Mining An Obituary

Thirty-five years have passed since my father died. I've tried often to write about him, but for some reason I couldn't sustain the effort. Too many dimensions and, I suspect, too much latent emotion, not to mention no deadline.

My last attempt to set something down was just before a brief memorial service on Thanksgiving weekend of 2002 at the College of Preachers beside Washington National Cathedral. (My wife Rosemary has re-endowed the care of the college's Garth, or atrium garden, in Mother and Dad's memory and to honor the Bowes family.) On that occasion I read aloud to a small family group my recollections of Mother--written when she died in 1987. But the words in my head about Dad still weren't organized or committed to paper; I could only recite from his obituary.

That obituary and his photograph appeared on the front page of The Blade, a metropolitan daily in Toledo, Ohio, the day after his death on November 17, 1969. Perhaps by quoting someone else's words I can also jump-start my long-delayed acknowledgment (acceptance?) of his passing. I taped a conversation about Dad with my sister Margery Dakin before she died in May 2005. I get it. As the oldest surviving member of the family I've run out of excuses.

*****

"Urban E. Bowes, 77, first director of research for Owens-Illinois, Inc., and a man whose interests branched far beyond his career of research chemistry, died Saturday after an apparent heart attack in his home, 550 East Front St., Perrysburg.

"Mr. Bowes, a native of Jordan. N.Y. retired in 1957 as O-I's director of international technical relations after 33 years in the glass industry. He was director of manufacturing for the Berney-Bond Glass Co., Columbus, from 1924 to 1930 and became O-I's director of research in 1935. In 1948 and 1949, he was president of the then O-I subsidiary the American Structural Products Co.

"He was a former councilman and board of education member in Perrysburg. His leisure pursuits ranged from history to art to economics.

"He was considered knowledgeable on the history of northwestern Ohio, and enjoyed tracing family histories. He was a member of Arts Interests, an area group that helps struggling young artists. He liked to keep abreast of economic trends and population studies, and often sent letters to the Department of Commerce and other government agencies for updated statistics.

"Mr. Bowes enjoyed gardening and until recent years went duck hunting in eastern Lucas County marshes.

"He studied at Syracuse University and at the Sorbonne in Paris. He served in the U.S. Army during World War I as an artillery officer.

"He was a member of the American Chemical Society, American Institute of Chemical Engineers, Society of Chemical Engineers, and the American Ceramics Society. Mr. Bowes was a fellow of the Society of Glass Technology in Great Britain.

"His civic activities included the presidency of the Hospital Planning Association, and the Institute of Medical Research at Toledo Hospital. He also was general chairman of the Community War Fund in 1945, and a member of the executive committee of Toledo Hospital and the Toledo Council on World Affairs.

"Surviving are his wife, the former Margery Waite Bigelow; son, David, of Chevy Chase, Md.; daughter, Mrs. Margery Dakin, of Pelham, N.Y., brothers, John and Fred, both of Syracuse, N.Y., and five grandchildren.

"Services will be Tuesday at 11 a.m. in St. Rose Church, Perrysburg. The body is in the Heilman Mortuary, Perrysburg, where the Rosary will be recited tonight at 8. Private burial will be in Fort Meigs Cemetery. The family has requested that any tributes be in the form of contributions to the Toledo Hospital Institute of Medical Research or the Northwestern Ohio Heart Fund."

*****

Well, there it is: an upwardly mobile, productive and in many ways distinguished life condensed into tight, declarative sentences--sentences that can become paragraphs unto themselves when squeezed into narrow columns on a newspaper page. Having labored at three metro dailies myself, I've researched and written more obituaries than I can count. I've even jabbed out my own draft death notice using two fingers for the vital statistics and a thumb for the space bar.

So I know how selective, even ephemeral, obits can be. When I was a boy in the 1940s, the neighborly Perrysburg Journal ended each listing of a deceased citizen's survivors with the phrase "…and a host of friends." Not uniformly true, of course, but sufficient to settle all scores. In Dad's case that host was real. He was a respected, even beloved, presence in his adopted village-turned-suburb. In downtown Toledo, near his office in the Ohio Building (the city's tallest at perhaps 30 stories), the Greek-Americans who blocked felt hats with clouds of hissing steam never forgot the Community War Fund speech in which Dad praised "the courageous anti-fascist guerillas of Greece." Nearly two decades later I watched word of Mr. Bowes's presence still ripple through the hat shop when he entered.

