Louis D. Brandeis

by James B. O’Hara

Anyone who has attended my courses on American legal history knows how much I admire the great Supreme Court justice Louis D. Brandeis. Scholars tend to rank him as one of the most influential judges the country has ever had. Only John Marshall and Oliver Wendell Holmes are ever suggested as being of greater importance. But even Holmes has no major university named for him as Brandeis does. It is safe to say that Louis Brandeis would be a major figure in the history of American law and in the history of American Judaism even if he had never been appointed to the Supreme Court.

Brandeis was born into a well-to-do immigrant Jewish family in Louisville, shortly before the Civil War began. His early education was in Louisville private schools. But when he was 16, the family began a three-year “grand tour” of Europe, where the young man became fluent in German and French and acquired an academic reading knowledge of Latin and Greek while attending school in Dresden.

Upon his return, young Brandeis matriculated at Harvard Law School. While a college degree was not required to enter law school at that time, students normally did have some college experience. Brandeis, however, enrolled without a single day of college and achieved the highest grade point average in the history of the school. That average was never equaled during the time Harvard used the old numerical point system!

Most people have a single career in life. A few have two. Brandeis had four. He was 1) a practicing lawyer; 2) a reformer; 3) an American Zionist leader; and 4) a Supreme Court justice. At all four he excelled.

By sheer force of intellect, Brandeis quickly became one of Boston’s most important corporate attorneys. He was the central figure of a law firm remarkable for its sophistication and competence, and his clients were a “Who’s Who” of New England manufacturing. He quickly amassed a fortune, which freed him to devote greater time to causes he deeply believed in. (As an aside, he was never showy about money. Brandeis and his wife Alice lived well, but simply.)

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As a reformer, Brandeis became interested in questions of public policy. Dubbing himself “The People's Lawyer,” he gave legal assistance to progressive causes, without fee, sometimes making powerful enemies of Boston's Brahmin establishment. He battled the insurance industry, the railroad aristocracy, and the scions of great wealth who owned and operated New England’s manufacturing base. On the national level, he took on President Taft by challenging Taft’s secretary of the interior. He became a trusted advisor of the great progressive senator Robert La Follette, Sr., and New Jersey governor Woodrow Wilson. When Wilson became president, there was speculation that Brandeis would become attorney general or secretary of commerce.

Fairly late in life, Brandeis was introduced to Zionism—the dream of Theodore Herzl that there could be a Jewish national homeland in Palestine. Brandeis was an unlikely convert to this cause. He had been raised in a non-observant Jewish household, although an uncle, Lewis Dembitz, was a distinguished Talmudic scholar. Though they never denied their Jewish heritage, and indeed were proud of it, the Brandeis family had no synagogue affiliation and did not really identify with the larger Jewish community in Louisville or in Boston. But, in his fifties, Louis became entranced with Herzl's vision. In less than a decade, he was one of the country’s most recognized Jewish leaders. He brought direction, good management, vitality, and enormous enthusiasm to the Zionist Movement in America. Only after he assumed his duties on the Supreme Court and after marked differences of opinion with European Zionism did his zeal dampen. Brandeis then turned over his leadership to others.

His fourth career was, of course, on the Supreme Court. There he led the Court to a new vision of the law—joining forces with Holmes and, later, with Justice Harlan Stone. His contribution to free speech jurisprudence has ramifications even to the present. His understanding of the relationship between the federal government and individual states brought new insight to an area of constitutional law long neglected. Finally, his mastery of the facts of cases helped judges and lawyers to see the law as something concrete, not abstract. In Brandeis' understanding, law was not just a set of principles to which people had to conform, but a set of practical norms arising from the ethics and interaction of individuals. Law, he believed, developed from the bottom up.

Brandeis has been the subject of many biographies and legal studies. In the 1950s, Princeton professor Alpheus Mason attempted a lengthy study. But that effort was too close to Brandeis' death and is hopelessly outdated. A truly definitive biography has long been needed.

