Speaking of Faith

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VIKING
2007

which we've ordered our common life for many decades-law, politics, economics, science. It is, rather, a realization that these disciplines have a limited scope. They can't ask ultimate questions of morality and meaning. Our most heated debates-on marriage, or stem-cell research, or abortion-defy the boundaries of legal rulings and political rights into which we've attempted to fit them. They drive back to the mysteries of human life and human sexuality. They are prisms for deep questions about identity, relationship, and love in our time. They also arouse fierce human impulses both to question difference and to defend it. We can construct factual accounts and systems from DNA, gross national product, legal code-but they don't begin to tell us how to order our astonishments, what matters in a life, what matters in a death, how to love, how we can be of service to one another. These are the kinds of questions religion arose to address, and religious traditions are keepers of conversation across generations about them. I've seen a tapestry unfurled, both ancient and in progress like the whole of creation, a bearer of truths that arguments cannot contain. I must tell of these things, and how they meet my own deepest longings for truth, beauty, and hope.

I was born on the night John F. Kennedy was elected president. So I arrived more or less with the sixties, but too late

to experience the underlying hope and whimsy of the times. I came of age to the unraveling of dreams. All of my earliest public memories, the defining public events of my childhood, are of violence and tragedy, and always attached to admirable faces: John and Robert Kennedy; Martin Luther King Jr.; young men coming home bloody and broken from Vietnam. I grew up with a strong but deeply conflicted sense of politics as the primary arena of human action-of social power and of human frailty; oflight and dark secularized yet of biblical proportions.

But life on this side of a new millennium and my interviews of recent years have altogether changed the way I would tell the story of the momentous decade of my birth. Much of its hope as well as its tragedy yielded to irony and dead ends. The mighty Soviet Union was in the end a Trojan horse. The flower children raised stockbrokers. The Vietnam War succumbed to popular protest, but it has been succeeded by other wars in which it is more difficult to discern a dear moral stance. And between and among these political events, religious seeds were being planted that are coming to fruition and shaping the global present. Kennedy's Catholicism and Martin Luther King Jr.'s theology were as pivotal for our culture as were their politics. The vast, unresolved change set in motion in the mid-1960s by the Second Vatican Council-perhaps the largest democratic assembly in

history—is an animating factor in the global north-south divide that has followed the East-West Cold War. And the Barry Goldwater presidential campaign of 1964 marked the little-noticed entry of evangelical Christians into conservative national electoral politics.

Nevertheless, in those same years Western intellectuals were foretelling the end of religion as a public force. As human beings grew more modern and technologically advanced and their societies more plural, they proclaimed, religion would retreat to the private sphere. Perhaps it would disappear altogether. Harvard's Harvey Cox published his runaway best seller, *The Secular City*, in 1965. "Secularization," he wrote, "simply bypasses and undercuts religion and goes on to other things. . . . The gods of traditional religions live on as private fetishes or the patrons of congenial groups, but they play no significant role in the public life of the secular metropolis." On April 8, 1966, *Time* magazine asked on its cover, *Is God Dead?*

This was not erudition, as we now know, but myopia. Harvey Cox recanted long ago. And I'm persuaded by the analysis of the eminent Boston University sociologist Peter Berger, who now calls his own 1960s prediction of a secular future the greatest miscalculation of his career. He's spent recent decades studying the lively intersection of religion and life globally—Guatemalan Pentecostals translating populist

faith into democratic civic cultures, software entrepreneurs in Bangalore who garland their computers with Hindu ritual. The world remained as furiously religious as ever, Berger says, but there were two exceptions to that generalization. The first was geographical: northern Europe and the northern United States did become less religious than the rest of the world in the course of the twentieth century. And sociologically, in the United States as across the world, the elites of the twentieth century—the international intelligentsia—also became quite secular in sensibility and outlook. The decline of religion was never a factual reality, but a gulf of perspective. In U.S. culture, Berger likes to muse, religion became "something done in private between consenting adults." That is to say, we began to bracket ways of making meaning and defining personal conscience out of our spheres of action in the world.

