

Robert Kennedy Remembered by Jean Baudrillard

by Gary Percesepe

Catastrophe

K is eating a banana. He says to me, "There is no end in the sense that God is dead, or history is dead. I would prefer not to play the role of a thoroughly useless prophet. I leave that to others, like Gene McCarthy."

He chews the banana with small sharp teeth. Then says: "Catastrophe is overrated and ironic. We now have a horizontal era of events without consequences. The end of the world is rehearsed, then televised repeatedly; in this way, it never arrives.

"History, politics, society, ideology—they will continue to unfold tediously, like nails growing after death.

"But cheer up. If there is no longer a future, there is no longer an end either."

He finishes off the banana. "If you were to see written on a door panel, 'This opens onto the void,' wouldn't you still want to open it?"

K Tosses the Faux Existentialist and the Philosopher

K enters the room, still clasping the book. He tosses the Mailer essay on the desk and picks up the new book by Derrida, tosses that too. His graying, ginger hair laps over his earlobes, and his tie is askew. Fresh lines are carved into his narrow face, in his brow, around his icy blue eyes, near his mobile mouth.

K picks up the Derrida again and reads to no one in particular, in an unmusical monotone,

when I am not dreaming of making love, or being a resistance fighter in the last war blowing up bridges or trains, I want one thing only, and that is to lose myself in the orchestra I would form with my

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sons, heal, bless and seduce the whole world by playing divinely with my sons, produce with them the world's ecstasy, their creation. I will accept dying if dying is to sink slowly, yes, into the bottom of this beloved music.

K is crying. We leave him there in the hotel room, and gently close the door.

Dress

He is neatly dressed in a manner that does not call attention to itself. The suits are soberly cut and in dark colors. He must at all times present an aspect of freshness difficult to sustain because of frequent movements from place to place under conditions which are not always the most favorable. Thus he changes clothes frequently, especially shirts. In the course of a day he changes his shirt many times. There are always extra shirts about, in boxes. "Which of you has the shirts?"

K Beside Himself

K is being pressed on the program with Tom Wicker of the *Times*. K replies in a soft, weary voice, "No matter what I do, I am in difficulty...I don't know what I can do except perhaps get off the earth in some way."

Wicker re-engages, and Martin Agronsky jumps in, hectoring K on the war. K's face contorts into a hard mask, then softens as he says, "We're going in there and we're killing women, we're killing children, we're killing innocent children because we don't want to have the war fought on American soil, or because they're 12,000 miles away, and they might get to be 11,000 miles away. Do we have the right, here in the United States, to say we're going to kill tens of thousands, make millions of people, as we have, millions of people refugees, killing women and children, as we have?"

K stammers, "I think we are going to have a difficult time explaining that to ourselves...."

He is beside himself now. "I think the picture in the paper of a child drowning should trouble us more than it does, or the picture

last week of a paratrooper holding a rifle to a woman's head—it must trouble us more than it does..."

He Throws the Morning Newspaper Out the Window

K picks up the paper and rips it in half, throwing it out an open window in his suite. We are in Kansas and his speech has been panned. He calls for a glass of water. He drinks the water and tosses the glass out the window.

At ten in the morning the day before he had said, "I come here, to this serious forum in the heart of the nation, to discuss this war with you; not on the basis of emotion, but fact; not, I hope, in clichés, but with a clear and discriminating sense of where the national interest really lies.

"I am concerned that, at the end of it all, there will only be more Americans killed; more of our treasure spilled out; and because of the bitterness and hatred on every side of this war, more hundreds of thousands slaughtered, so that they may say, as Tacitus said of Rome, 'They made a desert, and called it peace.'

"Let us clearly understand the full implications of our situation. The point of our pacification operations was always described as "winning the hearts and minds of the people." We recognized that their minds would have to be changed—that in the countryside the natural inclination of the people would be to support the insurgency rather than to sacrifice for foreign white men, or the remote government in the capitol. And it is this effort that has been set back in the last month. We cannot change the minds of the people in the villages controlled by the enemy. The fact is, as all recognize, we cannot reassert control of those villages now in enemy hands without repeating the whole process of bloody destruction which has ravaged the countryside throughout these last three years. Nor could we thus keep control without the presence of millions of American troops.