*Louis D. Brandeis*, a massive new biography (953 pages: Pantheon, $40) has now appeared. While length will scare away some readers, this volume is a major contribution to Supreme Court scholarship and will, I am sure, spur new academic interest in the work of this extraordinary man.

It will also alert a new generation to the brilliance of Brandeis’ achievements. Its author is the distinguished historian Melvin I. Urofsky who, as a younger man, edited the Brandeis papers. Surely no one is more familiar with Brandeis scholarship or with his writings. But Urofsky brought additional credentials to the task. He is an important legal and Supreme Court historian. He has written extensively on the history of American Judaism. And he writes well, avoiding complex legal terminology.

A personal note: in my own study of Supreme Court history, I have read extensively about Brandeis and the Court in the early twentieth century and particularly
about its clashes with Franklin Roosevelt before World War II. Much of the story Urofsky tells is not new to me. What is new—and extremely fascinating—is the interwoven tale of the growing importance of American Judaism as a moral and cultural force in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century. The nuances of that history will, I believe, be informative to Jewish readers also. One can readily understand why Brandeis, the lawyer and judge, is so important an icon.

I Wish

by Martha McCoy

The skill of painting still eludes me.
Artist groups will not include me.
My brush stroke’s clumsy, paint’s too runny,
Pen and pencil just look funny.

My mother, father, sister, brother
Paint with flair; admire each other’s
Oils, acrylics, charcoal sketches.
My attempts are truly wretched.

Bathroom walls and outdoor chairs,
I paint them all with layers and layers;
Increase their worth – add to their charms,
They welcome me with open arms.

I still would rather sketch or paint
But my attempts make people faint.
In conclusion, let me state:
Great artwork seems not my fate.

Shakedown Cruise

by Leight Johnson

October is not the best time of year to try out a new boat, but we couldn't wait for spring. It was our first boat, and I was anxious to see how she sailed. No matter that it was cool and cloudy in Annapolis: there was a nice breeze, too good to pass up. So off we went.

Our crew consisted of my wife, ten-year-old daughter, seven- and four-year-old sons, and six-month-old Pancake. Pancake, I should add, was our English bulldog puppy. I'd been sailing since I was a teenager, but the others were not experienced sailors. No matter, I could handle a 22-foot sailboat by myself, so long as the others stayed out of the way.

On a crisp Saturday afternoon we hoisted sail and headed out into the harbor. All went well for about the first minute until Pancake, who had not seen a body of water larger than the toilet bowl, leaped overboard. This prompted a flurry of advice to me, none of it useful, and all of it ignored.

Retrieving an object from the water, dead or alive, while underway, is a tricky business. Lacking an auxiliary engine, you have to do it under sail alone. If you have sailed, you can appreciate the difficulty, and if you haven't, I won't bore you with the nautical jargon. Simply put, you have to turn the boat around, get back to the floating object, slow down when you get there, and pick it up.

The target of our maneuver, Pancake, was swimming capably in spite of no previous practice and appeared calmer than most of my crew. We reversed course, reached her without delay, and headed into the wind to slow nearly to a stop. With one hand on the tiller, I reached over the side, grabbed her with my whole arm and hauled her aboard. Mission accomplished!

However, this left me soaked to the shoulder in a heavy wool sweater over a heavy shirt. In the cool breeze this quickly became extremely uncomfortable, and we cut short the cruise, satisfied that our boat was seaworthy and that puppies can swim.
The Bike

by Lew Schneider

I begin with a story by John Cheever: A man on a business trip is travelling by air to New York, headed towards his home on Long Island. Something goes wrong with the airplane and, after a terrifying time, the plane is brought to a safe landing in Philadelphia. The man finally arrives home, and shaken by the realization that he was close to death, is eager to talk about his experience. But his wife and children are wrapped up in their own small problems of the moment. He can't get his wife's attention. Finally, everyone goes to bed and he never gets to tell his story.

My mother was afraid of bicycles and, as a boy, I never had one. I learned to ride on other kids' bikes, but was never really agile on one. Later on, although I was generally lacking in athletic grace, I had a tendency to think, prematurely, that I'd grasped the art of something, whereupon I went at it with overconfidence, inevitably coming to grief in a terrific crash. By the time my children were grown I had written off skiing and skating.

