

THE MCGILL LECTURE

Ralph McGill: Rock in a Weary Land

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I am especially pleased to see so many young people present today. Ralph McGill used to say it was a waste of breath to make a speech to anyone but young people. Old men, he observed, have had their minds closed for years.

In particular, I am glad to be able to tell a group of students what kind of man Mr. McGill was. It bewilders me and my old friends who are here in such gratifying number today to think that some of you were infants when our magnificent old colleague was summoning the better angels of our natures to do battle at his side. And many of you were in grade school when he died.

So let me set a framework for the lectures to come in this series by telling you a bit about Ralph McGill, with whom I worked for 12 years at the *Atlanta Constitution* and for whom I bore the greatest respect and affection I have felt toward any man outside my own family.

"Every man you'll ever meet is bearing some kind of cross," Mr. McGill liked to say, and he seemed to have taken some private vow to stand for all of them as their rock in a weary land.

He gave his time to others in such heedless chunks that he often had to wedge his writing into random moments. The lower the fortune and importance of the person, the greater the time and interest he got.

He hitchhiked to my father's funeral in rural Georgia (he never did learn to drive a car) and I will not forget how Dad's forlorn pet squirrel sprang down from the lot fence when Mr. McGill got there, climbed up his pants leg and sat quietly on his shoulder.

In the weeks of Mary Elizabeth's dying he kept vigil with her; and when the time came daily to write he would often sit on a straight chair in the Piedmont Hospital corridor outside his wife's room and write his column, a figure alone stooping over the yellow pad on his knee.

He overtipped every waitress who ever served him, emptied his pockets to any drifter, counseled the young, comforted the old, and did it with such huge enjoyment and uncalculated selflessness that I once told him he'd have been a natural as a bishop but he was a little short on guile.

It embarrassed him to be thanked; he would mumble, shuffle and pull his forelock. But he would roar with delight if he found an impenitent drunk spending a McGill coffee dollar in a saloon, just as he scarcely concealed his admiration for the thief who once walked out of his office carrying the McGill typewriter, hocked it around the corner and got away.

In a mean world where men tear at each other's vitals and measure success by destruction inflicted, Ralph McGill kept an almost childlike quality of encouraging other men to believe in their worth, because he did. He knew the rules of the jungle but didn't like them; so he moved among the beasts taking thorns out of paws, and the predators couldn't eat him because his hide was too tough.

That was his rarest gift—more than all the money he gave away (and nobody ever beat him to a check or got behind him through a door), more than all the jobs he got for the jobless, more than all the hours of his life that he let others consume. He gave you his faith, kindly.

As the succeeding generations of journalists, that faith is ours now to honor.

And his first memorial lecture can only take its bearing from his life and thought, which I want to explore with you for a moment.

To begin with, he loved the South as helplessly as the Southerners he argued with for their ways—loved it enough to get angry with its failings even as he shared its song, enough to stand almost alone against his detractors even as he understood and forgave their hatred of him.

The Southerner, forever, he wrote, "Is a part of what he has met, and been."

The South, "now fluid as quicksilver, now rigid and cruel in its adamant injustice and wrongs, now soft and merry, it was difficult to put into words."

He quoted Will Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*: "... the sober fact is we [white and blacks] understand one another not at all. Just about the time our proximity appears most harmonious, something happens . . . and to our astonishment we

sense a barrier between. To make it more bewildering, the barrier is of glass; you can't see it, you only strike it."

Yet Mr. McGill would not accept that life is, or can be, lived in compartments, glass or worse. He wanted that glass broken.

"Segregation," he wrote, "is estrangement. It is a withdrawal from **humanity** that is close at hand, that passes in the streets, that lives just over the way. Life in separate, side-by-side compartments, as events of the last half of the twentieth century already have demonstrated with such devastating emphasis, is productive of results both explosive and tragic. This is a part of the guilt and accusation that make up the mosaic of the Southern conscience."

He wanted the doors to all those compartments open, and he would not rest even now until they are.

For he saw the price the South paid for false pride.

