

# Allard Lowenstein

By Sandra L. Russell

... Man blinked. "What is the purpose of all this?" he asked politely.

"Everything must have a purpose?" asked God.

"Certainly," said man.

"Then I leave it to you to think of one for all this," said God.

—Vonnegut

There is no way to find purpose for the most recent catastrophe in the bloody history of this gun-loving land. And what answer can we give to the question that hangs heavy in the air each time: Why is it the good ones—the kindly, caring people—who are slaughtered, while the malevolent, the bileful, flourish? To what purpose the terrible sacrifice of this magnificent human being in his prime, this peacemaker whose enlightened wisdom cut through all the crap with such pure logic?

There is no answer, for we live in an insane world run by the poisons of greed, anger, and stupidity, filled with eyeless troglodytes whose reality is the sneering cynicism that discards a man of radiant integrity and kindness—their fondest wish, to dismiss him as an illustration of foolish idealism from a departed era. If the qualities of Allard Lowenstein no longer are relevant in our time, we ought to explode all the bombs now: there is no more to be said.

If Al was, as the cynics kept telling us, no more than a relic of another decade, why was his funeral attended by our Governor, Mayor, Senators and Congressmen from across the country, leaders in all social concerns, the achievers in all areas of human endeavor? If he was not a major influence in *this* time, why did close to 5,000 people converge on a midtown synagogue for the service? True, there were the curious, the celebrity gawkers, and those who came in guilt or hypocrisy. There were some whose presence was an insult to those who had toiled lovingly in his behalf. But the mob was mostly his, and they came because Al had touched their lives. Several of us looked at that enormous crowd and

wondered where they all were when Al needed them, why they cared so much more after his death than they did while he was exuberantly alive. With such "troops" he would have won election by a landslide.

Many are coming forth to praise him now, some for the first time. We hear pious paeans from those who vilified him when their own ambitions were at stake; who discounted him as a globetrotting Quixote while they sought power and position from lesser opponents, praising little men who might fertilize their parochial interests at the expense of the larger needs of us all. It is difficult to muzzle bitterness, for this man who loved people was their innocent victim on so many occasions, right to the final brutality. Ted Kennedy uttered what may be the ultimate truth when he said that perhaps "Allard Lowenstein was too good for this world."

Al probably accomplished more and was slandered more than anyone in American public life. Yet the self-crowned analysts of statistics called him a loser—because he was elected to Congress only once. If Al Lowenstein was a loser, there are no winners.

Perhaps on another level they wouldn't understand, Al was the loser. A study in perpetual activity, this selfless man constantly was on his way somewhere—to help someone, to give coherence to some effort

at justice, to mediate arguments, to articulate (with his unique eloquence) some cause he believed in. He was a warm, sweet, generous man who turned little of his kindness inward. He took time for everyone, no matter who, at immeasurable cost to himself—and at the last, to all of us, because it cost him his life.

It was a life of risk, whether in the South with Martin Luther King, among the oppressed of South West Africa, or with the freedom fighters of Franco's Spain; even in the districts where he campaigned against the unacceptable status quo. Wherever he went, he spoke the crystal-clear vision of common sense and humanism. A rebel with many causes, he loved to motivate people; unlike other talkers, he was a man of action

into a chair to talk, the active feet begin removing the sneakers, the articulate toes stripping off the socks, aligning the shoes, placing a sock neatly atop each one, and proceeding unnoticed with their own activities as though they were no part of the person to whom they were attached.

He was a masterful raconteur, regaling his audience, whether one or a thousand. I wish there were a tape library of his words—speeches, conversations, repartee among friends. All of it was worth remembering and rehearing. His stories of Congressional operations should be required material for all who would approach the process of government with pomposity. There were tales of the UN that could make you weep if they weren't so funny. Anecdotes from his campaigns and his travels . . . the best stand-up comedian anywhere. All of it self-deprecatory, for Al made

rude jokes only about himself.

Those assuming that an Ambassador, Congressman, candidate will show up in a gleaming black limousine were confounded by Al's transport, a battered VW convertible of robin's-egg hue that was lent readily to anyone needing wheels. It was an unpredictable vehicle—sometimes stranding its occupants without warning, often needing nothing more than an infusion of gas but prone to mysterious ailments of sheer neglect. Al's approach to auto maintenance was simple: you turn the key in the ignition and it goes. If not, you leave it to reflect on its contrariness and you board the nearest means headed in the right direction.

He loved life in all forms, and he loved music (knowledgeably) and movies and good writing and ice cream, and he was fascinated by the diversity and talents of people. Mechanical things and the hum-drum details of existence bewildered him. His Christmas cards seldom were mailed before July. He tried to eat sensibly but often in haste made do with junkfood. (I gave him a list of vitamins that could help maintain a healthy balance, but instead of buying each separately, as instructed, he found a combination in monstrous horse-size tablets and raged at me because he'd nearly choked on them. So he gave them to me. I still have them: no way would I try to swallow any pill that big.) He smoked very rarely, and he didn't drink (wine was "grape juice gone bad").

It is terribly inadequate to say that I will

miss Al. He is irreplaceable, and it has not registered yet that I won't hear his voice on the phone ever again, that I won't experience more of those impromptu dinners joined by a score of people he happened to run into, that I'll not be able to talk with him again about life and events, that I'll not see the bright, gentle, lively face that somehow photographed so imperfectly, that we'll not share laughter again.

