

Eulogy for Tom Boorse, October 1, 2021

Dear family and friends of Tom Boorse,
Chère famille et amis de Tom Boorse,
Liebe Freunde and Familie von Tom Boorse,

Dear Len!

He was a man of many languages and varied interests, a multi talent, our beloved friend Tom, whom we uplift and uphold with grieving spirits today. You couldn't place Tom Boorse in a box even if you tried, no pun intended toward the Funeral Director. There is no box that would have contained the person he was. But there were many strands of life woven together in his biography.

There is the school teacher who served for more than 40 years at North Penn and taught countless students how to speak, write and pronounce the language of Rousseau and Balzac. It's an interesting part of Tom's life, but only a part. There is the life-long North Wales resident, walking his dog down the streets of this town, a member of the oldest local church who sang in our choir for seventy years, starting as the proverbial choir boy. It's another interesting aspect of Tom's bio, but hardly the only one. Then there is the young man who came of age in the 1950's, discovering his attraction to the same sex, suppressing it and finally making peace with it. It's a drama woven into Tom's life but far from the defining one. There is his love of antique cars, especially those of British design, his interest in history and ocean vessels, and his replica of the USS Normandy. There are the books he wrote (unpublished, just for the fun of it) and the music he enjoyed or composed... It's all interesting stuff and all part of a complex and gifted human being who lived humbly, yet never hid his light under a bushel. Somewhere and everywhere in the complexity of that human being we meet a child of God, forever loved, forever blessed, gone now but not gone, resting in the everlasting arms of God.

Tom had what few people have and what I have pursued in vain thus far: exactly the right mixture of humility and assertiveness. He never came across as arrogant and he never came across as submissive. He had a wonderful, gentle persona, but a gentleness that was endowed with strength and common sense. When he died two weeks ago, none of us were prepared for it.

Tom Boorse? He hadn't been sick. He hadn't shown signs of serious decline. He looked fairly healthy, good to go for another twenty years; he was headed toward the club of centennials as far as we were concerned; but he died shy of his 80th birthday, taken away from us on an ordinary night, hunched over his laptop at his home on Montgomery and 7th Street. And we are still in disbelief. Did this really happen? Nevertheless, we owe it to Tom and we owe it to the gospel of the resurrection to share his life's story and recall the wonderful things God has done through his servant Thomas Boorse.

Tom was born on February 7, 1942 in the old Norristown hospital to Florence and Maurice (Moe) Boorse. He grew up on 705 West Montgomery Street. He walked to Schoolhouse Road for his elementary and middle school education. In his first year at High School on Summit Ave the school burnt down and that fire was the spark which ignited his educational journey beyond North Wales. The kids had to go to school elsewhere. Eventually, the site of his old High School was re-purposed for a new and upgraded Elementary School and that's how it is to this day. But Tom's educational journey had just begun. It led him to Kutztown Teacher's College. Soon, he excelled in his special interest: foreign languages. Later in life he traveled extensively to meet the French and Germans on their own turf, to discover and enjoy the culture of old Europe. Tom, as much as he stayed true to his roots as a child of this community, was very comfortable in the so-called old world. In fact, in his mind, older was probably better. He took exquisite care of his Bentley and his Rolls Royce, his beloved antique cars.

Tom's teaching career began in New Hope and after a brief stint there, he honed his skills in our own School District, moving from Middle School to High School, where he spent most of his career, hardly ever missing a day of school. At one point he even taught his younger brother Bill. How many of us get that opportunity? Tom was Bill's French teacher in 7th grade. I wonder what grades he gave his petite frere...

Tom never married and people tried to hook him up with ladies, suggesting dates as people often do... In many ways, Tom's story is the story of how our entire society has evolved over the last few decades when it comes to sexual identity. As a society, we used to be pretty uncomfortable with anything that was perceived as being outside of the accepted norm. False

assumptions were made about men in charge of children and youth who happened to be gay. I believe Tom was keenly aware of those sentiments. He was a public school teacher in a small town. He internalized those vibes and decided to be very private, if not entirely quiet about it. He was, after all, a child of the 1950's. When I met with his long-time companion Len and his brother Bill last week, it occurred to me that I myself had never spoken to Tom about this important aspect of his life. I always sensed that he was not interested in making it a topic of conversation, and I respected that. But I also think: it must have been jarring at times, to keep part of who you are under tight control. And I am happy that he found more freedom in his later years. He met Len 20 years ago and they were life partners, traveled together, spent time in Florida together, sharing life, affection and many interests. Our prayers this morning go out especially to Len for this painful loss.

Tom enjoyed the arts, - music, craftsmanship and more. He left us a few artifacts to marvel at, fruits of his creative labor. How many hours did he spend assembling his replica of the USS Normandy? Or writing his three mystery novels? Or fixing his cars? Or composing music...? We can't count the hours he spent enjoying these creative pleasures. There were too many to count.

There was one other special place for Tom and that was coastal Maine, where he owned a place for a number of years, spending time there in the summer months. He convinced his parents, even his dad who was chained to North Wales according to Florence, to come and enjoy a landscape of great beauty and serenity. It worked. Before long, his parents bought a place and lived there for some 14 years. His mom, in her later years, spoke fondly of that time.

I selected Psalm 139 as one of the Scripture Readings for Tom's service because his life was an exploration of himself and the world. As he roamed around from small town to city, from landlocked Pennsylvania to coastal Maine, from the narrow morality codes of the 1950's to the brave new world of the 21st century, he was always, as the author of this psalm assures us, intimately known by God.

"You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.

²You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

³*You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.*

⁴*Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.”*

I love this psalm especially as a guiding light for searching souls who don't easily fit in. Its words are comforting and speak of a God who is omnipresent; even the sheltered parts of our lives are known to God. In fact, I would like to place these words in Tom's mouth and I hope he wouldn't mind, the words from the last two verses of our reading:

¹³*For you created my inmost being;*

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;*

your works are wonderful,

I know that full well.

In my early years as a pastor here, Tom attended church with his mother Florence. Every Friday, the gang came together to fold the Sunday bulletins before going out to breakfast, Tom and Florence among them. When the folding machine kept breaking down, Tom bought us a new one. I remember singing a few times with the choir and I always tried to stand next to Tom in the bass section because unlike me, he could actually read music! Those are fond memories now of a person who was here, still is here in a sense, but above all is now in the everlasting arms of God. Today we thank God for his life and all that he was and all that he meant to us.

Amen.