

Bill Zinsser eulogy – May 22, 2015  
St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, New York City

Our Bill Zinsser, as was evident in his work, his demeanor, and his friendships, knew that fine details can matter a great deal. It will come as no surprise that he gave some *thought* to how this service – this celebration – should proceed. So I have five minutes, at which point a bell will clang. You might not hear it but, trust me, Bill will be ringing it.

It's just as well. When you live as long as Bill did, as fully as he did, and cover as much ground as he covered, there's no concise summing up. Five years ago, in a talk he gave at Deerfield Academy, his alma mater, he spoke about his book "American Places." "American Places" I think of as belonging to the thing-right-under-your-nose-why-didn't-I-think-of-that genre of nonfiction. Its sixteen chapters describe Bill's travels to sixteen iconic American sites – among them Niagara Falls, Kitty Hawk, Lexington and Concord, Appomattox, Mount Rushmore, Hannibal, Chautauqua – and his seeing them fresh, in part because some he had never seen before.

He told the Deerfield audience about a question a student had once asked. He said, "It was something like 'When you wrote "American Places," did you conceive it as a series of discrete entities? Or was it rather an over-arching encompassment?' I thought, 'How am I going to answer *that*?' Finally, I said, 'You know, I'm just trying to have an interesting life.'"

He continued: "I don't define myself as a writer; I'm a person who writes. I go around looking for things that *interest* me, and then I make a narrative arrangement of them that I hope will interest other people. My writing isn't a *product*. It's a *process*, a continuing journey."

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That journey was the defining constant in a life whose theme was re-invention of self. Unlike some of us, Bill took daring leaps.

From the New York *Herald Tribune* – a boyhood dream fulfilled – which he left after thirteen years, when he could no longer bear daily witness to the Trib’s decline; to freelance writing (the roll of the magazines he wrote for regularly in the ‘60s – *Life, Look, The Saturday Evening Post, Horizon* – reads like a necrology); to Yale for a decade; to the Book of the Month Club, and then a return to a freelance life of teaching and writing.

I decided to spare all of you and not leave a stack of Zinsser reading lists and discussion questions next to the guest book. Bill is best-known, of course, for “On Writing Well,” which captured between hard-covers the non-fiction writing seminar he taught at Yale for ten years. Many of his former students are here today -- all of us older, some of us *much* older, than Bill was when we met him in class. Among the most gratifying features of the wonderfully thorough obituary of Bill in the New York *Times* was the commentary in the Web edition from Bill’s other students, his readers. Testimony from all over the world about what “On Writing Well” had meant to them.

A couple of days ago, I heard about a particular Zinsser disciple, an English teacher at a school in Connecticut. My youngest son, a sophomore, happens to be one of his students. All year, the teacher has been citing “On Writing Well” to make various points about . . . how to write well. Classes end next week and, as an homage to Bill, he’s devised a novel valedictory exercise. He’s going to bring to class a couple of racks of meaty barbecue ribs. Each student gets a rib, along with a toxically prolix sentence that must be de-cluttered to Zinsserian standards. Remove an unnecessary word or clause and you get to take a bite of rib. The winner, of course, will be the first to get down to nothing but bone. My son is looking forward, but he’s also somewhat skeptical: “The cheaters will be taking the biggest bites,” he said. (They always do.)

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Bill has rung the bell, but I’m ignoring it: I’ve spent the past week-and-a-half re-reading Bill, a potentially fraught experience

that happily was not. What it has done, above all, is to remind me how hard Bill worked, and how happy that made him.

For many years, he said that his favorite of his books was “Willie and Dwike.” The past couple of years, however, it’s been neck-and-neck with “The Writer Who Stayed,” a collection of selected columns he wrote for *The American Scholar* in 2010 and 2011. Bill felt that “The Writer Who Stayed” reflected the purest distillation of his style, the voice he had aspired to all along. We didn’t exactly disagree about that appraisal, but I’ve long been partial to his contribution to “Five Boyhoods,” a book I doubt many of you have heard of. It was published in 1962 and has been out of print for about fifty years.

As the title suggests, it consisted of five chapters, by five writers, each describing a boyhood during a decade of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bill wrote about the ‘30s – sandwiched between Walt Kelly on the ‘20s and John Updike on the ‘40s. Years later, he disparaged this autobiographical essay as overwritten, even callow. He was wrong. I first read it in 1972, having checked it out of the Cross-Campus Library at Yale, when I worked for Bill as an assistant editor at the *Yale Alumni Magazine*. It blew me away. I’ll concede that my enthusiasm perhaps had something to do with having taken LSD a couple of hours before I started reading it. I called Bill immediately to convey my admiration. After about twenty years, I stopped regretting that. This winter, we started talking about “Five Boyhoods” and he told me that his own copy had disappeared. So I tracked one down, gave it to him, and read him his chapter. When I was done, his opinion of it had risen. And neither of us had dropped acid.

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In 1999, I sent a group letter to all of Bill’s former Yale students, inviting them to write about their experiences in his course, for inclusion with his papers, which he had donated to the Fales Library at NYU. I want to read you an excerpt from one, because it is emblematic. (The writer was Gary Lucas, a virtuoso rock guitarist, composer, and music producer):

“[Bill] had a gentle manner that still managed to cut through to the essential kernel of thought. He could on occasion be severe in his comments but never in a negative way. Never did I take his critique of my writing in a personal sense. I actually saw Bill as a kind of brave guardian angel figure, standing for the highest values of clear expression in an ever-vigilant battle stance, cutting through all the glibness and cant that surrounds us. I was honored to be privy to his sense of those values and extremely grateful for his generosity of spirit. He absolutely touched my life.”

*--Mark Singer*