Some part of me clings to the fantasy that this is an obscene, sadistic hoax, that Al will fly in from a distant place and say a terrible mistake was made. Each TV newscast, each headline ("the slain Lowenstein," "Lowenstein killed," "last rites for Lowenstein") hits me as a totally new shock that I can't accept. I see something in my apartment I was saving to show him; remember a subject we were going to discuss; recall something I wanted to tell him. And I still can't understand that I won't be able to—not ever. His friendship, his sweetness, his very special being all blown away in the blast from a goddamn gun.

Someday, I suppose, the sorrow will heal and I can make some sense of it all. I am deeply grateful that he lived (the world was made more acceptable by his presence) and that I had the honor of knowing him and being one of his friends. I was willing to go through hell for him, but I didn't know I would be forced to—not this way. One could say that a large part of each of us died with Al, but it would deny his life and his impact on our conscience. Rather, I must turn it around and say that Al lives on in those of us who love him for all that he was (but that platitude cannot quell my rage over the waste of his overwhelming life force). If each could generate only a small portion of his energy, his dedication to all that is decent, honest, kind—and yes—mannerly, we could demonstrate that these are the qualities essential to life. We are Al's infinity, his ultimate significance. Are we capable of such awesome responsibility?

My head hurts, as do the eyes and the guts and all the rest: my *life* hurts. Allard Lowenstein was my dearest friend and I loved him. I always will.

And if you think the pain is eased by setting down these rambling thoughts, you're wrong.

as well, and he laid his life on the line. Some of his work is well documented, much of it not: he did not speak of the help he had given people, and when he talked of himself, it was with self-effacing mockery.

How gruesomely ironic that this grand, tirelessly active life should be ended behind a desk in a Rockefeller Center law office *allegedly* at the hands of a former friend turned psychotic. Of course, the additional horror is that yet another proponent of gun control has become a victim of the gun (handing Ted Kennedy one more trauma to live with). Dennis Sweeney had a history of psychiatric treatment and institutionalization; however, he could buy a gun at will two blocks from a police station without even being asked why he wanted one. Al knew Sweeney was seriously unstable and still was willing to extend the ever-helping hand.

I do not wish to discuss Sweeney; he does not exist for me except as the symbol of a savage society's violence. Will the U.S. ever grow up? Are we to endure until all-out destruction the adolescent machismo that equates "masculinity" with weaponry? Posturing cowards, all—with nothing but a mechanical phallus to support their claims. The pinnacle of genuine masculinity was Al Lowenstein, fearless and fierce in his devotion to the best in humanity and in all ways a true gentleman.

It was not possible to warn Al away from the creeps and the manipulators. Some of us tried to dissuade him from involvement with people who were ill-intentioned, who thought to use him, to cloak mean goals in his unquestionable goodness. But he invariably chose kindness over wariness, saying he would rather err on the side of trust. He welcomed all who professed friendship, and some of them used his name to enhance their own flawed images, some harmed his efforts through malice or ineptitude. Yet the only grudges he could hold were against those he believed had willfully harmed people he loved. And he suffered fools. Indiana Congressman Andy Jacobs remarked during the service that Al did not expect too much from others but demanded everything from himself and that it could be hell on his friends. Quite so. His lack of self-esteem was a pain to all who loved him and knew his worth.

Al endured so many personal sorrows without losing direction, retaining his purpose and his laughter through strains and disappointments that crumble weaker men. He sometimes did weary of the lack of progress on earth, of the calumnies heaped on him, of the obstacles bedeviling his path. But what really depressed him was recognition that not enough people cared about the problems to act. Tied down like Gulliver in the tight laces of bureaucracy, red tape,

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and plodding unconcern, Al railed against the blindness and apathy that are the hand-basket to hell of a world amok. Then for a spell he would long for a distant quiet beach where he could enjoy his beautiful children, rebuild his humors, and back away from the burdens. (Once I told him that only ordinary people could enjoy that luxury of withdrawal, that he meant too much to the people who do care about the condition of life, about all the aspects that must change if we're to survive: he couldn't drop out.) But inevitably something would galvanize him and he would return to the battlefield where sanity and intelligence struggle to beat back the darkness.

There are treasures of recollections, dimmed momentarily, to be reawakened in diverse reunions of friendships formed through mutual love of Al, when we can talk of his eccentricities and delights—after the tears have dried. An endearing person in all ways, he could be exasperating to work with. It was difficult to set a time, even a day, for any event requiring his presence: he had little sense of clocktime, and something of immediate importance always arose. Following a common mortal schedule, one might expect to meet with him, only to discover him racing about, stuffing random items into a bag, not knowing the whereabouts of the clean laundry, and the 'meeting' would take place breathlessly amidst this chaos or en route to an airport.

If Al's arrival somewhere was desired at 9, it was wise to tell him he was expected at 7 so that he could get there by 10. (At the service Bill Buckley expressed the wish that Al had run to form on his final appointment.)

My sense of clocks is not quite so bad as Al's, but almost—so I got the hang of his pattern fairly quickly, using some extrasensory device to time arrivals. One night I miscalculated on one of his customary last-moment dinner invitations: he was there ahead of me. When I reached the table, he glared at me ferociously, snapped, "You're late!" and we both broke up laughing.

Al's concern for clothing was an ongoing joke. He was most at ease in old things and sneakers, and barefoot was best. (A petty critic's haughty denunciation of Al's wardrobe drew an acid rejoinder from Buckley, who preferred to view Al's garb as that of an English lord tending his garden. I liked Buckley for that.) Like a film loop running through the mind, I can see Al arriving (late) at a gathering, suited and necktied from the day's official business, toting an enormous canvas bag stuffed with newspapers, books, notes, and things; he greets the guests and disappears into the host's bathroom with his bag, emerging a few moments later in a tee shirt, well-worn slacks, and sneakers. As soon as he settles