From a stack of letters written to Mother after Dad's death I've plucked several characteristic sentiments:

"I was terribly sorry to hear about Urb on the radio this morning," wrote Henry McKisson, once a neighbor in the suburb of Ottawa Hills. "I saw him at the Toledo Club about ten days

ago and thought, 'How well and happy he looks.'" John Marshall Briley, a Wall Street lawyer who became senior vice president of Toledo-based Owens-Corning Fiberglas Corp., remembered that "To a young man coming into a new community he was generous in the wise counsel that only a leader in that community could give." Ben Hazelton, in whose duck marsh Dad hunted, "had the great honor of knowing Urb for 47 years. The entire association was very dear to me, and I looked upon him not only as a great friend and advisor, but truly as a proxy father." Dad's niece Margaret Bowes harked back to his visits to her father Edward's home in Jordan, N.Y. "He never failed to ask me to play the piano. I remember how proud I was when he sent me MacDowell's 'To a Wild Rose.' I practiced and practiced to be ready to play it the next time he came." (A lifetime later she and Mother would become frequent correspondents and good friends.) Lucille Halstead, a social friend, captured Dad's patriarch quality somewhat startlingly when she told me: "I was driving along behind your father one day and noticed how old he had become. And I thought to myself, 'There goes God.'"

I'm going to continue leaning on Dad's obit as a checklist of sorts. My mind's- eye glimpses of Urban E. Bowes are simply too disparate to proceed unassisted. And for the record, make that Urban *Emmett* Bowes, a middle name out of Ireland's patriot history that he never used and apparently never cared for. I say "apparently" because I realize in retrospect how many personal things of legitimate interest I never asked him. He was 41 years old when I was his firstborn. Our relationship had a congenial, almost grandfather-to-grandson quality. Had he been a younger father, perhaps in his late twenties when I and then my sister Marge came along, might I have dug deeper while still I could? Probably not. I became an editorial writer and columnist, not an investigative reporter.

My sense is that Dad changed a lot as he grew from one milieu into another. You see, he came into Mother's world and not the other way around. The boy who grew up shooting groundhogs on a modest Upstate New York farm graduated to duck blinds at exclusive marshes habituated by the corporate chieftains he served and came to know. When Judy Gregory Bowes and I were first married and living in small, stuffy Washington apartments, he called the *president* of Toledo Edison, a huge private electric utility, to ask what brand of window air conditioner would be most appropriate for us! Yet despite such influential friendships, I recall his genuine disbelief --the look of "this can't be happening to me"--when Mother marked one of his birthdays with a Patek Phillipe wristwatch and another with a Belgian Browning shotgun.

Marge and I were reared in an upper-middle-class, Episcopalian slice of Toledo. (Our maternal grandfather had been president of Ransom & Randolph, a manufacturer of dental equipment.) We always had a live-in cook. The glass business brought Dad to the city in early-middle-aged bachelorhood. There he courted Margery Waite Bigelow, a single post-debutante in her mid-30s. They met at a dinner party on Middle Bass Island, part of a small archipelago in nearby Lake Erie where Social Toledo summered. Mutual friends plotted to introduce them. Mother would recall in old age that he was breathtakingly handsome and that when she gave up her telephone number he jotted it on his shirt cuff.

Dad hailed from farmland outside Syracuse where my many Bowes relatives remained. We visited there as a family only rarely, for reasons you may surmise later. For their part, sociologically speaking, the Syracuse family and in-laws of Dad's generation seldom ventured beyond their lower middle class neighborhoods. They were hard-working, devoutly Catholic, unfailingly cordial people extremely proud of Urban's singular success in a distant business world. His brothers, I later learned, went to Mass in suits that Dad had sidelined and sent along after being measured for new ones by his tailor. He helped two nephews, Walter and Edmund Bowes, launch their own careers in the glass industry.

