

“Bearing Witness” introduction by Oby Ballinger
and “Remembering Murray” by Karin B. Miller
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Acts 1:1-14

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

At the opening of our scripture passage today, the disciples who followed Jesus are under what is in effect a shelter-in-place order. After his resurrection, Jesus ordered them “not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father”. They were frozen in time, suspended in space, waiting in place for a future that had yet to unfold.

There are two words of special significance in this passage. The first is the word “apostle”, how the writer of Acts characterizes those who were gathered around with the risen Jesus. Note that they’re not called “disciples” any longer, as though they were secondary characters to the main feature, the teacher, the messiah Jesus. No, now it’s on them, because “apostle” means “one who is sent” according to the Greek word from which this term comes. Their job has changed from the earlier role of being students and learners, followers of Jesus. Now the focus is no longer on an exemplary leader, but instead on them as ambassadors and messengers of the Risen One, “witnesses” to Christ. This is a major job transition, perhaps something akin to what you’re going through. The new apostles are in the deep end and not prepared for this, but Jesus promises to be with them.

The other key word here is “witness”, which in Greek is *martyria*. This means one who gives testimony, as we understand witnesses to do in the courtroom. However, the word is also that of our English word “martyr”, meaning to put one’s body and soul on the line for one’s beliefs. Being a witness in this sense means both talking about the promise of Jesus, and doing the things of Jesus: healing, teaching, even giving one’s life for this mission. Christians manifest in our bodies—with our entire lives—the teachings and Good News of Christ. Saint Teresa of Avila, centuries ago, put it this way: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you

are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” In the world after the Ascension of Christ, the apostles and all those of us who come afterwards are commissioned to *be* the body and soul of Christ, still here on earth, for the good of the world.

One of the ways we “bear witness” as humanity is by keeping alive the stories of our history, both those that are inspiring and those that are dreadful. That’s why there are annual observances to remember the Holocaust; today and the first part of this week are known as the “Days of Remembrance”. Bearing witness herself and giving us an example of how to carefully tend what *we* witness, Karin Miller shares now a story that she has written, in the spirit of Holocaust Remembrance.

Remembering Murray

by Karin B. Miller

My best paychecks—all given to me by one man—included home-canned pickles, a giant jar of strawberry jam, and a beautiful corsage.

I met Murray the first weekend we spent in our new house in St. Louis Park. The day before we’d found several neighbors knocking at our door—all welcoming us to our street. Clara, a retired nurse, had brought flowers and a word of caution: “Your next-door neighbor is a Holocaust survivor. Don’t ever ask him about the war—he never speaks of it.”

But the next day I returned home to find my husband, Thom, chatting away with a slight and balding man in our driveway. Murray greeted me with a broad smile. “I hear you’re a writer,” he said, his Polish accent still intact. “Maybe you can help me write my Holocaust memoirs.” I was gobsmacked, to say the least, but immediately agreed to help him.

But Clara had been exactly right. Until that day, ever since the end of World War II, Murray had never shared details of his imprisonment—not with friends, not with his children, not even with his wife of fifty years, Marlene.

“Life is hard enough,” he explained. “I didn’t want to burden them.” But, having experienced a few health problems, Murray now wanted his family to know what he and millions of others had suffered.

About this time, I was having questions about my Christian faith. I’d been raised Lutheran and the only evangelical effort I’d ever made was singing “Silent Night” a couple of times to a darling Jewish baby I regularly babysat in middle school. (Yes, I cringe at the thought now.) But my faith had changed, and I now believed that other faiths also provided paths to God. Yet this new approach also made feel distant from God.

That’s just one reason I view Murray as a gift of grace in my life.

Initially, Murray found telling his story to a writer and near stranger infinitely easier than telling someone he loved. I understood: Thom had been diagnosed with cancer two years before, and I always found it simpler to tell strangers in a clinic lobby about his treatment than loved ones from whom I couldn’t hide my anguish.

And so Murray told me of his capture by Nazis at age 14, of the dangerous slave-labor jobs and inhumane living conditions he endured at five labor and concentration camps. He told me of the prisoners he saw killed in cold blood and those who killed themselves, running straight into electric fences rather than endure one more day. He told me of piles of prisoners’ suitcases he was put in charge of—and of piles of human bodies that he and others were forced to move to a crematorium. He told me of losing nearly every member of his family in concentration camps.

Why did Murray survive? Like many others, thanks to determination, youth, a bit of luck, and hope. Plus, his God-given talent for singing.

“I remember one sunny morning sitting on the grass singing—singing for self-preservation,” he said. “I kept hoping for a better day, which seemed nearly impossible. But if I didn’t have hope, I knew I would never survive.”

Murray was such a talented singer that he’d sometimes get extra food if he sang for the often cruel and sadistic camp guards. And at one point, on a death march, when Murray was pulled aside by the Death Commando and about to be shot, he also sang:

“The SS executioner was a rough guy,” Murray said, “I noticed that there was no one else to be executed at that point but me. Maybe he was too lazy to go into the forest to shoot just one prisoner. Or maybe he had a son my age. I don’t know what was going through my mind, but I had nothing to lose. I opened my mouth and began to sing.

“I sang for maybe two minutes. I don’t know what song I sang, something in Yiddish, maybe a folk song. But it was the solo of my life.

“For whatever reason, the executioner, this man who shot prisoner after prisoner without a thought, listened to my song and then ordered the Death Commando to send me back to the line of prisoners. ... My life had been saved.”

As Murray and I wrote his story over two years, it wasn’t unusual to find him at our door with a plate of hot latkes or vegetables from his garden. He helped my husband build our garage from the ground up. And one morning, I pulled up the window blind to find a snowman he’d built as a surprise beneath our daughter’s window. Despite everything he’d endured, despite sometimes feeling, as he took his daily walk, that someone was still watching him, Murray enjoyed his life and made others’ lives better too.

After publishing his memoir, Murray was invited to share his story with a large audience at a synagogue. Amazingly, after five decades of never speaking of his experiences, he accepted. Having shared his story with me and then his family, he felt strongly about the need to spread it more widely—especially as he learned about those who claimed the Holocaust was a hoax and saw continued anti-Semitism. Soon, he spoke regularly—at synagogues and churches, colleges and high schools. One university even sent a limo to fetch him. Murray loved that.

After a few years, Murray and Marlene moved a few miles away, but we remained close. He shared students’ thank-yous he received after speaking, frequently brought treats for our children, and offered thoughtful wisdom on all kinds of subjects.

Thom and I had dinners with them, attended a synagogue choir event held in his honor, and printed his emails when his computer didn’t cooperate. I remember how amazed he was by his new car radio, showing me how he could use his voice to play favorite stations, especially an all-music Latin station. “It’s in Spanish,” I said. “I like the beat,” he responded. I even ran lines with him when he tried out for the film *A Serious Man*. Impressively, one of the Coen brothers (he wasn’t sure which) gave him a standing ovation during a callback.

It’s been nearly eight years since Murray passed away, and I still miss him. I think of him often and the exemplary role model he was for me, my family, and countless others. For our final visit with him, one of our daughters, Mia, and I brought cupcakes to celebrate his 86th birthday.

Murray dedicated his memoir to his children. “I want you to understand what can happen when good people do nothing,” he wrote, “when they don’t care about or allow freedom of expression, when they look away when neighbors are abused, when they place economic well-being ahead of basic human values.” Unfortunately, Murray’s message resonates strongly today.

Tomorrow is Holocaust Remembrance Day. My family will light a candle in Murray’s honor. For his courage, his grace, his love, and his life.