

The Meaning of a Life

When I was 16, my 17-year old cousin asked her former boyfriend to kill her. They planned it for two days and then one late night in March, 1961, they drove twenty miles to a stock pond that his family leased for hunting purposes. The boy and girl chatted a bit and the girl asked for a final kiss. They shared a kiss, the girl knelt on a blanket on the ground, and the boy held a shotgun to her head. When the girl said “now,” he pulled the trigger. Arrested the next day, the boy declared that he was simply assisting the girl in “going to the angels” and that retrieving her body from the watery grave for the police was simply like “picking up a dead cat on the side of a road.” A hearing and then a Texas Supreme Court-mandated trial ended in the same way. The boy was found insane for the length of time it took him to pull the trigger. There was no jail time and no court-ordered counseling.

The “Kiss and Kill” Murder of 1960 tore Odessa, Texas in half. The western half of town where both the boy and the girl attended Odessa High School largely sided with the boy as the real victim. He was a handsome football player who was both popular and a good student. She was a troubled, kooky, drama girl who was definitely outside the mainstream both at school and in town. The dynamic and talented lawyer who defended the boy insinuated that she had “tricked” him into helping her commit suicide. That was the dominant view on that side of town and at that school. The eastern side of town where I went to school at Odessa Permian largely sided with the girl. My side of town saw it as a premeditated cold-blooded murder without a doubt. That is the way the Winkler County DA saw it as well. Winkler County is where the stock pond was, so the hearing was there and not in Ector County where Odessa is. The debate before the hearing and the reactions after the hearing and the trial hardened folks’ views then and for many decades afterwards. Most people, especially school authorities, simply did not discuss the event, the trial, or the issues the whole affair raised. We just got on with our lives.

Everything about this event, however, touched my life. It motivated me to move away from West Texas; it made me look at American justice in a jaundiced way; it divided my family; it led me to a new girlfriend who became my wife at 18 years old and who remains so 47 years later; and it later led me on a search for more evidence on why this event occurred and what effect it had on others’ lives. Oh, I did have a normal life. I graduated from high school, college and graduate school. I got a MA and PhD in International politics. I taught at Austin College in Sherman, Texas. I took leaves of absences to serve in the Federal Government twice. My wife and two kids were the central pre-occupations of daily life and wonderful salves to a troubled mind, but every once in awhile, I would think back to Odessa, my cousin Betty, and to the events in 1960 and 1961. In the 80s I worked with a writer to research and write the story. His two 300-page efforts were not published. In 1995, I wrote a one-page “short story” that stayed in a

note-book for eight years. Finally, in 2003 while I was on a sabbatical, I finished one book on nuclear proliferation and returned to my research on Kiss and Kill.

The time was right. I published a book in 2004 under the title "Washed in the Blood"; came out with a second edition in 2007, signed a movie option in 2006, and Texas Monthly published a national award-winning article about Betty in the same year. The reason the book has been successful is not about the sensationalism of the event or the outcome of the trial. It is about the effect Betty's life and death had on other people and the effect it continues to have to this day. The young man who killed her is now old, but in truth he is the other victim of the event. It's been a hard life and prisons do not necessarily have to have walls. People at the school Betty attended were deeply affected. One of her closest friends suffered through depression, alcoholism, and many ups and downs but is now doing police work in Plano, Texas. Many women who as girls shunned Betty and supported the boy dramatically changed their views over time and an astonishing number of them became counselors and therapists working with high school-aged girls. Betty herself became "Betty the Ghost" at Odessa High School. She is now the patron saint of the theater, choir, band and arts geeks at OHS. My book is now used to turn kids away from poor life choices and teenage suicide and it is Betty's legacy forever.

People have asked me if the book, the public's reaction, and maybe the upcoming movie bring closure for me in this matter. After all, I have spoken with numbers of people, some of my former students included, who turned away from death upon hearing how one person's death can deeply hurt others, not just themselves. Young people have found solace that in fact they are not alone in feeling isolated, conflicted or alienated. Parents have open dialogues with kids who have "disappointed" them in some way. Something positive has come of Betty's life and death. To tell the truth, as we have passed the 50th anniversary of Betty's death, I feel some piece of mind about how time has reversed her fortunes. I am gratified that individuals have embraced her and that people have healed. Nothing has been quite as powerful in this regard as a message I got just last week. It's from a counselor at her old high school, Odessa High School, and it reports the first public acknowledgement of Betty's attendance there and the role the school once played in the whole affair. I share it with you now and confess that in fact I have now achieved closure and I share that feeling with some important people central to the events of 1961:

...from a counselor at OHS on the occasion of the reunion of the class of 1961 this fall:
"Finally, many of us recall from our OHS history that the class of '61 is also the class that was struck with one of Odessa High's darkest occurrences, the murder of student Elizabeth J. "Betty" Williams. Some of the shroud came off of that as well, this past weekend. As a counselor, I felt outrage learning that, at the time, the school forbade students to discuss or mention what had happened, in any way, at school. Now, 50 years later...for the first time, the sad events were publicly acknowledged and discussed, among the class members, inside their school. Then, during a memorial & balloon

release for departed classmates in front of the school, "Elizabeth J. Williams" was the last name called as balloons drifted skyward. Several class members said afterwards that after half a century, they finally felt closure."