

Thursday, April 21st, 2005
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

**A TIME TO PRAY, TO HOPE, TO BE
CONCERNED, AND TO REMEMBER.**

Life for most of us is pretty predictable. We have our day in, day out routine that we come to terms with. But every now and then, it gets a bit more convoluted. Maybe it's a serious illness of a loved one or a friend. Perhaps even a death. And even more problematical forces, like the death of a Pope, can cause us to look inward and do a little soul searching. And your emotions, if you're anything like me, run the gamut of highs and lows, joys and sorrows, good memories, and a focus on where you ought to go from here.

I lost several friends this past week. Two were colleagues who served with me in public life for a number of years. Both unique, and both could list accomplishments that all of us would envy.

Louisiana Senator John Hainkel was an institution in Louisiana. He was the only person in America who was elected both as speaker of a state House of Representatives and as President of a state Senate. But the wonderful thing about John Hainkel was that politics in itself was not his sole focus. He was, almost uniquely, a "people person" in everything he did. Gregarious, outgoing, so full of life.

And he was easy to spot. You could see him coming a mile away, in his green and olive Tulane University striped tie, and his wrinkled seersucker suit. He was a major government reformer in the late 60's when it wasn't the "in thing" to be. He was a major national legislative leader, and when he was on your side in a good political fight, he was as good as they get.

Even though we were of different political parties, he supported me in every successful race I ran. He was only 67 when he passed away last week. We will miss you in many ways, John Hainkel.

Louisiana State Senator Ron Bean also died this week. He was active, legislatively, in insurance issues, and helped me time and again on important legislation. But, much more importantly, he was a true American hero.

Ron was an army helicopter pilot who flew President Richard Nixon on Marine One. In May of 1973, Ron's helicopter had major mechanical problems, and he had to ditch in the ocean. He dove down into the water time and time again, saving seven people who could not get free. In doing so, he ingested jet fuel that caused him problems for the rest of his life.

Ron had two kidney transplants and continued to serve in the state Senate with a great deal of pain and insurmountable courage. When both were still alive, Senator John Hainkel took to the floor of the Senate and called Ron “the ultimate in courage.” He was only 66 years old. Thank you, Ron Bean for all the things you did. For your country, for your state, and for lots of folks like me.

And remember John Fred? If you live in Baton Rouge, or really anywhere in the south, everyone knows his hits. I had just been released from the Army in 1967 and was practicing law in Ferriday, Louisiana. We all knew the words to most of the Beatles songs. John Fred came out of nowhere in December of that year and recorded one of the best parodies I ever heard. He made fun of “Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds” with his own version called “Judy In Disguise (With Glasses).” What a great song.

His brother-in-law was a colleague of mine in several public offices I held. He had a number of great John Fred stories. In his prime, John was all over town, volunteering to help in a number of charitable causes, and always willing to play for any local benefit. He was 63 last week when he died. Only 63.

When your birthday is just a few weeks away and you are approaching 65, the passing of these friends who died so young takes a toll and causes you, me, anyone a little older to try to put it all in perspective.

A few days ago, I stopped by Our Lady of Mercy Catholic Church. It's in my neighborhood. No, I'm not Catholic. But the church has a small side chapel that stays open 24 hours a day. A marvelous place to get away and meditate if you live in Baton Rouge. I was pausing to pray for my lost friends, and for the new Pope.

I believe the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church is important to all of us. The health and vitality of the Catholic Church reflects the health and vitality of the two billion Christians worldwide. It matters to all of us. Virtually none of us have any idea who heads up any other Christian denomination. Well, perhaps maybe that Prince Charles (can you believe?) is the titular head of the Episcopal Church of England. But the Pope is universally known. I dare say Pope John Paul II was the most recognized person in the world.

The Catholic Church is like the Yankees. People, Catholic or not, closely follow everything that happens to their flock--good or bad. Those of us who are non-Catholics regularly pass judgment on their beliefs, their politics and their problems.

And the Catholic Church does have problems. They're big. We all know that. When I was in Italy and France last summer, I visited a number of cathedrals. But even on Sunday, they were virtually empty. Mass was often said in a small

side chapel. Some of Europe's most stunning, amazing Churches seemed reduced to little more than monuments for tourists to admire.

George Weigel has a new book called "The Cube and the Cathedral." In it, he describes a European culture that has become not only increasingly secular, but in many cases downright hostile to Christianity. "European man has convinced himself that in order to be modern and free, he must be radically secular," Weigel writes. "That conviction and its public consequences are at the root of Europe's contemporary crisis of civilizational morale."

Translated, the new top guy has his work cut out for him.

I stopped by to say hello to my friend Father Miles Walsh, who is the pastor of Our Lady of Mercy. He is one of the most perceptive religious leaders I know, and being so young, has a bright future in the Catholic Church. I pointedly asked him whether the new Pope would do little more than maintain the status quo as some in the press have speculated.

"Don't pre-judge this man," Father Walsh urged. "He has a new role in the church. His role has changed. For many years, he has been second in command to Pope John Paul. He was the enforcer of the church's dicta. But he has gone from the enforcer to the Father. It may be essential for him to bring about some change. But not in core Catholic beliefs. Give him a chance. If he has been viewed as somewhat conservative, this may actually give him more credibility in suggesting needed changes."

I asked him to elaborate.

"Remember when Nixon went to China? He was viewed as a conservative president, and he wasn't challenged that much in his decision to make this journey."

Good point. I guess what he was telling me was that if Pope Benedict XVI wants to be a religious populist and bring more openness and ecumenicalism, he comes from a strategically better philosophical background that gives him a stronger chance for success. If he is so inclined. And that, for now, is a big if.

I really haven't strayed off the topic of this column, whatever it started out to be. You see, when you approach sixty five, losing friends, and the importance of religious beliefs (your own as well as others), can take on a much greater importance. Just as the Church is struggling, we all go through a daily struggle of our own physical and spiritual health and vitality.

Someone once said that a great life is born in the soul, grown in the mind, and lived from the heart. But you can't do all this alone. Friendships, family, and a spiritual concern, for most of us, are a recipe for a full and rewarding life. We

all know that. It's just that, because of events in the past week, there was a little pause to reflect and try to make some rhyme or reason of it all. I just hope, at some point in my life, if all comes together and makes more sense. I'm sure it will. But then, maybe not.

To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wildflower,
hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.

William Blake

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

(Jim Brown's weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.)