

Remembering JFK and a special speech

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November is where John Kennedy rests. I turn the calendar to the 11th month and every year I find him there. And then I find my dad. He loved JFK. He believed in him. Still does. It's been nearly 30 years since that day in Dallas, and John Kennedy is still alive in my father's life.

I was 3 when Kennedy was assassinated so I do not remember where I was or what I was doing when he was shot. I do remember, though, when I first learned about him. It was Nov. 22, sometime in the late '60s. My dad and I were watching a memorial broadcast and he explained to me who John Kennedy was and what happened in Dallas. My most vivid memory from that broadcast is of the Kennedy kids. I understood that they had lost their dad. It was the saddest thing I could imagine. We had a good cry together that night, dad and I.

Our tears came in tandem but we wept in a separate sadness. John Kennedy was more than a president to dad. He was a hero, larger than life. My father is of that generation that was inspired by the thousand days, by "Camelot," by "Ask not what your country can do for you..."

I wanted to understand my father's sadness and to share it with him, but to me it wasn't a president who fell that November day, it was dad.

Nearly everything I learned later about Kennedy pointed to the fact that he was not a giant but a man. He delivered powerful speeches, but many were written by others. He averted a disaster of worldwide proportions, but some say he also precipitated it. He had a beautiful wife, but there were hushed rumors about other women. His father financed the political campaigns with funds amassed over the years, allegedly from Prohibition bootlegging. John Kennedy, however, donated his senatorial and presidential salaries to charity. I learned a little about politics.

I admired Kennedy, but my admiration was tempered with the jaded political legacy of my generation. I came of age in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal and watched the return of Vietnam vets. There was little of which I was proud. Washington so fueled the fires of cynicism in me that it wasn't until I went to college that I found the John Kennedy my father loved.

I attended Trinity College, a small Catholic women's school in Washington. I heard that Kennedy had delivered the commencement address in 1958, so one day I rifled through old alumnae journals to find the text.

It was a warm speech. He praised women's education and encouraged the graduating seniors to "consider entering politics at some stage in your career." He asserted that "politics has become one of our most neglected, our most abused and our most ignored professions."

He discussed the perception that politics



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and scholarship occupy separate spheres in America, but he went on to say, "What we need are men and women who can ride easily over broad fields of knowledge and recognize the mutual dependence of the two worlds of politics and scholarship."

He cited John Adams and Thomas Jefferson as examples of Americans with the talent to balance these two arenas. Putting a good education to work in public service was the leitmotif of his remarks, but buried in the middle, almost unnoticeable, he observed, "Our political leaders must be drawn from the ranks of our most capable, dedicated citizens, regardless of sex."

Regardless of sex. In 1958. That was it; he'd won my heart. He had vision. Betty Friedan hadn't written "The Feminine Mystique," yet here was a senator from Massachusetts encouraging a group of young women to defy convention and enter the field of politics.

I walked away from reading that speech and gradually became aware of what John Kennedy brought to the American people. Things I'd taken for granted - funds for the arts, the Peace Corps, VISTA, civil rights -

popped into historical perspective.

Recently I asked my father if he'd ever gone to Columbia Point, to the JFK Library.

"No," he replied, "I never have made it out there."

It sounded as though he never would. Maybe because a trip to the library means acknowledging that there has been no president since JFK who has so encouraged public service. No president since who behaved as if those he represents - and to whom, according to the premise of democracy, he is accountable - matter.

A visit to the library would force accepting the death of a man as well as his dream. It might also be a good way to let go of the sadness and to say goodbye.

But maybe dad doesn't want to let go or say goodbye. Maybe it's his way of holding onto all the things John Kennedy gave him. And I'll wager there are scores of others like him who have never managed to say goodbye either.

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