"The front pages of our newspapers show photographs of American soldiers torturing prisoners. Every night we watch horrors on the evening news. Violence spreads inexorably across the nation,

filling our streets and crippling our lives. And whatever the costs to us, let us think of the young men we have sent there: not just the killed, but those who have to kill; not just the maimed, but also those who must look upon the results of what they do.

"So I come here to the great university to ask for your help. You young people are the ones who have the least ties to the present and the greatest ties to the future. I urge you to learn the harsh facts that lurk behind the mask of official illusion with which we have concealed our true circumstances even from ourselves.

"Our country is in danger: not just from foreign enemies, but above all from our own misguided policies...."

K, Laughing

K is laughing at dinner. Once again he has no money and an aide picks up the check. K stares at the waiter who makes off with a scrap of paper K has signed.

K and the Greeks

K is explaining Socrates to us, and the Greeks. Socrates practices fearless speech, K is saying, and thinks of philosophy as a preparation for death. The Socratic vocation is all about death, it is life as a kind of dying—to self, to fame and fortune, to the twisted desires of the flesh, the body with its cravings. You have to die to all that in order to live. It is true, as Aeschylus says, that great spirits meet calamity greatly. For this, one must prepare.

The problem with Socrates, however, is that he does not cry in the *Apology*.

Someone get me my notebook, K says. Write this down: "Take heart. Suffering, when it climbs highest, lasts but a little time."

K cradles his head in his hands. Get them out of here, he says to me.

He reaches for a scrap of paper on his desk that belonged to his brother. On the paper are several illegible words, circled.

K intones, "But sometimes in the middle of the night their wound would open afresh. And suddenly awakened, they would finger its

painful edges, they would recover their suffering anew and with it the stricken face of their love."

With his Friends Joking about Gandhi

Cesar is joking with K in his hotel room about Gandhi and King. They did it for the people, Cesar is saying, that's how it has to be done, for a purpose. People lose sight of the basics: Gandhi was one of the best fundraisers the world has ever seen! K roars at this, his head thrown back in joy. But people don't see it that way, Cesar says, they don't.

Cesar says, "One millionaire friend of Gandhi's used to complain, "It costs me millions to keep Gandhi poor!"

K says, Gandhi's secretary was once asked by some Westerners who came idolizing Gandhi, "Oh, how is it to live with Gandhi?"

K leans into us until his lean face is almost in our chests. "And his secretary says, "To live with Gandhi is like living in the mouth of a lion."

K laughs, a short staccato laugh, a laugh like a machine gun.

K in the Shower

K is in the shower when an urgent phone call comes for him. He stumbles out of the shower, his hair askew, soap in his eyes, a towel around his waist. He gropes toward the phone and announces to the three people standing in the room, "Make room for the future leader of the free world."

In Albany for Meetings

K lands in Albany for a series of meetings. No one is there to greet him. The airport is windblown, deserted, and blanketed with freshly fallen snow. As K walks off the plane he suddenly waves to the empty airport, clasping his hands over his head in a boxer's salute. Then he cracks up.

A Friend Comments on K's Aloneness

"The thing you have to realize about K. is that essentially he's absolutely alone in the world. There's this terrible loneliness which

prevents people from getting too close to him. Maybe it comes from something in his childhood, I don't know. But he's very hard to get to know, and a lot of people who think they know him rather well don't really know him at all. He says something or does something that surprises you, and you realize that all along you really didn't know him at all. "He has surprising facets. I remember once we were out in a small boat. K. of course was the captain. Some rough weather came up and we began to head back in. I began worrying about picking up a landing and I said to him that I didn't think the anchor would hold, with the wind and all. He just looked at me. Then he said 'Of course it will hold. That's what it's for.'"

A Dream

K is haunted by dreams. He sees a house suspended between earth and sky. A specter haunts the house, only visible if one cranes one's neck to a certain position, which tilts the house sideways. The specter *watches*, only watches.

K says, "Well, ghosts are everywhere where there is watching; the dead cannot watch."

K says, "Ghosts appear because the time is out of joint. We must listen to hear what they want. How do you address your ghosts?"