Mr. McGill mourned the number of "really able men" the South had sent to Congress where they could never hope to attain "the national respect and stature for which they so admirably were equipped" because, in order to survive politically, "they were required to conform to the [racial] mores of their states . . . the need to compromise along the lines laid down by their forebears." And their forebears' actions to bypass the Fourteenth Amendment were, in Mr. McGill's words, "without exception . . . dishonorable in purpose . . . a political system based on fraud and deceit [which] was hardly the stuff of Jefferson, the Virginia giants, or others from the Southern states who before the Civil War had given the region distinguished leadership and supplied the nation with presidents."

Segregationists so "sickened the region's politics," he said, that throughout his lifetime the most able and honorable of Southern national politicians "were condemned to be bound to a Prometheus rock, or like Sisyphus, eternally to push an unrewarding stone up the hills of bitterness."

I wish he could have lived to see a Georgian, Jimmy Carter, elected to the Presidency from a South transformed by a Southwesterner, Lyndon Johnson, who brought into being those redemptive laws of the land that gave life to Ralph McGill's vision of a region rectifying its wrongs instead of trying to justify its cruelties any longer.

It was not only the politicians that Mr. McGill confronted but the business establishment, empty-headed society, yes, even the churches.

"Christianity cannot well afford to be on the wrong side of a moral force," he thundered. He understood the region's guilt and the toll it took.

Mr. McGill quoted in his book a telling conversation with Carson McCullers of Columbus, who said: "Southerners are the more lonely and spiritually estranged, I think, because we have lived so long in an artificial social system that we insisted was natural and right and just—when all along we knew it wasn't."

Mr. McGill went on: "Carson was, of course, right. In its literature, its national and local politics, its fierce insistence on regional identification, its fierce chip-on-the-shoulder defensiveness, the South has consistently and almost embarrassingly revealed its troubled conscience."

And he confessed that "an impatient anger against the myth-South grew" in him as he moved through dreary Southern barrens that never had known ease or pillared mansions . . . and even so, the poetry of this poor South resonated in his soul, and he loved nothing more than to read aloud the lines of Stephen Vincent Benet:

Fall of the possum, fall of the coon,
And the lop-eared hound dog baying the moon . . .
A brief white rime in the red clay road
And low mules creaking a lazy load
Through endless acres of afternoon,
A pine cone fire and a banjo tune,
And a julep mixed with a silver spoon.

"Juleps for the few," as Vann Woodward put it, "and pel-lagra for the crew!" Myth-South. He loved it, and grieved over its self-deceptions and foolishness, and made it the aim of his life to teach his kinsmen of the need to grow honest and find a better way.

He lived to see the first fruits of his life's effort, which he stated too simply—"seeing to it that the people of Atlanta knew the facts and the alternatives."

And he closed *The South and the Southerner* by saying how it was to feel the mountain move: "To see the golf courses, transportation, eating places, libraries and schools desegregated without an incident but rather with understanding and good manners was a warm and rewarding experience. There is almost an ecstasy which is quite indescribable, in seeing, and feeling, a city slowly but surely reach a decision and act on it."

But, in looking back, Mr. McGill was plainspoken about the part played by much of the South's press. He was unsparing and we ought to remember it. In his words: "A shocking number of its newspapers had failed in the responsibility of leadership—to reveal a region to itself. Painfully few had ever dissected the so-called Southern way of life or stripped the myths from the Southerner's belief that he was somehow different from other Americans and entitled to special rights, including that of being 'let alone' in the ugliest practices of discrimination."

The politicians, the business bosses, the churches—even the press! Was no cow sacred from the McGill branding iron? Now that the bellowing of the burned has quieted somewhat, the press in particular can be rewarded by a look backward to that not-entirely-noble time and a look inward to identify what we have, or should have, learned.

Courage. He taught us that. A great wrong waited to be righted in his native land and he went forth to meet it, in John F. Kennedy's words, no matter the cost, no matter the peril. It was strictly secondary that Mr. McGill's implacable conviction helped strike away the shackle that had weighed down the South and liberate a people from imprisonment by the past. Assisting his fellow Southerners to reclaim their pride and worth was a by-product he had confidently expected—and the prosperity and national leadership that followed for the South would not surprise him.