My daughter was at home for a period after she'd graduated from college. She owned an Italian-made ten-speed bike and, one fine day a little before dinner, I looked at the lovely machine resting against the wall in the garage. I had to try it. I wheeled it out and hopped up on the narrow seat. We lived on a cul-de-sac at the top of a hill. I began to ride round and round, feeling like I was gliding on clouds. I tried the gears.

La de da.

I swiftly whirled around the circle ready for more adventure. I coasted down the street, around the corner and circled the block. The return route was via a bicycle path up over a small hill before descending on a paved path leading into our cul-de-sac. I had walked this way a thousand times. There was an apple tree at the top and a curve, and then the path between the split-rail fences bordering my house and my neighbor's. La de da. I had the bike in the top gear and swiftly came over the hill, caught suddenly in the realization that the curve in the path was a sharp turn at high speed and the space between the fences, which was actually about eight-feet wide, appeared to be about six inches. Catastrophe. The wheels slipped out from under me as I tried to make the turn. I have no memory of the actual fall, just that I was lying on my back looking into the sky, the bike several feet away, its wheels spinning against the sky.

I got up dusty, pants torn, arms scraped. The two halves of my black-rimmed eyeglasses were lying on the ground. I felt like an idiot. But no one had seen the accident. I picked up the bike, which didn't appear damaged, and walked it into the garage. When I went inside, my wife was setting dinner on the table. I never went without glasses, and in those days frames with heavy black rims were the style. We sat down. Neither my wife nor daughter seemed to notice anything amiss. I decided to wait it out. Surely, they would observe something unusual in my appearance. We ate. We talked. It took about fifteen minutes before my daughter said, "Dad, why aren't you wearing your glasses?" And then, "Oh my God! You're all dusty and you're bleeding..."

And that's when I thought of Cheever's story.

Interlude

by Martha McCoy

"Eight degrees is just too cold," I mutter to myself as I climb the dark, icy steps of the nineteenth-century building. After signing in, I join my husband for dinner.

The dining room is filled to capacity. Sixteen-foot windows, crystal chandeliers, tables adorned with flowers and the sweet sound of a Strauss waltz welcome the diners. A large oxygen tank is placed discreetly in one far corner. The residents are grouped at tables with friends. Because hearing, seeing, and engaging in conversation are difficult for most, the environment is subdued in spite of the warmth of the
room. Waving to my husband, I dodge busy waitresses and join him at his table. I am the only guest.

Midway through our meal, the activity director visits our table and reminds us of the concert that will be held in the chapel immediately after dinner. “You’ll love it,” he enthuses.

After dinner, a slow parade to the chapel begins. Wheelchairs steered by private nurses are first, followed by those using walkers. Residents who are able to walk alone and other staff members bring up the rear. The group assembles randomly; some remain in their wheelchairs while others sit on couches or wing chairs.

The chapel is impressive. Eight ornate chandeliers hang from the sixteen-foot ceiling, casting a diffuse light on the chapel’s massive organ and elegant grand piano. Large stained-glass windows frame the room, adding warm hues to the lighting. At the far end of the chapel is a large rectangular table and floor lamp for puzzle enthusiasts—slightly out of context in this august environment.

The performers are late. The wintry roads are dangerous and the trip is taking longer than expected. All wait patiently, not eager to return to empty rooms. Suddenly we hear a rustling sound in the hall. The singers have arrived!

Five young girls enter silently in a single line and form a semicircle in front of the assembled audience. After a brief introduction, the “Ragged Robins” are ready to sing.

The smallest “robin” plays the beginning note on a pitch pipe and the singers hum their first chord, an ethereal sound in this acoustically perfect setting. It takes our breath away; we know that we are in for something special. The group begins with their theme song, “The Bramble and the Rose.” After a quick shift of position, the happy sounds of “Under the Sea,” from The Little Mermaid fill the air. As the ending notes fade, we applaud gently, not wanting to break the magic spell.