K turns to me and says, "*Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio.*"

K with his Daughter

K is in Montauk, swimming in the North Atlantic. His does the dead man float, then turns in the ocean to address his daughter, who has followed him out to sea without her eyeglasses,

Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's-float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash

to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Gallery-going

K. enters a large gallery on Fifty-seventh Street, in the Fuller Building. His entourage includes several ladies and gentlemen. Works by a geometricist are on show. K. looks at the immense, rather theoretical paintings. "Well, at least we know he has a ruler." The group dissolves in laughter. People repeat the remark to one another, laughing. The artist, who has been standing behind a dealer, regards K. with hatred.

K Grieves

Martin's been shot and there's a crowd gathered in Indianapolis, waiting. They haven't heard the news. There is a sea of black faces.

K gasps when he gets the news, and seems to shrink into his black overcoat. His shirt collar is a size too large for his scrawny neck.

K hunches against the cold wind, still in the black overcoat, and speaks without notes, directly into the crowd, these words:

"I have bad news for you, for all our fellow citizens, and people who love justice all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight."

King in his last days had been exhausted and beleaguered. He looked far older than his thirty-nine years. He kept saying, "I'm tired now, I've been in this thing thirteen years and now I'm really tired." K knew and heard the voices all around King, voices calling him "traitor," "stupid," "misleading," "provocative," "communist dupe," and "Martin Loser King."

K continued, near tears himself, speaking of his former adversary, now safely dead,

"Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort.

"In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of nation we are and what directions we want to move in. For those of you who are black—considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible—you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, with great polarization—black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred for one another.

"Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

"For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

"My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote, 'In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.'

"Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man, and to make gentle the life of this world.

"Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country, and for our people."

Sixty Days

K cancels all his appearances and withdraws into his hotel room. He emerges on April 5 to give a speech in Cleveland.

K has sixty days to live.

"This is a time of shame and sorrow. It is not a day for politics. I have saved this one opportunity to speak briefly with you about this mindless menace of violence in America which again stains our land and every one of our lives.

"It is not the concern of any one race. The victims of violence are black and white, rich and poor, young and old, famous and unknown. They are, most important of all, human beings who other human beings loved and needed. No one—no matter where he lives and what he does—can be certain who will suffer from some senseless act of bloodshed. And yet it goes on and on.

"Why? What has violence ever accomplished? What has it ever created? No martyr's cause has ever been stilled by an assassin's bullet. No wrongs have ever been righted by riots and civil disorders. A sniper is only a coward, not a hero, and an uncontrolled, uncontrollable mob is only the voice of madness, not the voice of the people.

"Whenever any American's life is taken by another American unnecessarily—whether it is done in the name of the law or in defiance of the law, by one man or a gang, in cold blood or in passion, in an attack of violence or in response to violence—whenever we tear at the fabric of life which another has painfully and clumsily woven for himself and his children, the whole nation is degraded.

"'Among free men,' said Abraham Lincoln, 'there can be no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet; and those who take such an appeal are sure to lose their cause and pay the costs.'" Yet we seemingly tolerate a rising level of violence that ignores our common humanity and our claims to civilization alike. We calmly accept newspaper reports of civilian slaughter in far-off lands. We glorify killing on movie and television screens and call it entertainment. We make it easy for men of all shades of sanity to acquire whatever weapons and ammunition they desire.

"Some look for scapegoats, others look for conspiracies, but this much is clear; violence breeds violence, repression brings

retaliation, and only a cleansing of our whole society can remove this sickness from our soul."

His Friend Jack Looks Back

At 1 A.M. on Friday, June 7, 1,000 people already stood in line along East 51st Street, outside the great Gothic cathedral. St. Patrick's would open at 5:30 that morning to the glare of television lights over the light mahogany coffin on its black steel frame. As I waited my turn to stand vigil, I noticed Tom Hayden walk away from us and slump back in the shadows. Sitting alone in an empty pew, tears began to form in his eyes. Tom Hayden, a revolutionary, an apostate Catholic, a green cap from Havana sticking out of his pants pocket, weeping for K.