Ralph McGill's legacy was the example he set for the rest of us in journalism. Perhaps never again in American life will one editor be thrust forward by destiny to take up so monumental an issue, so clearly-defined, and, starting nearly alone, to fight it to overwhelming victory.

Yet his example remains always, no matter the nature of future challenges, and it says to us journalists: Build your work on a moral base.

A society's material, social and political rewards that follow are but by-products of action that springs from the heart.

Ralph McGill had the warmest heart of any man I ever knew, and certainly the most unruly one. And if he were speaking to us now, I assure you he would not be comfortably dwelling on past victories. He would feel a deep satisfaction at our new beginnings here in the last quarter of the twentieth century, yes. We have seen forced racial segregation give way to something better. The Southern economy long ago began its march from subsistence farming to an urban industrialization

across what they now call the Sunbelt, and prosperity is replacing pellagra. Southern politicians, once pariahs, are suddenly fit for the Presidency. A past-ridden people, once in thrall to Confederate grandpas, orients itself to the future at last, and takes its pride in educated grandsons.

All this would give him pleasure. But it would not give him rest. And he would say to us in that tough-soft voice—that mixture of honey and gravel—that the work of the journalist is scarcely begun and we'd better be about the future, not contented with the past. He would point to the challenge of change yet to come—and he greeted the prospect of change joyfully as an opportunity, never fearfully as a threat.

He would tell us first that our prime human challenge as Americans is to extend desegregation into true racial integration now. And if we told him how hard we're finding that task to be—the true equalization of educational and social and economic opportunity—he would only snort impatiently about the details and remind us that success in this human undertaking must be an article of American faith. He would never rest until full justice is done before history, and we have far to go.

He would caution us, as this once-parched Southern land begins to yield industrial plenty, not to harden our consciences to the plight of the poor and the left-out, but to keep always in mind that a newspaper's prime job in a commercially-competitive society is to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

He would tell us to speak first as Americans and only second as Southerners, for we are united with the other states now in a union long overdue.

And with able men no longer trapped in a peculiar provincialism, he would especially urge that we support worthiness in Southern politics and raise up the nation's Thomas Jeffersons again. Mr. McGill took a special pleasure in what he called the adagios and arabesques of politicians, for at their best he saw them as the uniquely American instruments for making his editorial conviction into practical policy for a better life.

In presidential politics, of course, even though Mr. McGill fought the one-party hold on the South, he lived too long under Franklin D. Roosevelt to advise us to vote Republican. With many a chuckle he used to tell the story of a conversation he had in 1952 with the late Gov. James M. Cox, then owner of the Atlanta Newspapers and himself a Democratic Presidential nominee in 1920. Gov. Cox said he had noticed Mr. McGill was

writing some pretty favorable stuff about the Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower, then running against the Democrat Adlai Stevenson, and he wanted to give the editor some advice.

There would be times when a Republican Presidential nominee would look pretty good, pretty able, and would even appeal to an editor like Mr. McGill, Gov. Cox said. But when such a strange seizure might momentarily afflict him, the old governor said, and these were his words:

Just always remember, Ralph, that the Republicans are no damn good, and they're always bad for the country!

Seriously, Mr. McGill had a great liking and a close friendship with Republicans of the moderate wing. He strongly supported the builders of a moderate Republican party in the state in the 1950s. And he thought the vain efforts of moderates like Nelson Rockefeller on the national level were admirable. He did, in fact, like Ike.

His cheerful partisanship had much persiflage in it, though his eye could turn to steel at a breath of demagoguery from misleaders. He did not trust doctrinaire politicians of the left or right; he found them either foolish or dangerous. He would urge us as journalists, and as citizens, though, to engage ourselves deeply in the self-governing process, and in this he saw the free press as the cornerstone of freedom.