The closest I came to glimpsing Dad's New York origins was in 1944 when a polio epidemic was traced to Perrysburg's polluted Grassy Creek. (My classmate Ronnie Swartz was among its victims but survived.) My sister Marge didn't leave our yard all summer. A gaggle of epidemiologists from the University of Michigan and elsewhere convened in our living room. By then I was en route to quarantine in Syracuse on a New York Central Pullman "sleeper" so I could later attend Camp Algonquin in northern Michigan. Dad's surviving sister, my Aunt Margaret Sheedy, and countless others treated me like a young prince--that is to say, like Urban's son--at one gathering after another. My Uncle Fred, who kidded Dad mercilessly for turning Republican, extracted the cigar from his mouth long enough to challenge me to an onion-eating contest. I saw the Bowes family farm that had been sold in 1913 after the boys grew up and left. My first cousin John Sheedy, a respected Syracuse obstetrician who Dad had helped to finance his medical education, entertained me at the Liederkranz Club. Most memorably, I sat at a desk in the one-room rural schoolhouse (then still operating) where Aunt Margaret once taught her *seven* brothers and one sister, swatting the boys with a ruler to tame their animal spirits.

The small frame farmhouse near Memphis, N.Y., which is near Jordan, which is near Skaneateles, must have been a crowded dwelling. In addition to father Michael, mother Elizabeth and their children, my great-grandfather Lawrence Bowes lived with the family. He sat in the parlor watching the road out front for the R.F.D. man with the mail. With his foot he rocked the cradle in which his current youngest grandchild slumbered—eventually all nine. The family was Irish but not totally so. My younger daughter Martha Bowes, an accomplished genealogist, encouraged me this year to scrape the inside of my cheek and provide DNA for testing. Her report: "The name Bowes is reputed to be an Anglicization of the Gaelic surname O'Buadhaigh. Yet for that to be relevant you'd have to match a Gaelic 'haplogroup.' Instead, your DNA clearly belongs to a Viking haplogroup, most likely of Danish Anglo-Saxon origin. So while your great-grandfather came to America as an Irish Catholic—smoking his clay pipe and known for his fleet-footed jig—he was an example of the thorough assimilation into Gaelic culture of a marauding Viking, probably named Ug, who may have arrived on the Emerald Isle as nearly as 800 AD."

Dad would be fascinated by that, and fascinated to learn that I now live on a 40-acre farm in western Maryland that Rosemary Tofalo Bowes, my second wife, bought more than a decade

before we met. The image he left me of his youth was that of a barefoot boy fishing through a gap in the planks of a covered bridge over Jack's Fork--a boy who hooked a fish too big to pull up through the gap! Dad was interested in agricultural technology, but he had no desire to return to the land. Four times a year he'd buy an issue of Farm Quarterly at Houck's Rexall Drugstore and that was that. Yet this research chemist and executive in his vested blue serge suit always harbored rural wisdom. For example, I embraced oatmeal only after he presented me with "steel cut oats like I had on the farm" and explained earnestly the importance of adding raisins thereto. And there was Mrs. Ellenwood's look of amazement the day I tagged along as Dad dropped off shirts for her to launder. He counseled the countrywoman to put oyster shell in the chicken feed. "See if that doesn't stop them from eating their eggshells," he explained gently, as if the result might not be a foregone conclusion.

Dad made no secret of his service in World War I, but he seldom elaborated on it. Once was the day I was sick in bed. When he came home from the office Mother sent him upstairs to divert the restless patient. He pointed out, in a framed etching on my bedroom wall, the precise curve in a river where Saumur, the French cavalry school, was situated. And he described one artillery campaign so arduous that he slept for 20 hours after it ended. Lately, from correspondence written from the front to his parents and sisters (all then living on Palmer Avenue in Syracuse) I've traced his enlistment for medical corps duty at Army camps in New York, Alabama, Georgia and beyond. In 1919, as a first lieutenant studying chemistry at the Sorbonne, he looked back at how he had sought responsibility, projected maturity and made the most of what came his way:

"I have been very fortunate," he wrote, "in the variety of service I have had since I left Saumur, serving with [an artillery] battery, on liaison with infantry, as forward observer and then to go to staff as assistant operations officer, the most interesting phase of artillery. Since the armistice I have been made Brigade Personnel Adjutant which is an important phase of army administration and good experience. On the whole I think things have shaped themselves very well for me since I entered service." Aware that the postwar economy would be weak and job prospects tenuous, he jumped at an opportunity to stay on in France for six months of university study at full military pay. Apparently he had no desire to again sort mail on night trains between New York City and Montreal.