I stood between actor Robert Vaughn and radio personality Barry Gray. In that moment I learned again just how much historical space K occupied. Hayden, the personification of the New Left, was crying somewhere behind me, Barry Gray was holding back his tears and Irish Joe Crangle, the Democratic leader of Erie County, was off mourning alone. Paul Gorman, a McCarthy man, was weeping now too, lighting a candle for K. And me. And the curious, bereft people waiting out on 51st Street all night long. And I thought again of the quotation from Pascal that Camus invokes at the start of *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*: "A man does not show his greatness by being at one extremity, but rather by touching both at once."

One of the most heartbreaking sights of my life was the view from the window of K's funeral train, as we traveled through New Jersey and Maryland. On one side of the railroad tracks, in those small New Jersey towns, were whole families of working-class whites, holding American flags, wearing hard hats, and saluting; many were clearly weeping. On the opposite side of the railroad tracks in the larger cities of Newark, Philadelphia, and in Washington, D.C., there were masses of blacks, also weeping. They were already bereft from the loss of Martin Luther King just eight weeks before. They also stood at attention and waved farewell. They had the ruined faces of the twice-wounded.

Three days before I had got up early and drove around L.A. with two friends, before the sun came up, and before the polls opened. What I witnessed was uplifting. I saw poor blacks, elderly blacks, church-dressed blacks, standing in line to vote. And I saw even longer lines of Mexican-Americans waiting for their chance to participate in American democracy, as sound trucks blared in Spanish: "Today is the day Cesar Chavez asks you to vote for Robert Kennedy." All my life I have heard the clichés of cynicism and white superiority: blacks don't vote; Puerto Ricans don't vote; Mexicans don't vote; the unemployed don't vote. And on this day I had the experience of seeing this elitist theory disproved. On that day the voter turnout in Watts and East L.A. was higher than in affluent white Beverly Hills. Poor people voted when they had somebody to vote for. They did not vote when they thought neither candidate would better their living conditions. And they were usually right.

RFK remains the missing chord of American politics: the missing unifying line between blacks and working class whites. He was the blue note that touched all the people of no property and no power regardless of color. It was his absence that allowed the development of the so-called "Reagan Democrats," the unionized working class whites who shifted their allegiance to the Republican Party in the 1980s.

Of course he was far from flawless. There are no perfect human beings. He was an ambitious politician, not some monk or ivory-tower academic. He was slow to recognize the moral imperative of the freedom riders and civil rights community organizers in 1961 and 1962, when he was attorney general. He authorized the wiretap of Martin Luther King's home. He ran for president in 1968 only after Eugene McCarthy plunged in and demonstrated how vulnerable LBJ was and how unpopular the war was becoming. He made his share of misjudgments and compromises.

But he ignored polls and followed his instincts. He campaigned for gun control in pro-gun Oregon, knowing it would cost him votes. I saw him condemn student deferments for the Vietnam War to medical students in Indiana who had student deferments—because

he didn't approve of the war being fought only by the poor of both races.

There was something liberating in the air during the 1960s that allowed some of its greatest avatars to keep growing in public and reinventing themselves, like Bob Dylan, Miles Davis, Muhammad Ali, the Beatles, and RFK. The velocity of external change during this decade of tumult seemed to invite and validate authentic interior transformations.

Of course, I could be remembering this all wrong, and this all could be bullshit, but part of K's strength I thought was the way that he combined thought and action. He understood power in a way that few did, and he used it for good, mostly. He thought deeply, but he was also a tireless activist and organizer. He still seemed to believe in the power of moral outrage as public policy. He felt that the "unacceptable" had to be changed directly and immediately, not just deplored in speeches.

Twelve years after he was gone I asked Cesar Chavez, who loved him, what had made K unique, and so permanently missed by those who knew him best.

"He crossed a line that no other American politician ever crossed," the leader for the farm workers' union told me.

When I asked him to elaborate, he spoke about K's intensity of feeling for the poor, his capacity to create hope and trust, his authenticity as a human being, despite his fame and wealth. And his ability to grow and to be changed by experience.

At the Baltimore station, where the train arrived five hours late, there was a crowd of about 20,000—mostly black. They were singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," accompanied by a mournful brass band.

When we passed Resurrection City, Reverend King's doomed shantytown of the dispossessed, the crowd sang "We Shall Overcome" through tears of rage.

