

Celebrating a life

Dr. "J" June 22, 2004

Time, they say is a healer. It is also a changer, a reflector, a calibrator, and a provider of perspective. It doesn't come and go. We come and go. Time just sits there. It is. But it is during our comings and goings that it works its magic—does that thing it does.

Oftentimes it leaves the abrasions of loss upon us. Someone we greatly admire passes on to the "next" and we are left to put it all together and make sense of the hole and the whole. The hole is that void where they once played such an important role in this great illusion. The whole, like time, its foremost constituent, just is.

A while back, news of such a departure spread among my countrymen. The collective stunning of whatever comfort zone we still had left was overwhelming. As the overall sense of what had changed settled-in, our day-to-day behavior defaulted to the natural, and seemingly required, rituals of culture.

We wrapped ourselves in our tribal blanket and through veils of disbelief began the process of communing. Tributes and tears flowed from the faithful, more numerous than stars in the sky. No memorial was too great to serve as counterweight to what he had left us. All agreed that this place was a much better place for the time he spent here.

Now it was our turn to do—to keep the faith and carry on in, and with, his spirit. But first there was the inventory that had to be dealt with. We were all named in the will, after all--all of us, not just those who loved him and believed in his vision.

There are many who never even heard of him whose lives are enriched from the trickle-down effect, you might say, of his policies. Although they were never in his inner circle, they felt they knew him on a deeply personal level. This kinship was enough to put them in long lines to pay final respects. There was even talk of adding him to Mount Rushmore.

They were surprised by the depth of their emotions. His physical presence had been with them for so long that they never thought they would have to live without it. It was reassuring to see his grinning mug on television and in the print media. The twinkle in his eye showered the people. Clouds of joy will do that.

Not to worry, however. Ray Charles will always be among us. His spirit is too large to fit in a box or, once allowed access, vanish from our hearts. He was the first secretary of my interior. His gospels of love, both physical and transcendental, rang true, and, praise be, there is the legacy of his music to nourish our hungry hearts in time of need.

It has been said that Ray Charles sang to our soul, played the piano like it was a woman, and taught us all how to joyously shake our thing. He wed the rhythms of the church with the secular down-to-earth nitty-gritty of man and woman and never saw the need to separate the heavenly from the Heavenly. He had a woman way over town, she was good to him. Oh, yeah!

He loved his country totally and held it to standards somewhat higher than those with which others were comfortable. His classic rearrangement of the verse order in his beautiful and haunting version of "America the Beautiful" was yet another raising of this bar.

He kicks it off with the second verse which speaks of heroes "who more than self, their country loved, and mercy more than life." The implication being that America must earn the verse that follows. "Oh beautiful, for spacious skies..." should also speak to our interior landscape. Ray was all about the many levels of love.

And you certainly couldn't accuse him of only preaching to the choir. He took his message to what many of his peers thought of as the enemy camp when he performed a most stirring version of the song at the 1984 Republican Convention. Ray Charles was one ecumenical preacher-man.

And as far as that Mount Rushmore idea goes, it makes perfect sense in this quarter. But I don't think Ray would be comfortable on land held sacred by another culture. The time may come, however, when the truly gifted of our kind will be sculpted into rock as a tribute to their contribution.

Close your eyes for a second and you'll notice Ray in shades with head tossed back nestled between Louis Armstrong and Robert Johnson. That other guy is Hank Williams. Billy Holiday should be showing up soon.

Some say he invented rock and soul and, most certainly, he re-invented country back in 1962 with "Born To Lose" and "I Can't Stop Lovin' You." He would have an impact upon Willie Nelson, B. B. King, Elton John, Norah Jones, and Bonnie Raitt, all of whom were involved in his latest recording project, an album of duets set for release later this summer.

His influence upon lives cannot be quantified, however. He reached millions with his art. Blind since childhood, his pain fueled a seemingly bottomless reservoir of faith, hope and charity. It took hip-replacement surgery last fall to bring about the first cancellation of a tour in 53 years on the road.

When they put together the 10-member inaugural class of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame back in 1986, Ray was included along with Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, and James Brown, among others. The following year he received a Lifetime Achievement award at the Grammys.

And now, that lucky old Ray has nothing to do but roll around heaven all day. Time is on his side. He hit the road, Jack!