Upon learning that his brother Vincent had been killed at Chateau Thierry he wrote home this:

"In your most recent letter you were uncertain if you had acted wisely in telling me of Vin's death in action. By all means the proper course was to tell me at once. While of course it seems hard that he should die so young, he has accomplished as much here as could be expected of any one man. There is no doubt that he was prepared with a record clear with God and with the world. Under those conditions it does not matter so greatly if a man die at

twenty or seventy. I know that was the attitude with which I first went under fire and it is my attitude yet…"

Upon first reading this reaction to a brother's death in battle, I thought how strangely flat it seemed. Similar comments in other letters likewise sounded as if he were speaking of a distant acquaintance. Is that how *I* sound? Keeping emotion at bay? I don't like to think so, but acorns typically fall close to the tree. When I was about ten, a neighbor and contemporary named Tom Coon died of brain cancer. My mother asked me to deliver a note that Dad had written to Mr. Coon. "Your father can't bring himself to go over there," she explained. "But you can tell the Coons how sorry *you* are, too, and offer to cut their lawn." I did as asked, on the way peeking at the note's reference to "your year of sorrow." Thirty years later a therapist asked me if I didn't find it thoughtless that a boy had been dispatched to remind a grieving family of their own dead son. Not yet having seen these letters, I was speechless. Now I understand better why I go to such lengths to send emails and letters--anything to avoid picking up the phone or ringing a doorbell. No wonder I opted for an editorial writer's contemplative isolated aerie when such was offered.

A letter to his brother William after five days in France's Argonne forest reveals some of what Dad didn't write to his parents: "I was fortunate enough to be present at the biggest offensive the American troops put over, also fortunate enough to come out alright. Just between you and I, there were times when the prospect of ever [returning home] was d____ slim." The Meuse-Argonne campaign, which ended at 11 a.m. on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, encompassed 900,000 allied and Axis soldiers and 4000 cannon. It spanned some 50 days during which 50,000 were killed and 200,000 wounded. In Joseph Persico's 2004 history of Armistice Day I found this:

> "The last day of the war provided chilling closure. The ending, in its ferocity, bloodiness, and uselessness, contained the entire war in microcosm. The fighting went on for the hollowest of reasons: No one knew how to stop it. Graveyards were the chief legacy of World War I. Nowhere is this depressing conclusion more evident than among the dead who fell during the last day, the last hour, even the last minutes.

Implicit in Dad's overall correspondence about service abroad is his eagerness to learn and practice social graces that one didn't learn on poor farms. Singled out for staff assignments, and then staying on in Paris after the armistice, the farm boy found himself transported in "an olive drab Cadillac" as the assistant to a general. He and other young officers rode horseback--"very good mounts with lots of life." He kidded in letters to his mother that he might bring a French girl home. (Mother Elizabeth was not amused and warned him against "entangling alliances.") He lectured his salt-of-the-earth family about how attending

afternoon teas in Europe “is no reflection of one’s masculinity.” I love the following verbal snapshot of the man:

“Sunday seems to be rather a favorite day to hold social events in France. This afternoon I attended a ‘soiree’ which was interesting. I constituted the escort of a very clever young lady in whose home I have been entertained several times of late and the young lady’s mother accompanied us. Rather I was invited to accompany them. Their friend, at whose home this soiree was held, is the Minister of Finance of France. He corresponds to our Secretary of the Treasury. The home is located on the circle of the Etoile (Arch of Triumph) and is one of the mansions Napoleon built for his marshals. Gorgeous! The affair lasted from 4:30 to about 7 p.m. It was quite formal. Probably the predominating feature to a casual observer was beautiful women. The garb was worthy of note also. Personally I wore a costume of olive drab serge, chamois gloves, dark tan belt and boots. Boots of course are the correct dress footwear for an officer of the mounted branch of service, [in this case] Field Artillery.”

He remained similarly fastidious throughout his life. When squirrels invaded our attic on East Front Street, coming and going by means of a mulberry tree and a mountain ash, he got permission from Chief Ross Enright of the village police to stalk them with a rifle that fired short-range .22 caliber shot shell. I see him still, sitting in the bushes in shirt, necktie and sport coat, waiting for his quarry to appear. I wrote about the saga for a school assignment, patterning it after tales in a then popular book, “Life with Father” by Clarence Day, and received much encouragement from the teacher.