Only Robert Kennedy could have united these two injured classes, trapped on opposite sides of the tracks that still run through the

middle of the American Dream of Lincoln, Walt Whitman, and Dr. King.

Oh, I think to myself, what might have been, if history had not slipped through our fingers.

Now I realize what makes our generation unique, what defines us apart from those who came before the hopeful winter of 1961, and those who came after the murderous spring of 1968. We are the first generation that learned from experience, in our innocent twenties, that things were not really getting better, that we shall *not* overcome. We felt, by the time we reached thirty, that we had already glimpsed the most compassionate leaders our nation could produce, and they had all been assassinated. And from this time forward, things would get worse: our best political leaders were part of memory now, not hope.

The stone was at the bottom of the hill and we were alone.

And His Friend Arthur

The train arrived in Washington. Night had fallen. Mourners with twinkling candles followed the coffin into Arlington Cemetery. "There was," wrote a grieving Lady Bird Johnson, "a great white moon riding high in the sky." But the cemetery itself was dark and shadowed. The pallbearers, not sure where to place the coffin, walked on uncertainly in the night. Averill Harriman finally said to Stephen Smith, "Steve, do you know where you're going?" Smith said, "Well, I'm not sure." Then Smith said, "I distinctly heard a voice coming out of the coffin saying, "Damn it. If you fellows put me down, I'll show you the way."

Question

One night I ask K, what is the point then?

He answered, "To do harm to stupidity. To push that which wants to fall."

K Saved from Drowning

K. in the water. His flat black hat, his black cape, his sword are on the shore. He retains his mask. His hands beat the surface of the

water which tears and rips about him. The white foam, the green depths. I throw a line, the coils leaping out over the surface of the water. He has missed it. No, it appears that he has it. His right hand (sword arm) grasps the line that I have thrown him. I am on the bank, the rope wound round my waist, braced against a rock. K. now has both hands on the line. I pull him out of the water. He stands now on the bank, gasping. "Thank you."

Note to the Reader

Will the partly true become wholly true through this note to the reader? Hardly. Nevertheless, alert readers will note the paraphrase of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's thought in the first paragraph, and the excerpt from Jacques Derrida's remarkable *Circumfession* in the second, published after 1968, the year of Kennedy's death. More disturbing (in a James Frey-Oprah kind of way) is the wholesale authorial borrowing (or theft) from Donald Barthelme's 1968 short story, "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning," published in the *New American Review* in April of that tragic year, some two months before Kennedy's death, in paragraphs 3, 11, 14, and 20 of the present fable. As one might imagine, Barthelme was often queried about the origin and timing of his story. Here is what Donald Barthelme told Kennedy's biographer and friend, Arthur Schlesinger:

From "Robert Kennedy And His Times," by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., paperback edition, pp. 877-8 (footnote)...

"I never met Robert Kennedy nor did I talk to people who had. The story was begun while I was living in Denmark in 1965...the only 'true' thing in it was Kennedy's remark about the painter. I happened to be in the gallery when he came in with a group; I think the artist was Kenneth Noland. Kennedy made the remark quoted about the ruler—not the newest joke in the world. The story was published in

New American Review well before the assassination. I cannot account for the concluding impulse of the I-character to 'save' him

other than by reference to John Kennedy's death; still, a second assassination was unthinkable at that time. In sum, any precision in the piece was the result of watching television and reading the New York Times" (Barthelme to author, July 16, 1977.)

The poem in "K With His Daughter" is called "First Lesson," by Philip Booth from *Lifelines: Selected Poems 1950-1999* (Viking).

Excerpts from Kennedy's speeches and personal notebooks may be checked by the fact-checking crowd in such sources as *Make Gentle the Life of This World: The Vision of Robert F. Kennedy*, by Maxwell Taylor Kennedy, and *The Gospel According to RFK: Why it Matters Now*, by Norman MacAfee.

The long section, "His Friend Jack Looks Back" is excerpted from Jack Newfield's important and lovely book, *RFK: A Memoir*, while the widely-quoted story of Steve Smith and the coffin is taken from the last page of Arthur M. Schlesinger's biography, *Robert Kennedy and his Times*.