Religiously, spiritually, I was a child of my time. I grew up in Oklahoma, the granddaughter of a Southern Baptist preacher. Through him I experienced the drama of faith, but my parents had turned their backs on his stern rules for a fallen creation. We went to church on Sunday. Monday through Friday I was raised to win, to perfect myself, and to do so in the American way of accomplishment and accumulation. My father listened to election returns as my mother gave birth. He was a political operator in a culture

where politics is ruthlessly provincial, a blood sport. I watched him wage wars on the pages of newspapers and by way of radio ads. As an Oklahoma Democrat, he was more conservative than most Massachusetts Republicans. But he imprinted me with what, in the wider world, are hybrid instincts. In that decade of my birth, he was a true believer in civil rights and the war on poverty. I loved his passion and idealism. They became entangled with cynicism and pain in the years of my childhood in which good men and high ideals fell one by one, shot down all too easily and finally by other men.

Later I landed in the heart of divided Europe, confronting the Cold War clash of good and evil as a young journalist and then at the level of diplomatic and strategic high policy. This was the era of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain and terrifying enemies who, in contrast with our current enemies, now appear wondrously civilized and contained. Granted, they had thousands upon thousands of weapons of mass destruction—long range, medium range, short range, trained on our major cities—but we knew this. We had our weapons trained on them too, in commensurate numbers. And when I arrived in divided Berlin in the early 1980s, no one imagined the whimper with which the Soviet empire would end. In neighboring Poland, future president Lech

Walesa's Solidarity movement had just been crushed. In Czechoslovakia, future president Václav Havel was a safely imprisoned dissident for life. And the wall running through Berlin—a material symbol of the ideological "Iron Curtain" that cut through the heart of the ancient continent—appeared as the shape of forever, an unshakable truth of our lifetime. I hold on to these memories now as a reminder that there is at any given moment much reality we do not see, and more change possible than we can begin to imagine. I believed then that all of the important and interesting problems in the world were political, and all of the solutions too. And for a while I threw myself body, mind, and spirit at this conviction.

But I changed my mind. This book is a chronicle of a change of mind, and of a discipline of listening that keeps my mind and my spirit stretching. There are places in human experience that politics cannot analyze or address, and they are among our raw, essential, heartbreaking, and life-giving realities. I returned to America from Europe in the early 1990s as my generation was rediscovering a hunger for spiritual depth, for religious moorings. I studied theology to learn whether I could reconcile religious faith with my intelligence and the breadth of my experience in the world—whether faith could illuminate life in all its complexity and

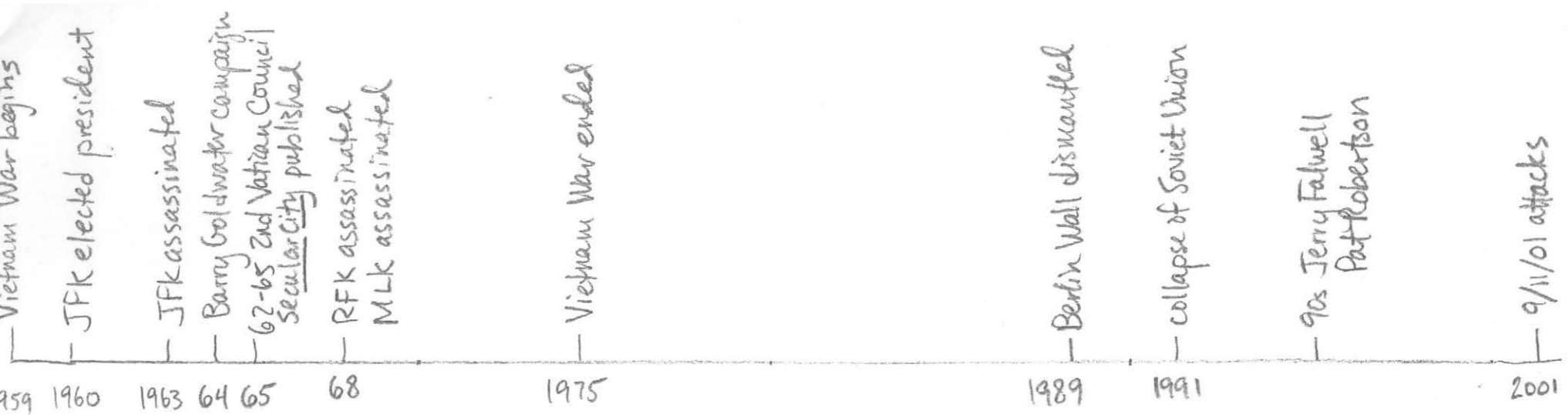
passion and frailty. I decided that it can. I have found a vast and vivid landscape of others who share this discovery and with whom I now share a life of conversation.