Then, the group’s leader steps forward. “Thank you very much for listening to our music.” And before we can applaud again, the singers file silently out of the chapel. “Only two songs!” We are stunned. The beautiful sound of the ensemble still rings in our ears. I whisper to my husband, “Well, someone ought to thank them!” I rush into the hall to tell the girls how much we enjoyed their program, urging them to return to the chapel so that we can thank them properly. The girls agree and as they reenter the chapel, the applause begins. One of the male residents struggles to stand and haltingly approaches the group. He pauses, catching his breath and with studied concentration, composes his thoughts. He says quietly, “Girls, your singing is as beautiful as you are.” The girls, looking shyly at each other, giggle and thank him. This simple, eloquent sentence expresses the feelings of all. The audience becomes a chorus of its own as grateful thanks accompanied by swelling applause echo throughout the chapel. At this one extraordinary moment, we become a community.

I have attended many concerts in which renowned conductors and fine musicians perform great works, but never in my experience have I witnessed the profound impact of music upon the human spirit as I did this evening. For a few, brief moments, cold became warm, lonely became loved, and old became young.

Back Story

About a week after the concert, we learn the reason for the singers’ late arrival and truncated performance. It seems that, one of the singers suddenly became ill and had to be taken to the hospital. Her vocal part in the music was very important in all but the two songs that we heard. The group knew that we had been looking forward to the concert and decided to perform what they could. The young singers arrived, worried about their friend and not feeling much like singing, but determined not to disappoint this fragile audience. In the end, the sadness of one group and the loneliness of the other were comforted by each other—and of course, the magic of music!
It’s My Secret
by Janet George

The person most afraid of Walter was Jerry, the school custodian. If Walter was on the loose, our six-foot seven-inch custodian would drop his broom and mop and run in the opposite direction.

Fiona, my instructional aide, was the only person who ever touched Walter. She held him, hand-fed him mealworms and stroked his long, scaly tail. Walter was a handsome iguana of uncertain gender. He lived in a commodious glass terrarium in the fifth-grade pod area.

Pod is a term that emerged from the open-space school movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. Four classrooms, two with doors and two without, opened to a central meeting area called the pod. In this pod was a climate-controlled glass cage made to order for the comfort and nurturance of Walter, the iguana.

For most of his life, Walter had lived quietly in his personal environment, but when Fiona arrived, she took him out of the cage, petted him, and allowed him to run free when the children left for the day. Sometimes we would forget that he was on the loose, only to hear a female teacher shriek or Jerry yell, “Oh, no, not again!”

Fiona improved Walter’s life in many ways. She stocked the teacher’s fridge with fresh peppers, tomatoes, and cucumbers. She stored a daily supply of mealworms and an occasional cricket in a can high on a classroom bookcase. At feeding time the kids loved to watch Walter’s long agile tongue flick out and reel in a worm.

One day Michael Schwerdick’s Reptile World Show came to Running Brook School. We watched as the men unloaded box after box in various sizes. In the crates were snakes, one of them a 24-foot-long python named Norma Jean, several alligators, varieties of small lizards, and two enormous iguanas. After the kids had seen the show, our effervescent and excitable vice-principal, Jack, insisted that the iguanas visit Walter. We freed Walter to play with his visitors, but to the disappointment of Jack, the animals completely ignored each other.

About a week later, I brought two candy eggs to school and placed them in Walter’s cage. No one saw me. I told Fiona of my deception, and we laughed. Then I forgot about the whole thing until, one day, I heard Jack out in the pod crooning with delight.

“Oh, goody, Walter laid eggs. Ooooh how exciting,” he squealed. “Imagine our iguana breeding in captivity. I know John Collins, the TV weatherman, and I’m going to call him right now.”

Teachers and students jostled each other trying to get close enough to the cage to see the astounding eggs. Kids jumped and shouted, anticipating the TV cameras and imagining themselves on the evening news.

As Jack literally skipped up the hall, he called back, “I’m going to call Reptile World too.” Fiona and I looked at each other in horror. What to do?

The next morning we came in to school to find Jack with his nose pressed to the glass of Walter’s cage, his face a mask of pain.

