

MEMORIAL MINUTE FOR GREGORY NORMAN McMILLAN

Gregory Norman McMillan, 84, died on September 6, 2000, at his home in Port Townsend, Washington. A Memorial Meeting for Worship was held September 24, 2000, by the Port Townsend Worship Group.

Greg and his wife Brenda Martin visited Port Townsend regularly in the summers of the early 1980's and in 1989 relocated from Ojai, California. Greg became an active attendee of the Port Townsend Worship Group and joined the University Friends Meeting, Seattle, WA, in 1991.

Greg was born December 11, 1915, in Gagetown, Michigan, to Leo Angus McMillan and Mary Elizabeth Toohey. He received a Catholic education. As a youth he worked a paper route in order to pay his tuition to Catholic Central High School in Detroit, Michigan. After high school he became a novitiate to the Congregation of St. Basil, the Order of the priests who were his high school teachers. In 1936, he enrolled in Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario, to prepare for the teaching priesthood. After receiving his BA degree in Liberal Arts, he was assigned to the Congregation's seminary in Toronto on the campus of St. Michael's, one of the colleges of the University of Toronto, where he was appointed to study at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. After a year of graduate study, he left the Congregation. Strongly influenced by Thomas Merton, he joined the Trappist Order and spent a brief novitiate at the Trappist Monastery in Rhode Island. His struggle to be faithful to vows of physical self denial imposed by the "religious life" ended. He returned to Detroit to search for a new vocation.

In 1942 Greg married Rose Politzer. Until 1964 when his marriage to Rose ended, he and Rose faithfully attended mass each Sunday and assured that their five children did the same and that they were schooled in the catechism. In the mid 1940's the family settled near Escondido, California, where for several years they farmed a fifteen acre avocado ranch. In 1947 Greg began his career at Convair in aircraft personnel administration. In 1970 he retired from this work to do occasional work in construction and to build small boats. As he notes in his journal: "No more phony prestige of the big job, just a handy man."

First Greg built the Kittiwake, a two-place English canoe, which in 1974 he and Brenda cruised into Momp Bay and down the Salinas River. Then he built a Bolger's Light Dory. He rowed the dory with their supplies and Brenda paddled her kayak, cruising together in the Sea of Cortez. Then he built a cold-molded South Jersey Beach skiff for a friend and one for himself. Then he rebuilt a thirty foot catamaran, the Arriba. Each year, for four years, beginning in 1980, Greg and Brenda spent the months from October to May, sailing the Arriba along the coasts of the Sea of Cortez and the mainland of Mexico. His next boat was a single-place Blandsford canoe. Carrying the new canoe and Brenda's kayak on top of their old Dodge van, Greg and Brenda traveled across the U.S., canoeing all available rivers, and returned to the West Coast by way of Canada, again canoeing in the lakes and rivers. In his journal Greg answers the question, "Why would someone want to build a boat if he already has one?": "To me it hardly seems necessary to have to justify building anything at all. That is why our hands have become the way they are, so we can build things. And what more wonderful thing to build than a boat, especially a beautiful, gleaming, graceful boat? Some of the boats that I have built have been that way and I expect that the one I am building now will be beautiful, the best that I can do."

Reading from his journal, Greg recently shared his spiritual odyssey with Port Townsend Friends. Excerpts from that reading follow:

"During my lifetime, spanning as it does, 83 years, as I write this, the world has changed greatly and, thankfully, so have I. It was in my old age 'during the last watch of the night' as Buddha is reported to have said, that I had spiritual experiences I so value."

"Most days, during the past thirty years, I have meditated each morning for a short period. These meditations have changed over the course of the years. At first, they followed the Soto Zen approach which means that one attempts to empty the rational mind, quiet down the thinking process. Then, because of the influence of Thich Nhat Hanh, my meditations changed to a pursuit of mindfulness, with attempts to bring that mindfulness into everyday life. Then came another influence, that of the 'Insight Meditation' school led by Jack Kornfield, a more explicit effort to achieve a life of mindfulness. Of late years, I came under the influence of the Quaker mystics and here the meditations took a different direction, with the introduction of prayer and contemplative practice into the meditations."

"Several months ago (October 1997) an amazing thing happened. While sitting in my usual morning meditation, I had what I can only term a mystic experience. I was suddenly surrounded by, engulfed by, a brilliant, blinding light. That light was everything there was. Of course, I was startled. My immediate impression was that it was a tremendously intense energy. At first, I did not realize what was happening, but then, emanating from the light, came a powerful impression of love, not just 'abstract love', but an ardent, compassionate love and, most incredible it was love for me. The whole experience was awesome even though it lasted perhaps only momentarily. I was dumbfounded: I had read of some such things but had dismissed them, somewhat cynically."

"That mystic experience has been repeated but not in quite the same way. A few months ago, after foolishly overexerting myself, I went in and lay on the couch, undergoing a severe attack of angina. I knew that I was near dying, on the brink of death, as they say. Then once again I was suddenly startled by the blinding light. I was aware again of the same strong feeling of loving fervor and now that translated in my mind into a welcoming, sort of a 'Come on Greg, we are waiting for you.' There was then certainly no fear at all of dying but instead a very real readiness, an eagerness for it, an awareness that what was coming was wonderful beyond any expectation I could have."

"As of now, I am still very much a practicing Quaker. Of all the religions, I regard the Quakers to be the only one I find acceptable. It is non-doctrinal enough that it can accommodate me as I have changed, especially during the past year. Prior to that time, I considered myself a questioning Christian. Since then I have pretty much dropped away from all doctrinal beliefs and want to base my religious convictions and practices on what I have experienced. I am not interested in trying to define aspects of the deity. I know experientially that God is all light and love and that He will allow me to share that. What more could I want?"

The last years of his life Greg carried a concern for the homeless and the incarcerated of Port Townsend. He regularly visited the jail and led an ecumenical effort to respond to the needs of the homeless.

Greg is survived by his wife Brenda, his former wife Rose, his daughters Mary and Martha, his sons Michael, Thomas, and Tony, and his seven grandchildren.