Urban Bowes, as one old friend recalled after he died, “was always on the brink of a chuckle or a laugh.” He also was “tender-hearted,” as Mother once observed, and quick to get moist-eyed in the presence of stirring music or noble sentiment. His didactic formality could be a vessel into which he poured humor. As a teenager, for example, I complained loudly and often about not being allowed to “peg” my trousers, a Zoot Suit-inspired fad in which the lower third of each trouser leg was taken in so sharply that the cuffs hugged one’s ankles above the blue suede shoes. “But *everyone* wears pegged pants!” I wailed “Listen here, young man,” Dad replied. “There are places in this world where people don’t wear *any* pants.” Mother started laughing and couldn’t stop. I could only join in.

However, there was at his core no nimble whimsy. He was a scientist, after all--a precise and inquisitive chemical engineer. Once he explained that minerals wouldn’t clog Mother’s steam iron if she’d fill it with water that could be saved when defrosting the refrigerator. When our black Cocker spaniel, who rarely came indoors, persisted in barking at night, Dad would shine a flashlight from an upstairs window and “guide” Bozo into his doghouse. Yet Bozo would follow the beam right back out. Dad was so pleased with himself when he solved this episode in animal behavior by guiding Bozo into the doghouse--and then switching the light off. When in 1936 Dad had an emergency appendectomy, he specified a spinal anesthetic so he could remain conscious and inspect the appendix while he was still on the operating table. And socially speaking he had come a long way by observing and embracing convention, not

flouting it. He once even toyed with the idea of running for Congress. Whenever he bought a new pair of shoes he held a ruler across each one; he wanted the first flexed crease to be perfectly straight and to suppress all subsequent creases. I can't remember the context, but Dad even instructed me that if I ran water in a lavatory basin nobody outside the guest bathroom would be able to hear me urinating. Better still, he added, if I got down on one knee there would be no noise at all! And then there was the day he found bawdy limericks on my bedside table. Specifically:

There once was a man from Dundee,

Who buggered an ape in a tree,

The result was most horrid

All ass and no forehead

Three balls and a purple goatee.

I thought this was funny at the time and I'm chuckling now. OK, I grant you it's in poor taste. Yet the wordslinger in me, not to mention the poet, can't help but envy the outrageous imagination that accrued to this image as it ran a kind of three-legged race through the popular culture. Absurd riffs such as these adolescent equivalents of nursery rhymes are a reminder that poet Walt Whitman had encountered all manner of expression by the time he claimed to have heard America singing "varied carols." For Dad's part, this was a pivotal episode in my teenaged life. Turning very serious, he explained that no true gentleman would allow himself to be associated with vulgarity. Further, he stressed, such failings have tangible going on tragic consequences: Men who traffic in trash can expect to be rebuffed when they seek membership in the best clubs. I took my cue from his somber mien and assured him I'd take the advice to heart. Later I pondered what I sometimes overheard from pot-bellied golfers wrapped in towels in the locker room at the Toledo Country Club.

My obsolete Gateway laptop tells me I'm at 3673 words and counting. I feel guilty devoting so much more space to Dad than I did to Mother or Marge in other essays. Yet all our lives were woven into his. In addition, there was more background material about him on paper to prompt these musings. I realize, however, that something else is afoot. In the 35 years since his passing--that under-examined span of psychic time following the death of a man's father--Dad has never been far from my mind. Intimations of mortality? Surely that, and also comparisons between our lives as I, having just turned 72, stand within five years of the age at which he died. I will neither ask for whom the bell tolls nor conclude this essay (forgive me) before its logical end.

I can't elaborate on Dad's engineering and business career in his own "voice" the way I could with his time in the military. I don't have many written records at hand. As his obituary recounts, he worked in manufacturing jobs at small glass companies in Pennsylvania and Ohio before becoming director of research for Owens-Illinois Glass Co., a manufacturer of

national scope headquartered in Toledo. The original technological prayer wheel at which Owens-Illinois worshiped was a bottle-making machine invented in 1912 by Scottish immigrant Michael Owens. I watched mid-century editions of this whirling dervish as blasts of compressed air forced blobs of molten glass against the inner sides of bottle shaped molds.

