

## MEMORIAL

# Goodbye, Rev. William Sloane Coffin



PHOTO: SUSAN LERNER

William Sloane Coffin blesses the sacred and civil union of Mary and Liz Stedman, July 28, 2001.

## A Vermonter Bids Farewell to An Old Ally

BY BOB BLAND

*Editor's Note: The Rev. William Sloane Coffin, prominent peace and civil rights activist, retired from Riverside Church in New York City in 1987 and moved to Vermont, where he lived in Strafford until his death. He was immortalized in the Doonesbury comic strip as Rev. Sloane. He died April 12 at the age of 81.*

I heard this afternoon that Bill Coffin had died. Since Bill changed and perhaps saved my life, I feel a need to add to the public discourse on his life. But first, my personal sympathy to Ned, Vi, and Randy Coffin whose loss is private for this wonderful man.

On May 1, 1970, Bill helped organize a rally in New Haven, Connecticut in support of several Black Panthers who had been jailed unjustly. Several of us "radicals" from North Carolina drove up for the rally. Included among the speakers was Jim Fouratt of the Gay Liberation Front.

Like many of us isolated gay people at that time, my life had been rough. It was really hard 40 years ago in rural North Carolina to even realize that there were other people who did not fit the

heterosexual model. I gradually learned that I was not unique in all the world, but what I did learn did not make me comfortable at all with what I felt in myself.

Like many young gays then (and really still now), suicide was something that I thought about a lot. I kept fighting to try to figure things out, and like many young gays, did a transference thing that saw me fighting for the rights of others, the black, the poor, the Vietnamese.

And then, standing at that rally, I heard that not only was I not alone. Indeed, I was worthy of liberation! Being "homosexual" was not something sordid that I should hide, being gay was good, but we needed to fight along with our brothers and sisters in the world to free ourselves.

It was a stunning epiphany, a moment that I will never, ever forget.

And it was brought to me by Bill Coffin, Huey Newton, and many of the other people who were so enlightened in those dark days as to give Jim his time on the podium.

On the way back to Chapel Hill, I "came out" to my fellow radicals, who had no choice but to accept me under the post-rally circumstances. I came out to all the local feminists and about half of them came out publicly in a real "debutante" moment there among the southern pines.

Within a couple of weeks, I was in New York seeking out Jim

and the Gay Liberation Front. And within another week, I was marching in the first-ever Gay Pride March up 6th Avenue.

From that life-changing, life-saving moment, all my future life would develop. And if I have had a small part in making a better world for GLBTQ people, that is part of the heritage I owe to Bill Coffin and many others who broke new ground in those days.

When I then learned that Bill Coffin was a neighbor here in Vermont and began to work closely with his brother Ned, it became possible for me to thank him personally. His reaction was such that I am sure I was the millionth person to thank him for a life-changing moment!

Bill has been important to all of us in our communities. I remember especially the night he spoke to the Sierra Club Board of Directors gathered under the stars on Garden Hill at The Mountain School. He talked of God in such personal and liberated terms that I said to myself that Bill's God is one in which I could have believed.

And now I hope that Bill has found a heaven with that God.

Thank you Bill! ▼

➔ Bob Bland is treasurer of the Vermont Democratic Party and chairs the Orange County Democratic Committee. He lives in Vershire.

### *Voices for Civil Unions:*

Some claim that "Take Back Vermont" refers to heritage, not hate. But gays and lesbians remember the "good old days," when they were excluded from their families, frozen out of churches, and discriminated against in a variety of painful legal ways. They are convinced that "Take Back Vermont" means take back civil unions.

It's time for us straight people to talk less *about* and more *with* gays and lesbians. Only by listening to them can we recognize them as persons, as men and women beloved of God. Because, to quote an old Vermonter, "Ignorance ain't what you don't know; it's what you do know that ain't so."

REV. WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN

The above appeared in newspaper ads in 2000 to help re-elect the legislators who had voted for the civil union law.