreed with the Webster definition of "liberal."

li-be-ral: favoring progress or reform; free from prejudice, tolerant; characterized by generosity; ample or abundant; not strict or literal; a person of liberal principle or views (Webster's Dictionary, Third Edition)

Memories:

Meeting Art for the first time at the dedication of Chip Ross Park in Corvallis, a memorial to him. The Ross family was Unitarian, so Art was invited to do a prayer. Chip's sister, Nancy, was a member of the Christian Church where I was minister. So I was also asked to do a prayer. Art had just arrived in Corvallis. He confessed that he didn't like to pray, public or anywhere. I told him I shared his sentiments.

Discovering Art was a fly-fisher. He didn't seem the type. Art really wasn't a type. He preached one of his sermons about fly-fishing. A list of his sermon topics would probably make a good memorial.

Laughing with him about his one-time passion for Cadillacs...and for cigars, both of which he later gave up.

The time he and Heather appeared at our cabin, Art driving a bus-sized motor home, then telling me of having problems seeing!

Occasional joint letters to the newspaper that we signed "the liberal Art's." If that's what people wanted to call us, we'd just as well enjoy it.

Conversations about church issues and all manner of things...his humor and laughter.

The giant picture of Michael Jordan on his wall...and other off-the-wall humor.

His trust in me as his church was growing and attempting multi-staffing and double services, using my counsel from experience in my own churches.

His use of me to fill in for him during an occasional illness or absence. I remember speaking to the small congregation of maybe 35 that met in a small building. Then in later years speaking to two full services after a new building was completed.

Watching Art's wonderment that so many families responded to the "liberal" style of his thinking and congregational life.

Remembering the ordination of Jill McAllister, who worked with Art in development of the Religious Ed program, being a key assistant during those rapid growth years...then hearing that she has been called back to be Senior Minister of the Corvallis Fellowship after many years in the mid-west.

Thinking that Jill's first official function as new pastor will be the planning of Art's memorial service.

The last time I saw Art was at the Unitarian Fellowship memorial service for Elsie Ross. When I saw Heather wheeling him in I came from the podium to share a warm greeting. He couldn't speak, due to advanced Parkinson's, but there was joy and friendship in our meeting. I heard someone whisper. "There are the liberal Art's."

I'll be back in Corvallis again for his service on September 15. May the Great Spirit of honest heretics and infamous liberals be with us all...and you too.

For the Moment... the other "liberal Art."