Dad also had research ties to Owens-Corning Fiberglas Company. I used to tag along when he visited the prosperous central Ohio farm of Gaymes Slayter, the key figure in the development of glass fibers. I visited Slayter's son John. Owens-Illinois teamed up with Corning Glass Works of Corning, N.Y., to create Owens-Corning and launch the use of fiberglass "wool" in home insulation among other applications. In the 1990s, when I introduced myself to elderly Harvey Littleton at a Washington exhibition of his work, the acclaimed creator of studio art glass replied, "Urban Bowes was your father? Urb taught me to play poker in Corning, N.Y., in 1932!" In the late 1940s Dad briefly headed a subsidiary of Owens-Illinois that developed Kaylo, a building material made of glass fibers inside bonded layers of, I suppose, plastic. The stress of that startup venture led to health problems--he "blacked out" when driving across a Maumee River bridge—from which he recuperated at quiet Bent Creek Ranch near Asheville, N.C. In his final post before retirement, he hosted technical exchanges with big glass companies in England, France and Germany. He would be incredulous to learn that today Owens-Illinois operates nursing homes, so much has globalism changed everything.

Then there was Dad's largely unsung role as inventor and holder of several patents. During one summer off from college in the 1950s, I did manual labor along the "grinding and polishing line" at a Libby-Owens-Ford (L-O-F) *flat* glass factory that manufactured auto safety glass and picture windows. More than a decade earlier--essentially unknown to me until after he died--Dad had begun pursuing his patented vision of a process to end grinding and polishing as the means to make opaque plate glass from the furnace transparent. A notebook diary tells how his superiors at Owens-Illinois showed no interest in perhaps competing with their flat glass counterparts. So Dad "stated to Mr. John McNerney it was my judgment that grinding and polishing would eventually be eliminated in plate glass manufacture. He was naturally interested on account of being a director of L-O-F."

In due course Dad obtained permission from his bosses to study privately the patent literature on flat glass manufacturing and to discuss any findings informally with the research leadership at L-O-F. Once again riding the Pennsylvania Railroad's Red Arrow passenger train east, he bought copies of the 100 most recent patents concerning flat glass manufacture on file in Washington. From that review and his own thinking came the concept of "controlling the surface of a viscous mass of glass during solidification by moving it in a horizontal direction on a vibrating conveyor." "Experiment successful," he jotted, after tests at the F. W. Preston Laboratory in Butler, Pa., one of many efforts in several states to prove the idea. I recall Frank Preston, a Scotsman, as a sometime guest at our dinner table in Perrysburg.

Dad was correct when he predicted the end of grinding and polishing. I saw why, I now realize, before L-O-F factory manager Horace Orser, another member of Carranor Hunt & Polo Club, notified Dad that I'd earned my wage limit and I quit before incurring a federal income tax obligation. Opaque, uneven sheets of new plate glass had to be bedded laboriously in plaster on large, square flatcars. Coupled into "trains," the cars rolled on rails along a deafening production line beneath massive grinding wheels. Once the glass was nearly smooth, huge brushes polished it to transparency, flinging soggy rouge everywhere. (I'd come home from the night shift so filthy that Mother spread newspapers where I was to drop my clothes.) Though L-O-F eventually bought Dad's patent for something like $80,000, his ship never really came in. His vibrating conveyor concept was nosed out by the British company Pilkington's "float glass" process in which molten glass cools to transparency on a pool of mercury.

Turning finally from things seen to things unseen, from the physical to the metaphysical, I must say something about Dad and his relationship with organized religion. I'll begin at the beginning as the subject unfolded for me. I don't recall how old I was, but I hadn't yet visited his family in Syracuse. My eyes would not fall on Dad's letters home from World War I for another 60 years--letters in which he spoke of attending Mass and of chatting with young women at church socials and Red Cross canteens. I could take you to the exact curve in a road on the edge of Maumee, the town across the river from Perrysburg, where I was riding in our Buick sedan with Mother and Dad. From the back seat I announced, in the heedless way that youngsters repeat whatever they've heard or think they've heard, that "I hate Catholics." Mother broke the silence that followed: "Well, your father is a Catholic. You don't hate *him* do you?" I won't dwell on how surprised I was and how ashamed I felt. I hastened to explain that whatever might be wrong with Catholics in general certainly didn't apply to him! He smiled slightly and kept his eyes on the road; the topic was dropped just like that.