“Where are the eggs? I can’t see the eggs.”

He turned to Fiona and me, “You don’t think Walter ate his own eggs, do you?”

“I don’t know,” we answered in unison.

The TV op was cancelled, and Walter was widely blamed for reptilian cannibalism. It was a week before Jack stopped visiting the cage to shake his head and lament.

What a great opportunity for blackmail, but Fiona agreed to keep the secret of the eggs. We listened to Jack with sympathy and said all the right things about Walter’s behavior.

“He didn’t even leave a trace of either egg. Ate the whole thing!” moaned Jack.

I agreed and then remembered, I really must empty the trash can in my car.
Piano Man

by Leight Johnson

Well, we’re all in the mood for a melody,
And you’ve got us feelin’ alright.

—Billy Joel lyric

Bill Messenger is our piano man and a splendid one he is. Anyone who has attended his classes can attest to that. Drawing on the music of popular American composers as diverse as Gershwin, Porter, Joplin, and W.C. Handy, he brings instruction to life as only a live performance can. Listen to Bill play a song in various rhythms—waltz, ragtime, boogie woogie, jazz—and you’ll appreciate his artistry.

In a course that compares composers, he examines the similarities and differences in their lives as well as their music. For example, Irving Berlin sprang from poverty while Cole Porter was born to wealth. Porter’s witty lyrics can’t be mistaken for those of Berlin. Life differences inform their music styles.

A Baltimorean from head to toe, Bill grew up in Highlandtown. As a child he would sneak out of bed to listen to the boogie woogie beat of John MacGraw, a blind pianist who played at the Jolly Post, a bar the Messenger family owned. Just by listening, Bill taught himself to play “The Huckle-Buck” note-for-note.

At one time Bill earned five dollars a night playing at the Peabody Bookshop on Charles Street (he makes more than that these days). In the early 1960s, he played a little rock ‘n roll and played back-up for Ellen Cohen, who later became better known as Cass Elliot of The Mamas and The Papas.

His formal education included study at the Peabody Conservatory, two master’s degrees, and a bachelor’s degree in music.

Before his passion for music took over, Bill taught English at Baltimore County high schools and at Goucher College. Now he teaches music courses at venues all over the place, both in person and by video.

Does he enjoy this way of making a living? Let me quote him: “I love it. I absolutely love it.”

The Gentle Selectivity of Memory

by Jerry Downs

For your kids and mine, as indeed for most living passengers on this minor planet, World War II, our “good war,” is ancient history. During the 1980s, when students in my classes discovered I had served in that war, I became a sort of monument—or an interesting relic. For that matter, they saw no particular distinction between WWI and II. Had I told them I had served in WWI, or even charged up San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt, they would have accepted it. To them, anything that occurred prior to the day before yesterday was an ingredient for a kind of historical soup. If I had asked whether Rembrandt knew Picasso or if William Shakespeare might have shaken the hand of Robert E. Lee, they would have said “Why not?”

But for the readers of this journal, awareness reaches farther back than the day before yesterday. We were—most of us—there for Dunkirk, The Blitz, Hitler swaggering down the Champs-Elysee, Pearl Harbor, and inception of Selective Service (the draft), Rosie the Riveter, painted stockings with painted seams, and the Battle of Anzio, Battle of the Bulge, D-Day, death camps—and, finally, the A-Bomb and the end.

As I think about those days, I am struck by the curiously benign aspect of my memory. This is what I mean: those war years were no picnic: privation,
physical separation, fathers and brothers lost or maimed, the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust—the list goes on. My own family’s story is not particularly unusual: we were pretty well spread across the globe: my father was a prisoner in the Phillippines, his wife and my younger siblings were staying with relatives in Boston and I with the U.S. Marines on Saipan. None of us knew from one hour to the next if the others were alive. No, it was no picnic—not for any of us.

But do we remember all that pain? Not I. Nor, I suspect, do you. That is what I mean by benign memory. For most of us, memory pulls a gentle curtain across the grim realities and leaves us with vivid little narratives that we repeat when family and old friends get together. It is not too great an oversimplification to see post traumatic stress disorder as a tearing of that benign curtain. Those sons and daughters at Walter Reed can’t stop seeing the horror. We who are lucky remember the fun.

