

First Encounter with George (Regas)

April 13, 2005

This brief fragment offers a recollection of one of Leonard Beerman's closest colleagues and friends, Rev. George Regas, who in 1967 became the rector of All Saints Church in Pasadena. Born to a Greek immigrant father and American mother who died when he was five, Regas served a number of Episcopalian congregations before assuming the leadership of All Saints in Pasadena, bringing to that congregation his unique blend of Southern-style oratory, theological sophistication, and a tireless commitment to progressive political activism. It was at a rally for peace to protest the Vietnam War held in MacArthur Park in downtown Los Angeles that the two first met. Out of that encounter, they developed a tight partnership on a wide array of causes, especially on behalf of nuclear disarmament under the rubric of the Interfaith Center to Reverse the Arms Race. They also remained very close friends until the end of Beerman's life.

It was in early January 1971 that we met.¹ I can't remember what kind of a day it was. But I do know that getting there was easy. Freeways were not crowded in those days. In less than a half hour after leaving the Leo Baeck Temple parking lot in Bel-Air, I was at Exposition Park.

Along the way I had begun to rehearse what I would say at the demonstration. The war was raging in Vietnam. President Johnson, swelling, outwardly at least, with optimism, assured us that more troops would quickly bring the enemy to heel. I was convinced that he was wrong and that the war was wrong. "A President has but one heart to give to his country," Senator William Fulbright had said. A President whose heart is at war in Vietnam, he concluded, does not have another to give to his promise of the Great Society, which would require a different war—against poverty, inequality, and racism.

At the park everything seemed to be ready for the event. There was a platform with a lectern and a microphone (and it worked). A crowd had begun to assemble. The program began when two young men, U.S. Navy officers dressed in their uniforms, solemnly wheeled a casket, draped in black, across the grass and placed it directly before us. No act of protest against the war could be so blatantly and unambiguously clear. I squirmed. It was too much for me. Yet I marveled at the power of their courage. Or was it simply madness?

An Episcopal priest was introduced and arose to speak. He was dressed in gray with a white priestly collar. His voice was deep and his words were strong and direct and they were lubricated with an accent right out of some part, some not too deep part, of the South. But what held me captive was not primarily what he was saying, but rather the rhythm of his speech, the way in which his words were linked to the movement of his body achieving a harmony that gave his talk increased power and significance.