Eventually I would learn how my widowed maternal grandmother, Mrs. Chauncy Scott Bigelow (she of the polished black limousine driven by chauffeur Charles Hill), responded to the arrival of that attractive, unattached engineer on Toledo's social scene. Nana felt obliged to send her single daughter on an around-the-world cruise aboard the good ship *Penrith Castle* so that Margery would "forget that Catholic"--a bias still common at the time. "You know," Mother would explain 50 years later, "we just didn't know any Catholics back then." Fortunately for Margery and Urban, not to mention me and my descendants, the scheme was a flop. She did visit a childhood girlfriend on an Army base in Manila. While there she met a haughty general named Douglas MacArthur. But my Aunt Phyllis Kinsey (later Bennett) leaked her sister's itinerary to Urban. When Margery returned to her Manhattan hotel she was greeted by Dad's red roses.

Later they returned to New York City to be married in a side chapel at St. Patrick's Catholic Cathedral. So far as I can determine no one from his family attended. After that, except for weddings and funerals, Mother and Dad seldom set foot in church. That is to say, we never went to church as a family. Dad was wonderfully kind and warm with my grandmother Nana,

and she came to almost worship him. Though he was named after a pope, Dad used to assert that children should inherit "their father's politics and their mother's religion." That would make my sister and me Republican and Episcopalian. Yet Mother wasn't exactly a self-starter; Marge and I weren't baptized until it became an urgent prerequisite to the popular pre-teen milestone of communion. Dad would drive us to and from St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Maumee on Sundays, but he never stayed. Belay that; he must have hovered in the back now and then to watch me serve as crucifer and perform the other duties of an acolyte.

Over time, Marge and I embraced the premise that as a research chemist Dad couldn't get comfortable with transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic belief that consecrated bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. We surmised that the hydrogen ions simply wouldn't line up to suit his scientist's mind. What we didn't know, until he was well along in years, was that his daily one-mile walks in the village sometimes included a pause at St. Rose de Lima Catholic Church. One of Mother's two Catholic social friends mentioned seeing him there. Yet for a time the only reason the monsignor in charge at St. Rose knew Dad was even nominally Catholic, though they served together on the village school board, was because a nephew wrote and told him so.

This was one occasion when Bowes relatives in Catholic religious orders--in this case Vincent, a Carmelite brother and later priest named for the Uncle Vin killed in battle--sought to fix what they honestly believed needed fixing. Those overtures reinforced Mother's durable belief that the family resented her for "leading Urban astray." When I was at the University of Virginia I received a letter from Cousin Vincent, introducing himself and suggesting we meet. On a track team trip to Washington, D.C., I called on Vince at his order's House of Studies. (I have Proustian memories of remarkable Gregorian chants and the aroma of tuna fish.) Vince and I have become good friends through the years, enjoying weekends in Washington, St. Louis, rural Upstate New York and Brighton, Mass. Now well into his eighties, Vince makes no bones about his regret that I wasn't raised Catholic. For my part, I recount sundry adventures in ecumenical and interfaith activity and he listens patiently. (For better or worse I'm the reporter cousin who carries a yarmulke in his glove compartment in case I must follow some story into a synagogue.) We then enjoy drinks and dinner and speculate yet again about what Martin Luther's problem really was and whether "modernism" is a genuine spiritual bane.

An earlier overture by Vince's brother Edward Bowes, a Josephite priest, was more problematic. Cousin Edward, a handsome and intense chain smoker, came to visit in Perrysburg. He stayed in my bedroom while I went to a couch. I remember peering into my room and seeing a black cassock laid across the bed. At some point Edward took my sister Marge aside, gave her some prayers to learn, and may have told her not to speak of it. At any rate she mentioned it to one parent or the other. Years later Mother related how "furious" Dad was. He drove Edward straight to the railroad station, telling him "never again to go anywhere near the children." After Dad's death Edward wrote: "I have always had regrets, Margery, about what happened when I visited you in the early Fifties. One of those human mistakes. It was very natural for him to misunderstand my motives. And I, for my part, with

the passage of years and a deeper understanding of human nature, would now avoid anything like that which would lead to misunderstanding…"