Two examples from my own war years: First, the famous “Incident of Dad’s Breakfast.” The scene (described by chance one evening at the dinner table and subsequently repeated on demand too many times to count): A troopship off Okinawa, D-Day, April 1, 1945 about 8 a.m. Lt. Jerry Downs sits in the wardroom awaiting with wolfish relish his breakfast of two eggs, bacon, and toast. (On Saipan, our port of departure, fresh eggs may have graced the table of generals, but for the rest of us they were a figment of memory.) The breakfast arrives. The lieutenant lifts his fork—and there is a muffled boom. The lights go out. The ship lists slowly, steeply, to port. We have been hit squarely at the waterline and in the engine room. There is shouting, confusion, smoke, rushing bodies, another smaller explosion. The lieutenant grips his plate firmly with his left hand, his fork in his right——and——eats——his——breakfast.

“But Dad,” the kids cry, “weren’t you scared?”

“Sure. But after breakfast.”

And the great war hero lives on, honored by one and all—well, actually, by three kids—as THE MAN WHO ATE HIS BREAKFAST. Sic transit gloria.

Meanwhile, on the grounds of an abandoned school near Los Banos in the Phillippines, my father waits out almost four years of captivity. Not technically a prisoner of war, but a civilian internee, his days were marked not by physical abuse but by hunger and boredom. Twice during those years, the Japanese guards backed a truck up to the school building, which served as a kind of dormitory, and proceeded to toss out little packages marked by the Red Cross. Each package contained a pack of cigarettes, hard candies, toothbrush, and cake of soap. Dad, who did not smoke, bartered his cigarettes for a little extra food and settled down to read. Read? Almost more than the “goodies,” the prisoners relished the scraps of newsprint used in packing those boxes.

On this particular occasion (or so Dad told us), one of the scraps in the box that Dad caught—a box tossed completely at random by the guard—was a bit of newsprint from a newspaper in Topeka, Kansas. Above the dateline Emporia, Kansas, Dad read the following headline: Fisherman Catches Five-Pound Bass When Fish Jumps into Boat. The story identified the fisherman as Rudy Downs of Emporia. Years later, when my uncle Rudy, a cantankerous old fellow, was told about this, he acknowledged that he was indeed the fisherman but remarked that the press, as usual, had got it wrong. The bass was a three-pounder, not five.

So gently does kind memory blur the outlines of grief and loss, leaving us with pleasant little tales like these. Some of you may wonder what happened to that troopship off Okinawa—and that leads me to yet another tale. For years I wondered what had happened to APA 120. The ship was dead in the water. For the better part of that day, small boats (LCVPs) transported the marines to other ships. My unit wound up on an LST, a landing ship tank, over the horizon from APA 120, my “breakfast ship.”

Decades later, having scored a gig with WBAL Radio—three minutes of daily commentary between Joe Garagiola and Judy Bacharach—I described the story and ended the broadcast with this question: “Anyone out there know what happened to APA120?”
I got three “eyewitness” accounts, all different. One had her sunk by a suicide plane; another had her sunk by friendly fire. The third caller, the correct one as it would turn out, saw her taken under tow.

Eventually, a friend with access to U.S. Navy records got me the straight scoop on APA 120, the USS Hinsdale. She was towed to Ulithi, repaired, and restored to duty. She is now in the mothball fleet moored in a long row of rusting vessels in the James River, near Richmond. I once thought about driving down to see her, but I changed my mind.

That was then: this is now.

**My Encounters with the Stars**

*by Claude Porsella*

Kathy and I were recently on a tour in Southeast Asia. When in Cambodia, we visited the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. It came to mind there that I had interviewed the king twice. Though he abdicated in 2004 in favor of his son, the former king, Norodom Sihanouk, still lives in the palace and his portrait still appears on huge billboards in the capital. He is now called the King Father. I had a one-on-one interview with him in Washington, D.C., and saw him later at the United Nations when he was pleading for the withdrawal of Vietnam, which had invaded Cambodia in 1978 to oust the Khmer Rouge. He was, in private, an affable and smiling man. As I was, at that time, a contributor to a radio station based in Monte Carlo, he told me he had a villa in that principality.