To him the First Amendment, with its guarantee against any laws abridging freedom of the press, was the holiest of our American title deeds. He would bid us to steadfastness and eloquence in resisting the current tidal flow of court opinions and public reaction against free expression—and predictably he would go the people themselves with his arguments. How much more fun and fire he could have brought to this vital debate than most of us writing our earthbound essays today!

He was my mentor, so I know some general rules he would expect us to follow, too. He had confidence in the journalists who came after him never to strike certain flags, and:

To watch in this world for ways up for those laid low, to help those least able to help themselves—to care most for the least among us, for to him that was the purpose of having editorial power.

To listen to our hearts, not out of sentimentality, but out of a capacity to care deeply.

To have courage and take risks for our beliefs, rather than trim sails in the tempest, if our course is right.

To write well and plainly—to say things straight. “You’ve got to put the hay down where the mules can get at it,” he liked to say. And in certain struggles with forces of darkness, he once told me, “there’s nothing to do but walk right out into the center of the ring and bust your opponent right square in the nose.” Yet with all that, he would expect us to master language, the tool of our craft, and use the cadence and the melody of it lovingly and well, as he surely always did.

And as reporters, we would hear again the simple rule he followed all of his life. “You’ve got to keep moving around,” he said. Move he did, all over this world, seeing and hearing and feeling firsthand the news as it filtered through his own senses. It was his secret that he engaged life directly and personally and conveyed it as he alone saw it.

Have the courage to fight, and the compassion to care, his whole life says to us.

Yet I do not believe Ralph McGill, an essentially modest man, ever dared pause to ponder or believe his true importance to his land and his profession.

Someone else did. I do not know the poet’s name. But the tribute I am about to read was left anonymously in Harold Martin’s mailbox the day after Ralph McGill died. Whoever left the beautiful, unsigned offering obviously knew that Harold was a particular friend of Mr. McGill’s from their years together at the *Constitution*. The writer also knew that Harold, a sensitive master of the English language, comprehended beauty. And so these are lines from that unsigned poem, grieving at the hour of Ralph McGill’s death:

On Ralph McGill

We mourn the young who are cut off
The rose before it blooms, the tree before its fruit is borne,
But he . . . who weeps for age whose race is run?
Who’s filled his full three score years and ten?
Were not his years with honors packed?
He suffered no decline, but like a lion
Still on the hunt, he died when stalking prey.
For the sword that pierced this noble heart
Struck him in full pursuit of jackals hanging round to feed
Upon another’s kill. He toppled in full stride . . .
He was a gentle hunter for so indomitable a man . . .

He heard the curses of the envious
And knew the scorn of vested lords
Who, furious in their fear of loss of baronies . . .
Set the ignorant upon his heels,
A pack to snarl and snap and threaten an assault.
He scarcely seemed to hear their frantic cry
For he never changed his stride or favored them with scorn
But to bemoan the blindness of their ignorance and hate.
He fought for those denied a place
About the common table, all his wrath
He threw, like lightning shaft
That frights the summer air, at those
Who puffed their pious coats to hide
Their trampled victims from the public eye.
He loved this land, he held its people to his heart
But kept uneasy watch upon
Its conscience; like a Mother he reminded it
That being just is oft more difficult
Than being brave. So lay him in this Southern ground
To sleep here where he lived and loved, and sometimes wept.
Let this warm Southern earth
Reclaim its Son; though he has other residence.
The race is over, he has run and well . . .
The Warden’s left the gate; let a new warrior spring
To man its portals for the barbarians gather close
As always to invade, and sack, and spoil
The citadel. Let it be defended, let another raise
The legacy he left. Let the compassion and the rage
For justice he embodied be maintained.
Good men leave goodly gifts; kind men
Leave love behind; let his memorial be
A kinder heart, a truer sympathy.

No kinder heart, no truer sympathy comes down the past to us. He lived and worked in times of fear and doubt and uncertainty—and he brought us courage and certitude by the power of his example. As if the wide Tennessee of his boyhood had washed all transient surfaces before it, leaving unmoved and growing taller as we and history move around him, there he stands, that rock in a weary land, Ralph McGill.