

***We Live by the Meanings of Things***  
**New Years Reflection by Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**  
**UU Church of Minnetonka**  
**January 4, 2008**

**REMEMBRANCES FROM 2008**

Note: All biographical information obtained from Wikipedia.com  
and edited by Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

**READER ONE**

**Sir Edmund Percival Hillary** (July 20, 1919 – January 11, 2008) was a New Zealand mountaineer and explorer. On May 29, 1953, at the age of 33, he and Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay became the first climbers known to have reached the summit of Mount Everest.

**Sidney Pollack** – director and actor

**Charlton Heston** – actor

**Heath Andrew Ledger** (April 4, 1979 – January 22, 2008) was an Academy Award-nominated Australian television and film actor. For his portrayal of Ennis Del Mar in the movie *Brokeback Mountain*, Ledger was nominated for the 2005 Academy Award for Best Actor. A few months before his death, Ledger had portrayed the Joker in the Batman movie, *The Dark Knight*. Ledger died at age 28, from an accidental toxic combination of prescription drugs.

**READER TWO**

**William Frank Buckley Jr.** (November 24, 1925 – February 28, 2008) was an American author and conservative commentator. He founded the political magazine *National Review* in 1955 and hosted 1429 episodes of the television show *Firing Line* from 1966 until 1999. Buckley was found dead at his desk in the study at his home in Samford, Connecticut, on February 28, 2008. “He died with his boots on,” his son said, “after a lifetime of riding pretty tall in the saddle.”

**Harvey Korman** – actor

**Bo Diddley** – Blues musician

**Ralph Rapson** (September 13, 1914 - March 29, 2008) was one of the world's oldest and most prolific practicing architects at his death at age 93. Rapson practiced in Minneapolis, Minnesota from 1954-2008. He said: “The design process isn’t just about bricks and stones; for me it’s also about the people in a building and how I expect them to live.” Some of his designs include the original Guthrie Theater and the Rarig Center for the Performing Arts, both in Minneapolis.

### **READER THREE**

**John Richard or “J.R.” Simplot** (January 9, 1909 – May 25, 2008) was the founder of the J. R. Simplot Company, which pioneered the first commercial frozen French fry in the late 1940s. In 1967, Simplot and McDonald's founder Ray Kroc agreed by hand shake that the Simplot Company would provide frozen French fries to the restaurant chain, and they supplied more than half of them by 2005. Simplot died suddenly at his home on May 25, 2008, with his wife at his side, following a bout of pneumonia.

### **READER ONE**

**Joe Kudla**, also known as “Snot,” from the infamous Minnesota Renaissance Festival comedy duo, “Puke and Snot.” “Puke and Snot” entertained thousands of spectators at the Festival for 34 years with a feisty, vaudeville style street theater. In 34 years of shows, Kudla failed to appear only once. An attack of kidney stones sent him to the Fairview emergency room but he was on stage the next day. Joe Kudla died on August 11, 2008, of an apparent heart attack at his northeast Minneapolis home. He was 57.

**Dith Pran** – journalist who reported on the Cambodian “Killing Fields”

**George Carlin** – comedian

**Diana Barnato Walker** (January 15, 1918 – April 28, 2008) was the first British woman to break the sound barrier. She became a pilot at age 20, and during World War II delivered solo hundreds of single and twin-engine fighter airplanes, flying 80 types of aircraft by 1945. On August 26, 1963, she flew an English Electric Lightning T4 to Mach 1.65, to become the first British woman to break the sound barrier. She was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 1965. She died on April 28, 2008, aged 90.

### **READER TWO**

**Jesse Helms** – politician

**Isaac Hayes** – musician and actor

**Irena Sendler** (February 15, 1910 – May 12, 2008) was a Polish Catholic social worker and member of the Polish resistance in Warsaw during World War II. Sendler saved 2,500 Jewish children by smuggling them out of the Warsaw Ghetto by carrying them in boxes, suitcases, trolleys, and ambulances, sometimes even disguising them as packages. She hid lists of their names in jars in order to keep track of their original and new identities. In 1999, Megan Stewart and her high school friends investigated a small clipping on the life of Irena Sendler. The students created a play, *Life in a Jar*. There have been over 250 performances throughout the United States, Canada and Europe. The students made six trips to Poland to visit Irena before she died. She once told the students, “You cannot separate people based on their race or religion. You can only separate people by good and evil. The good will always triumph.”

