

A last conversation with

"IT IS REMARKABLE," a mutual friend remarked the other night, "how many people seem to appreciate Al Lowenstein now that he's dead."

If Allard Lowenstein had somehow been permitted to glimpse the throng at his funeral service, he might have quietly murmured the same thought with the wry, philosophical grin that so many of us had often seen.

But that is not what would have mattered most to him. Rancor and recrimination were not his game.

What would have mattered is that so many people — not only the eminences of politics but very anonymous, unheralded people — came to say farewell and rededicate themselves to the humanist values he cared about.

Much of what I wanted to say about him was written in haste on the night of his death and published in *The Post* last Saturday. There will be no labored repetition now beyond a simple affirmation of affection and esteem.

I think he would have preferred that these remarks be addressed to what he and I talked about at length in our last conversation about three weeks ago.

He had been campaigning for Ted Kennedy in Florida and other places and invariably encountered the familiar questions about "character" (otherwise spelled Chappaquiddick).

His own sympathetic involvement with the Kennedy family — and especially with Robert Kennedy — went back many years.

In fact he had spent many hours of many months re-examining the circumstances of Bob Kennedy's assassination because of his deepening conviction that the full story had not been revealed. He died still unpersuaded that it was a "one-man job."

But the book he had been writing on that issue was put aside when Ted Kennedy declared his candidacy. Almost from the start, he recognized — more perceptively than many others — that the shadows of Chappaquiddick

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would haunt the campaign.

Amid sharp differences in the Kennedy camp he insisted the issue could not be evaded or muted.

In his view the issue was not whether the tragedy of that dreadful night rendered Kennedy unfit for the presidency, but rather that Kennedy's capacity to face the torments of a campaign was meaningful proof of courage, resilience and — to use the big controversial word — character.

On many platforms and on David Susskind's TV show, Lowenstein almost alone among pro-Kennedy orators chose to fight it out on that line.

I am paraphrasing now, but this was the essence of what he said privately when we last met:

"You know I can't understand why some of the Kennedy people didn't want to argue this openly. Here is a guy who has had two

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Al Lowenstein

brothers killed by political assassins. He knows how much anxiety his candidacy will create in his family. He knows Chappaquiddick will be thrown at him — even though we all know he wouldn't be running if there were any big new secrets that could be turned up against him.

"How does anybody dare say this guy lacks character? How many other people would be willing to let themselves be a marked man — by both terrorists and political assassins?"

So Al spent his last days on earth crusading for a man whom most of the pundits have written off but for whom he was prepared to wage a last-ditch fight.

At yesterday's service I was fortuitously seated next to Coretta King, not very far from the platform where Kennedy awaited his turn to speak.

The proximity of both seemed to dramatize and almost telescope both the mindless violence and sickness of our age.

Speaker after speaker, from Rabbi Alexander Schindler to Congressmen Pete McCloskey and Andrew Jacobs, from Bill Buckley to Andy Young, all spoke with deepest warmth about Al Lowenstein's lifelong commitment to reason and decency. And finally it was Ted Kennedy's moment to speak of how much Al had meant to his family.

He did so in a setting where all the memories of past murders were so grimly evoked and where few could escape the brooding sense of possible disaster.

There could have been no worthier reassertion of Al Lowenstein's faith that reason can yet prevail if enough of us are willing to take the incalculable risks. After all, Kennedy might have just sent a telegram.

That he was there, with so many others, was some sign that Al had stirred the best in all of us. All that was missing was a chance for him to deliver the closing remarks.