Mother called me in Washington and Marge in Pelham, N.Y., the morning Dad died in bed at age 77. The death certificate would specify heart disease. I left a telephone message for Vince when changing planes in Pittsburgh, asking him to notify someone in Syracuse who could spread the word. Many young people were among those who came to the Heilman Funeral Home. I remember my sister saying to me gently, as we walked into the room where the casket was, that I didn't need to whisper. The casket, which he had specified by note was to be "closed at all times," was in fact opened briefly for the benefit of elderly relatives who had seen him so seldom and come so far. Also per his written preference, a Low Mass was celebrated at St. Rose Church just down East Front Street from 315, the house he had sold after building a smaller place for Mother. (He died after six months in the new house.) Monsignor Walz at St. Rose was cordial. He asked whether, since I lived in Washington, I might know his college roommate, James Saxon, then the U.S. Comptroller of the Currency. Walz seemed to be comfortable in the pluralistic America of which Jesuit thinker John Courtney Murray had written. Only in recent months have I seen that note in which Dad also recounted how he

… discussed frankly with Monsignor Walz about five years ago
and again in June 1964 my difficulty with one or two items of
dogma of the church. He was very understanding. I am now making
a modest annual contribution to St. Rose's Church. I have the
utmost admiration for the Catholic Church and the work it does
world wide and particularly among the poor.

If Dad had died across the river in Maumee, according to what the mortician told me, the monsignor at the parish there might have declined to acknowledge an ambivalent Catholic. Death, like life, really is a crapshoot.

After the funeral we repaired back to 550 East Front where Victoria Schramm, our faithful cleaning lady, tended a dining table laden with comfort food from neighbors and the Carranor Club. Vince had not said he would come. (When at the funeral we saw Vince sitting up there beneath his monk's cowl, Mother turned to me and said under her breath: "Oh, if that's Vincent it means [the Bowes family] has come to take your father back.") But time had passed and the world had changed. Once-hard edges of denominational certainty were softening apace. Dad was buried not in the Catholic cemetery but in a plot he and Mother had purchased in Fort Meigs Cemetery near Fort Meigs, a now restored redoubt from the War of 1812.War. At the reception/wake Vince and I and the Episcopal minister from Mother's childhood church in downtown Toledo chatted over Canadian Mist on the rocks as if the occasion had no subtext whatever. I thought then as I do now how privileged I am to have

this rich, dual heritage of Protestant and Catholic faith traditions. Dad, whose regular Friday lunch companions downtown included a rabbi, would have endorsed the way I've extended that heritage as a founding member of Cincinnati's Episcopal-Jewish Colloquium and a board member of the Washington Theological Consortium for ecumenical outreach.

*****

So here was a man who felt things deeply yet seldom spelled out what he was feeling. Make that *never learned* to articulate emotion. Despite having vocabulary and authenticity to spare, Dad retained to the end of his life the full measure of formality he revealed early on in letters to loved ones signed "sincerely" from The War to End All Wars in which he lost one brother and very nearly another. "Do you really love me?" my mother used to ask him. "What do *you* think?" he'd invariably reply. She knew the answer. So did the rest of us. His love for and pride in his family was palpable.

Like him, I too understand how closely emotion can hover, threatening with its unruliness one's dignity and composure. Despite a handful of years in therapy I pretty much remain what psychologists call "well defended." So thanks be to Aunt Margaret Sheedy--an Irish-American matriarch as open as a book--for saving one letter in particular. "The kids are fine," Dad wrote to her in 1937 when I was four and Marge was three. "David came into our room yesterday laughing and said, 'Margie is certainly funny. I was telling her about Africa and she said she would like to go see the apricots!' They are very congenial and he is as proud of her as he can be. When any visitors come, he will always go and bring her in to see them. I wanted him particularly to have a good intellect and he certainly has it."

Did I pass muster with the man whose hand I see increasingly when I sign my name? There it is in his words. I can summon other, later evidence equally as indirect. Did he really love me? The body language year in and year out said everything that anyone with a modicum of self-confidence should need to hear. Did I really love him? To this day I actually catch glimpses of him in crowds. But there I go again, beating around the bush with analogies. Let's try that again. *Did I really love him?* I did indeed. More than words ever quite said.

(January 26, 2006)