## **READER ONE**

**Don LaFontaine** – announcer

**Jim McKay** – sports announcer

**Timothy John Russert** (May 7, 1950–June 13, 2008) was an American television journalist and lawyer who appeared for more than 16 years as the longest-serving moderator of NBC's *Meet the Press*. He was a Senior Vice President at NBC News, Washington bureau chief, and covered several presidential elections. In 2008, Time Magazine included Russert in its list of the 100 most influential people in the world. On June 13, 2008, Russert collapsed at the Washington, D.C. offices of NBC News, and later that day was pronounced dead from a heart attack.

## **RESPONSIVE READING #649 – Led by Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

### **READER TWO**

**Robert J. Anderson** (March 6, 1933 – June 6, 2008), was an American actor and television producer, most famous for his role as the teenage George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

**Roy Scheider** – actor

**Cyd Charisse** – actress and dancer

**Dorothy “Del” Martin** (May 5, 1921 – August 27, 2008) and **Phyllis Ann Lyon** were an American lesbian couple known as feminist and gay-rights activists. Martin and Lyon met in 1950, became lovers in 1952, and moved in together on Valentine's Day 1953 in San Francisco. On February 12, 2004, Martin and Lyon were issued the first marriage license by the City and County of San Francisco after mayor Gavin Newsom ordered that marriage licenses be given to same-sex couples who requested them. Del Martin died on August 27, 2008, from complications of a bone fracture.

### **READER ONE**

**Paul Leonard Newman** (January 26, 1925–September 26, 2008) was an American actor, film director, entrepreneur, humanitarian and auto racing enthusiast. He won numerous awards, including an Academy Award for his performance in the 1961 Martin Scorsese film *The Color of Money*. He also won several national championships as a driver in Sports Car Club of America road racing. Newman was a co-founder of Newman's Own, a food company from which Newman donated all post-tax profits and royalties to charity. As of October 2008, these donations exceeded \$250 million, and continue to serve 13,000 children with serious illnesses each year. On September 26, 2008, Newman died at his longtime home in Westport, Connecticut, of complications arising from lung cancer.

**Studs Terkel** – author, historian and actor

**Richard Knerr** – inventor of the Frisbee and Hula Hoop

**Bettie Page** (April 22, 1923 – December 11, 2008) was an American model who became famous in the 1950s for her fetish modeling and pin-up photos. After a fight with her landlady in 1979, doctors diagnosed her with acute schizophrenia, and she spent 20 months in a state mental hospital. After suffering a heart attack, Bettie Page died on December 11, 2008.

### **READER THREE**

**Majel Barrett-Roddenberry** (February 23, 1932 – December 18, 2008) was an actress, producer, and widow of *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry. In various roles, Barrett was in every dramatic incarnation of the popular science fiction *Star Trek* franchise. Her talents were also used as the voice of the ship's computer, which will be heard once again in the new prequel, *Star Trek*, due out in 2009. Barrett-Roddenberry died at the age of 76 on December 18, 2008, as a result of complications from leukemia.

### **READER TWO**

**Miriam Makeba** (March 4, 1932 - November 10, 2008) was a South African singer and civil rights activist. After engaging in anti-Apartheid artistic and political activism, South Africa revoked her passport. Then, in 1963, after testifying against Apartheid to the United Nations, South Africa revoked her citizenship. Later she was granted honorary citizenship in ten other countries. She performed with Paul Simon on his *Graceland* tour in 1987, and in 1990, at the urging of Nelson Mandela, she returned home to South Africa. In her life she recorded 31 albums, and on November 9, 2008, Makeba collapsed on stage from a heart attack.

**Sir Arthur C. Clarke** – science fiction writer

**Odetta Holmes**, (December 31, 1930 – December 2, 2008), known as **Odetta**, was an African-American singer, actress, human rights activist, and an important figure in the American folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1961, Martin Luther King, Jr. anointed her “The Queen of American folk music.” In the summer 2008, at the age of 77, she launched another North American tour, singing strongly and confidently from a wheelchair. She recorded 18 studio albums and seven live albums. She had hoped to perform at Barack Obama's inauguration, but on December 2, 2008, Odetta died from heart disease in New York City.

### **READER ONE**

**William Mark Felt, Sr.** (August 17, 1913–December 18, 2008) was an agent of the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, who retired in 1973 as the Bureau's Associate Director. After years of denying his involvement with reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, Felt revealed himself on May 31, 2005 to be the Watergate scandal whistleblower called “Deep Throat.”

