

## **An Earhriase Witness** -- from Terry Bergdall, 16 August 2004 \*

Though I am not much into poems, the recent death of Ronald Reagan brought one to mind. Then, just a couple of days ago, the same poem crossed my mind again as I was interviewing a determined woman in the Republic of Georgia (I write today from Tbilisi where I'm on a business trip). There are a few threads to this story, so bear with me as I weave them together. It begins at the home of Reagan's first political hero, Franklin Roosevelt.

Displayed on the museum wall at Hyde Park is a letter from FDR in response to an inquiry that asked about his favorite poem. It is entitled "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley and concludes with the following lines:

*In the fell clutch of circumstances,  
I have not winced, nor cried out loud,  
And under the bludgeoning of chance  
My head is bloody but not bowed.*

*It matters not how straight the gate  
How charged with punishment the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am captain of my soul.*

These verses, Roosevelt wrote, "have always proved an inspiration to me when the horizons of my hopes have been clouded with disappointment."

The second thread involves an old movie I saw last year. It was "King's Row," the film that gave Ronald Reagan his finest role. The title of Reagan's autobiography, "Where's the Rest of Me?," is taken from a line in the movie. The poem has a central place in the film's closing scene. Reagan's character had tragically lost both legs due to amputation after an accident. Unknown to him, however, was the fact that the doctor preformed the operation maliciously and unnecessarily. His best friend in the film recites these two verses just before telling him the painful truth.

The poem speaks perceptively about our human predicament. On the one hand, we are up-against a relentless power that makes it unquestionably clear that we are ultimately NOT in control of our lives. Plans go awry, illness creeps in, accidents occur, and death trumps all. On the other hand, we have infinite freedom to decide how we will relate to that power and how we will respond to an endless flow of challenges. We are never victims without options and our range of choice is wide. We can curse that power, temporarily ignore it, or respect and honor it -- just as we can retreat to lick our wounds in difficult times or find creative ways to move forward. As long as we breathe and are awake, we are continually making decisions about our lives. Being self-conscious of this, and willfully embracing it, is the meaning of faith. "I am captain of my soul."

The final thread of my story involves the woman I met in Georgia. She was an innocent bystander during conflicts in Ossetia. This is an ethnic provincial area next to Chechnya and was split, South and North, between Georgia and Russia when the Soviet Union dissolved. Unfortunately, the conflict is heating up once again. She was paralyzed from the waist down when she was hit by a sniper's bullet in the early 1990s.

Today, she is a local leader in a community development project. I visited her in a simple office where she moved about on rough-hewn floors in a wheel chair. Taped to her wall were several photographs cut from magazines showing people doing all types of things in wheel chairs: racing in the special Olympics, shopping at a supermarket, studying in a university classroom, attending sporting events, “marching” in street parades, transferring into a car (on the driver’s side), etc, etc. I asked her if she knew about Franklin Roosevelt and she said “of course.” I suggested that she might add a picture of him in his wheel chair working at the White House. She thought that to be a great idea, so I promised to send her one. Her gallery of pictures was a compelling rendition of the poem: decisive “captains” exercising their freedom. While she obviously put them there to serve as a daily reminder to herself, she certainly brought me to crisp attention as well.

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Follow-up: When I told her I would send a photo, I failed to realize how difficult it would be to make good on the promise. After a persistent search on the internet, I found one of the very few photos known to exist that shows FDR in a wheel chair. See below:



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