When I told our Cambodian guide about my meetings with His Royal Highness he was very impressed. At dinner, one of our fellow travelers asked me how many interesting people I had met or interviewed. Her question took me by surprise and I drew a blank. In fifty years in journalism, I have interviewed so many people that it is hard to make an instant selection of the most interesting ones. Maybe because most of my interlocutors belonged to the political world—heads of state, ministers, politicians, diplomats—the often boring type, I keep a fonder memory of those coming from a different field.

That’s probably why I better remember the few artists I’ve interviewed. My first was Jacques Brel (still alive and, at that time, living well in Paris). I was an intern at a local newspaper in Brittany and I met Brel in a café after his concert in Nantes. He was with his impresario and we talked over a beer. Many years later, he performed at the Listner’s in Washington, D.C. I was then engaged to Kathy and bought two tickets. (The only problem: I had forgotten them at home! But that was not as bad as when I took her to Chez François and, when the bill came, I didn’t have my wallet! She still married me…But, back to my interviews with celebrities.)

The second celebrity interview was at the French Embassy with no one other than Catherine Deneuve. It was a very short interview. I was so awestruck by her beauty that I forgot to ask her questions. My microphone was shaking.

I was more composed when I hosted the mime Marcel Marceau at the Alliance française. I felt privileged to be with such a great artist. I was moved by his life story.

From Jewish origin, he survived Nazi occupation (his father died at Auschwitz) and, with his brother, helped Jewish children to safely escape to Switzerland. He also had served in the Free French Forces under De Gaulle. It was great to hear the world’s most famous mime “speak” and say more than “bip.” (For the record, I didn’t buy the Marcel Marceau’s 6 CDs kindly offered by Irv Kaplan for $99.99).

When we were at Angkor Vat, we visited the Khmer temple, Benteay Srei, and I remembered André Malraux, whom I had met in Washington, D.C. In his youth Malraux had tried to remove some bas-relief from the temple. He was arrested by the French colonial authorities, an episode he related in his novel
“La voie royale.” That incident didn’t prevent him from later becoming minister of culture under De Gaulle. When I talked to him, he was back from China, just out of the Cultural Revolution. That time, he hadn’t tried to remove one of the terra cotta warriors!

Like every journalist, I have had my share of rejections. Covering the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976, I approached the then very young gymnast and gold medalist Nadia Comaneci. Knowing that she spoke French, I asked her for a few words: she simply replied with what was a very authoritarian voice for a 12-year-old: “NON.” There went my “exclusive.”

At another sports meet, I saw Carl Lewis training before a race. I was with a reporter from Nigeria. I asked Lewis if I could interview him. He refused, but he chatted amicably with my African colleague and I ended up taking a photograph of the two of them.

As I said before, most of my journalistic career has dealt with politics. For the past 40 years, I have tried to explain America to a foreign audience. Not an easy task. How do you explain the filibuster? How do you explain that a candidate who won the popular vote cannot be elected because he didn’t get the vote of 270 electors? I’ve covered 12 presidential elections and seen, in the flesh, all the presidents since LBJ. I was in the Oval Office several times. I was always struck with how small this legendary room is. I have shaken the hand of many French presidents, including the present one, Nicolas Sarkozy. Mitterand’s handshake was surprisingly weak. Chirac’s was firm. But enough name dropping. Did I tell you about my encounter with Kissinger? …More in my memoirs when and IF I write them one day.

Overall, it was fun to see, close-up, all of these so-called personalities. Journalists have little in common with them. Before an interview, there is usually only small talk with the interviewees. Most politicians hide their devouring ambitions under a veneer of charm and good-nature that they extend to the press.

To observe and report, and that’s what I have done—first in Africa and then in the U.S., is a comfortable position to be in. If there is a small frustration with this job, it’s passivity. You’re only a witness, not an actor. Hence, the desire by some of my colleagues to cross the line and go into politics. I never had such an impulse or inclination. I was content with having a front seat to history.

