

## **EULOGY FOR SENATOR THOMAS F. EAGLETON\***

MARK ABELS\*\*

Welcome to this meeting of the 15th Ward Regular Democratic Organization. We are pleased to see so many new members today! Don't forget to pick up your precinct assignments and sample ballots on the way out.

Tom Eagleton hated hospitals and funerals, and he wasn't too fond of Jesse Helms. There weren't many things in life he couldn't abide, but those were on the list. For a long time I couldn't tell which he hated more, funerals or hospitals, but now I know. He donated his body to a hospital just so he wouldn't have to be here today.

Sadly, in the last few years we spent a lot more of our time together going to funerals and it was sometimes an adventure. I remember one time . . . when a eulogist went on a bit too long for Tom's patience. He leaned over to me and in a stage whisper that could barely be heard ten pews away, said "I hope he finishes before someone else dies."

Those who will follow me to this microphone are forewarned.

Tom Eagleton mostly loved life. He lived it with zest, enthusiasm and outrage right up to the end.

Tom loved his family. Fifty-one years ago he found the perfect partner in Barbara, who shared his interests and joys and, as Tom noted, could put up with him.

Fathers teach their sons about life and if they do a good job, sometimes the son comes back to teach the father. After Tom left the Senate he discovered a whole new world of intellectual endeavor through art. He became an avid and passionate collector, and it was his son Terence who led him through that world. Now, if you ask Terence about it, he will quickly mention the name of Michael Schapiro at the St. Louis Art Museum as one who really helped open Tom's artistic eyes and so, Terence, I give credit where credit is due, as I know

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\* St. Francis Xavier (College) Church, St. Louis, Missouri, March 10, 2007.

\*\* Mark Abels has long been active in politics, running statewide political campaigns and serving as press secretary to Senator Eagleton. Having formerly been a senior communications executive at two major airlines—Northwest and TWA—Abels is currently a writer and part-time public relations consultant. He reserves most of his time for volunteer activities. He is a member of the Salvation Army's National Advisory Board, vice chair of the Army's St. Louis Regional Advisory Board, and holds leadership posts with St. Louis Variety, the Children's Charity, and the Gateway Chapter National Multiple Sclerosis Society, among other organizations.

you would want me to. But it was Terence who traveled the world with his dad and shared his excitement and discoveries, through what were some very happy days together. What a marvelous gift from son to father and father to son.

And what marvelous gifts Christy and her husband Michael gave Tom and Barbara. If you look at the picture of Tom on the back of the program you will recognize the smile of a doting grandpa, and that's what he was. He loved to sit in the back yard with young Barbara, James and Greg while they played with the dog or splashed in the pool, and he and Grandmother Barbara vacationed with Michael and Christy and the children every spring. He delighted in your family, Christy. What a blessing for your children that they had a chance to know their Pop-Pop and will remember him. What a joy it will be for them to read about his life and times as they grow older.

Tom Eagleton loved politics. He was a human bridge between the politics of an earlier, more colorful time and the politics of today. He grew up in the rough and tumble ward politics of St. Louis, learning his political craft in ward clubhouses populated by characters with names like Turtles Reardon and Poker White and Pops Chambers and Uncle Louie Buckowitz and Jimmy McAteer. There is music in those names—you can almost smell the cigar smoke. Tom was comfortable in those back rooms. In fact, he was more than comfortable. He loved it, and he learned his lessons. Even as a Senator, Tom never forgot the importance of getting a pothole fixed or helping a lonely widow track down her errant Social Security check.