**John Michael Crichton** – science fiction writer and producer

**Eartha Mae Kitt** (January 17, 1927 – December 25, 2008) was an American actress, singer, cabaret star and political activist. She was born on a cotton plantation in North Carolina, but later traveled the world learning to speak and sing in many different languages. She appeared in 35 movies, 17 television shows, 13 stage plays, and recorded 14 albums. She advocated against the Vietnam war, and once said of gay marriage: “If I have a partner and something happens to me, I want that partner to enjoy the benefits of what we have reaped together. It's a civil-rights thing, isn't it?” Kitt died from colon cancer on December 25, 2008 at her home in Connecticut at the age of 81.

## ***We Live by the Meanings of Things***

### **New Years Reflection by Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, Sogyal Rinpoche writes: “When I first came to the West, I was shocked by the contrast between the attitudes to death I had been brought up with and those I now found. For all its technical achievements, modern Western society has no real understanding of death or what happens in death or after death.” Sogyal Rinpoche teaches that death is part of the life cycle, and that there are only two things we can say for certain about death: “it is absolutely certain that we will die,” and “it is uncertain when or how we will die.” He says that perhaps the deepest reason that we may be afraid of death is that we don’t know who we are.

We believe in a personal, unique, separate identity – but if we examine it more deeply, we discover that our sense of “identity” typically depends on our name, our biography, our partners, our jobs, our family, home, friends, credit cards...and if all that is taken away from us, we end up discovering we are living inside the shell of an unknown person, a stranger we’ve been living with the entire time but never really wanted to meet.

I do not consider myself a Buddhist, and I have only peripheral knowledge of Buddhist teachings, but I do know that Buddhist teachings revolve a great deal around an awareness that life, and the things in life, are impermanent. I understand the Buddhist call to simplify, to reduce our ownership of things and so reduce our attachment to things. In the Buddhist tradition, attachment brings suffering. When we collect objects, we are attached to getting more of them and get upset if they are destroyed or stolen. If we have hope, then we are attached to an outcome, and are angry or hurt if that outcome does not materialize. If we are afraid of death, then we are attached to life and are distraught at its passing.

I find it appropriate at the dawn of a new year to take some time to reflect on things that have died and the things that remain yet to be born, on failures and accomplishments, on the transient and the permanent.

In Roman mythology, *Janus* was the god of gates, bridges, doors, doorways, beginnings and endings. *Janus* was a two-faced god, with one face looking forward to the future and the other face looking behind to the past. Associated with this ancient god in our modern culture are two prominent English words: “janitor,” a person who is typically known as a keeper of doors and halls, and the word “January.”

January is a time to reflect on the past with one face even as we look to the future with another. But is also a time we may remind ourselves, as we move through these cold winter days, to pay attention to this very moment of our existence. This is a time, as the cold weather herds us indoors, into our modern cave dwellings, that we may allow ourselves space and time to explore those deeper parts of ourselves we find annoying, disgusting or frightening. We walk through much of our lives unconscious and unaware of our deeper selves and our truer capabilities.

We have hidden companions residing in the caves of our souls we are either unwilling or scared to approach. The new year is a time we may allow ourselves to be invited into exploration and companionship. Rather than turning away in anger or fear – or with the excuse that we don’t have the time – it may be that we find meaning and enlightenment by turning toward that which we fear the most: a vicious self-loathing; sorrowful regret at missed opportunities; anger and bitterness toward others that reflects an anger and bitterness toward the self; a fear of scarcity that we will never have “enough.”

These fears and sadness are ours as well. And it appears that we find something of value in them because we tend to hold on to them so tightly. This New Year, as every New Year does, offers us the challenge to let go of the things we hold on to so tightly – both the hopes and the fears – and to live simply, as we are right now, in this moment.

In the responsive reading we shared earlier (#649), Antoine de St. Exupery writes: “Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations. Therefore we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage: when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with a child; when we depart and when we return; when we plant and when we harvest... We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.”

When we hold on too tightly to our hopes and fears, when that attachment becomes enmeshed with our identity, we “live by things.” When we honor “the ceremonies of our passage,” on the other hand, we live by the meanings of things. The meanings of things arises from a deep awareness that the “things” of this life are merely tools we can use to find meaning – but they are not meaning itself.

Life passes away. We move from generation to generation. Famous actors and politicians and musicians and writers and scientists pass away just as often as all of us other known and unknown people in the world. The lesson from great lives is not to imitate or be intimidated by them, but to be inspired, to take the useful meaning we can, to understand the love that passes through all things of significance and worth.

As people of faith, our task is to pass on from generation to generation what we most deeply know and feel and believe. It is work that knows the past, envisions the future, but lives in this moment. This very moment. It is work not pushed aside or submerged by the flood of trivial things, but which is enlivened as it is embodied through the meanings of things. It is the work of enduring love.