The job has had its rewards and its surprises. I interviewed Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the defrocked priest and president of Haiti, when he was in exile in Washington, D.C. He received the press in his Georgetown apartment. In the middle of our conversation, which I was recording, he told me: “When I look at you, I see God.” Whoa!

I have been named many names in the course of my career, but GOD! Please, from now on, when you see me in the hall or in class, bow respectfully. I am the one with the halo above his head.

Questions for Nancy Norris-Kniffin

by Wayne Faulkner

Question 1: Do you separate your family life from your studies?

Answer 1: My personal and professional lives are happily linked since my husband, Hazen Kniffin, loves literature (and writes excellent poetry), and I am very interested in his field of psychoanalysis. After we met in 2001 at a dinner party given by a mutual friend, he enrolled in my course on “Evil in Modern Literature” through the Hopkins’ Odyssey Program, read all the assignments, and did not throw spitballs! When we married the next year, I inherited—without any “labor” at all—four stepchildren (who live in Maryland and Massachusetts) and five step-grandchildren, ages eight to 18.

Question 2: Are William Faulkner’s fictional works a revelation to you and your students?
Answer 2: I hope my students are as intrigued as I that, though Faulkner’s stories and novels seem on the surface to be about just the American South, they soon reveal universal insights into the human condition, including its proclivities toward both evil and kindness.

Question 3: Would you tell us about your educational background?

Answer 3: The same year I graduated from Roland Park Country School, I received a certificate in piano from the Preparatory Department of the Peabody Conservatory. After my B.A. in English from Wellesley College, I received an M.A. in theology from a joint program between Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. Following my Ph.D. in English from the University of Pennsylvania, I began teaching part-time at Hopkins in the summer of 1973. This part-time summer teaching at JHU continued during the 13 years that I taught in the fall and spring terms outside Baltimore at institutions like the University of Oregon and Carleton College. In 1985 I became a full-time administrator at Hopkins, directing several programs, including the Master of Liberal Arts, until my administrative retirement in 2000. Then I resumed my position as a part-time faculty member in the MLA, Odyssey, and Osher programs. So, in this sense, I have come full circle to do what I most love—teaching part-time at Hopkins!

Question 4: Where have you lived that you would like to revisit?

Answer 4: Eugene, Oregon, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, because I still have friends and colleagues in those areas from my teaching years ago, and because they represent such different parts of the United States from Baltimore, where I was born and raised.

Question 5: What’s next, Nancy?

Answer 5: I rely on my students to suggest topics for future courses. For example, I was so impressed with the way Osher students read scenes from plays assigned for my last course on modern Irish literature that I developed my current Osher course on American dramatic classics.

Anniversary

Next year, 2011, will be the 25th anniversary (also known as the bicentennial) of the founding of Evergreen/Osher at JHU. Planning is already underway for a celebration worthy of the event. Among the activities under consideration are the following:

- A concert by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra to be conducted by Jonathan Palevsky. This would be performed in the Grace Church Fellowship Hall.

- A performance at the Meyerhoff by the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes, featuring former Rockettes Kathy Porsella, Susan Howard, and Wafa Sturdivant.

- Special concert by the Rolling Stones, open only to Osher members and their guests, in the Homewood campus Glass Pavilion. (Mick Jagger plans to retire next year and join Osher and will do this concert free in lieu of a year’s tuition.)

- A gathering of tall ships at the Inner Harbor or an air show by the Navy’s Blue Angels precision flying team.

May of this year (2010) marks the 15th anniversary of the extension of Evergreen/Osher to the Montgomery County Campus. Congress is to issue a proclamation making May 1 Osher at JHU Day: banks and post offices will be closed in observation.
Osher at JHU Journal, the newsletter of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Johns Hopkins University, is published under the auspices of the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences two times per academic year.

Johns Hopkins University, Osher at JHU, 6740 Alexander Bell Drive, Columbia, MD 21046-2100, 410-516-9719.

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