But Mark Eagleton did not raise a son whose political vision stopped at fixing potholes. Mark Eagleton raised his son to be a liberal lion who would see injustice and bigotry and abuse of privilege for what they were and who would never be afraid to step outside of his political comfort zone to fight them. Tom's friend Senator Jack Danforth described this Tom Eagleton best when he said, "[W]hat has set Tom Eagleton apart from the rest of us is not his intellect and his energy, impressive as they are. It is his moral passion, his capacity for outrage, his insistence that justice be done, that wrongs be made right."<sup>1</sup>

Tom Eagleton loved his home state of Missouri, and he especially loved his home town of St. Louis. He proved that in the best possible way—he came home. Let's be crass for a moment. What is the market value in Washington of a fifty-seven year-old man who has just finished three terms in the Senate, retired undefeated, and carries with him the love and respect of almost every member of that institution? Some small countries are not worth that much. But that wasn't for Tom. He always said, "When the time comes we're going

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1. 132 CONG. REC. 28,829 (1986).

home.” And when the time came he did, and gave us twenty more years—maybe the twenty best.

Tom Eagleton loved teaching. He was a born teacher, and not just in the classroom, and not just in his later years. Tom mentored generations of office holders, men and women who shared his beliefs and passions and who will continue to put his stamp on public service for decades to come. Looking out over this crowd, I see Eagleton campaign volunteer Bob Holden, who grew up to be a great governor. I see Eagleton campaign volunteer Claire McCaskill, who will honor Tom’s legacy by becoming another great United States Senator. But, I also see a young man named Jake Zimmerman, who won his very first public office as a state representative just four months ago, with advice and encouragement from Tom Eagleton.

I am honored to represent many who have worked for, worked with, and otherwise sat at Tom’s feet and learned.

To work for Tom Eagleton as a young man or woman in Washington was a graduate education in real-world political science beside which any course of study at Georgetown or Harvard paled. Tom’s reputation as a Senator attracted very bright, very industrious staffers—myself excluded, of course. I rose up in politics the old-fashioned way, through nepotism. When you went to work for Tom your first reaction was to be sort of awe-struck. He was without question the smartest man I ever knew. No matter how fast or hard you thought, he was always thinking a couple of steps ahead of you. Your awe quickly gave way to a sort of despair. How can I ever keep up with this guy? How can I possibly satisfy him? But after a while despair gave way to a warm sense of respect and admiration for Tom that you would carry through your life. You realized that you couldn’t keep up with him, so there was no sense in worrying about it. Just do your best, drink it all in, and learn as much as you can for as long as he’ll let you.

There are so many stories we all could tell about the lessons Tom taught us. I will share just one, a story I don’t think I’ve ever told before, that sort of defined Tom Eagleton for me.

The 1980 election was coming up. That turned out to be a tough one for Democrats, as we all remember. Tom got a letter from a long-ago political supporter. This man had once been a very prominent party figure out-state but in the years since had fallen on hard times, had done some stupid and illegal things with other peoples’ money, and had been caught and convicted. His sentencing was pending and he asked Tom if Tom would send a letter to the judge recalling the man’s more honorable days and asking leniency. Tom asked me to help draft the letter.

I was concerned, and I went into Tom’s office and said something like, “We have a tough election coming up. This man is a convicted felon, and this letter will be on the public record. This is something the other party would love to use against us. Have we really thought this through?”

The first remarkable thing about Tom's response was that he didn't bite my head off on the spot. I still shudder as I recall the arrogance of a twenty-seven or twenty-eight year-old snot-nosed kid asking the greatest politician in Missouri if he had really thought this through. But for some reason Tom didn't throw me out of his office. Instead, he told me the story.

He said, "Twenty years ago when I filed for my first statewide office I didn't know anyone west of Skinker Boulevard. Not anyone. This man was a very important political figure in his county, and I went to meet him and ask for his support. He had absolutely nothing to gain from helping me, and maybe something to lose. But he heard me out, he decided he liked me, and he said he would come through for me. And he did. When I desperately needed this man's help, he stood up with me. Now, he needs my help."

That's how Tom Eagleton taught me about loyalty and friendship. And that's how he lived his life.

There are many more stories we all could tell, but I hear a voice calling from on high. It is saying, "I hope he finishes before someone else dies."

So I will yield to the distinguished gentleman from Arkansas with a word of thanks to Barbara, Terence and Christy for sharing Tom with us for so many years.

What a life. What a loss. What a friend.