

Eulogy for Everett Gendler – 4/4/2022 – Tamar Gendler

Everett was always ahead

Everett was always ahead of his time. Nearly 75 years ago – in 1948, he became vegetarian. Some seven years later – in 1955 -- he spent a summer at the Monteagle Folk School receiving civil rights training alongside a young Rosa Parks. He was an environmentalist by the time of Eisenhower; in 1967 he gave a sermon on the immorality of factory farming. By the early 1970s, he and Mary had a large organic garden – filled with chard and kale – complete with compost heap. In 1978, he installed photovoltaic solar panels on the roof of his synagogue. He has used gender-neutral pronouns to refer to God for half a century.

In the early 1960s, at his congregation in Princeton, New Jersey, Everett began a tradition of conducting Shabbat services outside. “On bright days,” he writes in *Judaism for Universalists*, “temperature permitting, we would leave the sanctuary just after the *Barchu* and head out of doors. There, under the skies and in the face of the sun, we would chant together that part of the service which celebrates the gift of life and the radiance of the luminaries.” He viewed Nature as being, “along with Scripture, a Divine text revelatory of the Giver of Life and Guidance...both Nature and Scripture are the garb of God.”

And just as he was ahead on the environment, so too was he ahead in other domains. “Our age is a time of tremendous upheavals,” he wrote in 1957: “we have seen a nearly complete overturning of the political order which once seemed so firmly established. The earth has shifted on its axis, eastward, toward Africa and Asia.” Or 1971: “‘Feminine’ and ‘female’ and ‘woman’ are not necessarily equivalent terms. “Feminine” is a quality found in females, but it is found in males as well.”

Preternaturally sensitive to the world’s moral order, Everett was always out in front – sometimes lonely and isolated in his profound awareness of the earth’s simultaneous beauty and injustice; sometimes accompanied by or leading others who came to share his insight and commitment.

Everett was always behind

But in other ways, Everett was slow. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure of eating a meal with Everett knows that he took the advice to “chew before you swallow” with a literalness that exceeded even its frummetest interpretation; breakfast alongside Everett lasted almost until lunchtime, and dinner before an 8pm concert at Tanglewood needed to start before 5.

He bought his first house in 1971, at the age of 43. His first grandchild was born in 1997, when he was almost 70. His first book – *Judaism for Universalists* – was

published when he was 86; his second – a translation of the writings of Samuel Tamares – when he was 91. Those are hardly the timestamps of someone in a rush.

Nor was he in a rush to adopt new technologies. Until well beyond the moment that they went out of style – indeed all the way through the time that they came back in – he held firm to his typewriter, his vinyl records, his looseleaf tea. He used old-fashioned paper maps; carried a pocket calendar which he called – in a reference to modernity that was itself outdated – his “tush-pilot”; and knew hundreds of phone numbers – including those of most of you here in this room -- by heart. He gardened with a scythe; he cooked with cast iron pans; he treasured his 19xx multi-volume Oxford English Dictionary. And – in the words of the inimitable Reverend Philip Zaeder, his co-chaplain at Phillips Andover, when he moved from place to place, he “carried books of all sorts, in a cardboard box, masquerading as a briefcase.”

Everett was always fully present

But Everett was not only ahead and behind; he was also fully present. His life was filled with “radical astonishment” at the beauty of the world that surrounded him and those who inhabited it alongside him.

His ability to connect was extraordinary. “He would engender true and real love in other people, even in a brief encounter,” writes our dear friend Trude Schnackenberg.

For Everett, the realms of the secular and the sacred were in powerful proximity.

Ever a lover of the celestial bodies and their cycles, Everett marked each phase of the sun and the moon with great care. He turned chores into ceremonies, changing the filter on his well at solstice and equinox, accompanied by selections from traditional Hebrew liturgy, ancient and modern poets, and musical offerings from Handel to Mahler.

His garden fences bore a ratio of 42:72. Why? Because, as he notes, “Jewish tradition has a number of names designating the Divine...Two of these I have found valuable in reminding me, each time I step into my garden, that the living soil, with which I cooperate in helping food grow, is itself a gift of the Author of the Works of Creation.” One of these names has 42 letters; another has 72. “Why not,” asks Everett, “measure your garden so that it is 42 by 72, whether in feet, or inches – or in the Biblical measures of a cubit (*amah*) or a span (*zeret*) or a handbreadth (*tefah*) or a finger (*etzbah*)?” “For each of these dimensions,” he continues, “you might select passages from the Jewish tradition that can be posted at the corner of your garden.”

Those of you who are able to join us for the shiva this afternoon will be able to see the verses Everett selected for this purpose – one from the Zohar and the other from Exodus with commentary by Ibn Ezra – covered in plastic and posted, with old-fashioned flat thumbtacks, on small pieces of mounted plywood.

How is this possible?

Always ahead; always behind; always fully present: how is this possible?

Everett's teacher at seminary, the great Abraham Joshua Heschel, gives us some insight in his 1951 book *The Sabbath*. There, Heschel distinguishes between the realm of space and the realm of time. The realm of space is our ordinary human domain, the realm of the transient. The realm of time is the domain of the everlasting and the divine.

As Heschel writes: "To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time." Sabbath provides us with the opportunity to turn our attention away from the space to connect with the Eternal through time.

To the realm of time, Everett was exquisitely aware. He followed all earthly rhythms – natural, musical, spiritual – with uncanny attention. He was superlatively sensitive to the phases of the moon, the pacing of notes in a musical performance, the rhythm of prayer.

It is no surprise that he held onto life – to earthly time – until a moment of profound sanctity. Even as his oxygen dwindled, even as his breathing slowed, Everett remained in his earthly body until the sun went down on Friday, simultaneously ushering in the new moon, the new Hebrew month, the renewal of spring, and the Sabbath.

The Sabbath, Heschel writes, "is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord."

Everett: you spent your life being, giving, sharing, and being in accord.

Though you are no longer with us in earthly space, no longer with us in earthly time, you remain with us: always leading us toward your vision for the future; always holding on to the wisdom of the past; always focusing our eyes on the miracle of the present.

May your memory be a blessing to us all.