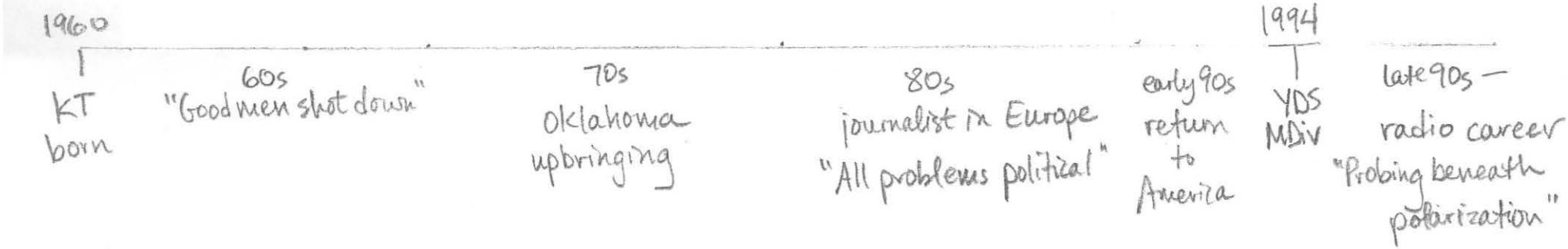
When I began my adventure of radio conversation in the late 1990s, I was something of a lone voice in a media wilderness. I saw that a traditional journalistic approach did not do justice to the vigor and importance of all kinds of religious impulses and traditions. It tended to simplify and flatten their spiritual and intellectual content, while giving inordinate play to a few strident voices that played the sound-bite headline game. I was dismayed with the black hole where the religious dimension of life might have been on public radio. I longed to add depth to the way religious ideas made their way into public conversation. I believed that these kinds of ideas belonged in the mix of resources by which we navigate all the important issues of our common life.

These ideas would have reasserted themselves eventually. Our late-twentieth-century compartmentalization of public action and private meaning was not sustainable. But tragically, instead of finding a way to speak that was consonant with faith's deepest virtues, some religious people began to squeeze themselves into political modes of discourse in order to be heard. And the shrillest voices got there first. When I

returned to religious questions in my own life in the 1990s, two men-Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson-largely defined what it meant to be Christian, what religious people sound like and advocate. They preached, pronounced, and condemned, in language that captured headlines, forced the Gospel into political debate, and made for good sound bites. Our culture is still reeling from that experience years after either of these men exerted anywhere near the dominance in evangelical Christian culture that they were granted in secular media. In that period, many thoughtful religious people-as embarrassed and outraged as any nonbeliever-cultivated a civilized public silence, loath to be associated with inflammatory speech that embittered rather than nourished our common life.

Then the world changed: September 11 happened. Now it was possible to argue that religion was at the root of the world's worst problems. It should not have taken 9/11 for Islam-the religion of more than 1.2 billion human beings-to figure in a U.S. vision of the world. Nor should we have needed this tragedy to know finitude and frailty-our vulnerability even in the strongest modern fortress-that much of the rest of the world has known all along. Religion faces vulnerability head on, and the recent spiritual awakening in our culture is in part a response to that. But fear, and the reality of global religious passions, entered American living





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