

In Memoriam Reverend Bob Holmes (1925–2005)
Compassionate Listener, Prophet, and Peacemaker

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The Rev. Dr. Robert M. Holmes, known as Reverend Bob to hundreds of Montanans, died at the age of 80 in the arms of his family and his God Saturday, Sept. 24, 2005. . . . Rev. Bob was an outspoken advocate for education, low-income people, single mothers, gays and lesbians, children in poverty, people in prison, the elderly and other people whose voices are not heard by the political system. He wrote, spoke, organized, testified before the legislature, and often stood alone to speak the truth out of his understanding for Jesus' message of compassion. . . . Rev. Bob modeled his life after three heroes: Jesus, Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. . . . The attentive compassion of Christ was his model, his strength, and the path he followed to his last breath.

~ *Helena Independent Record*, September 25, 2005
www.blueuniverse.com/thsculptures/film.html

To write a memorial essay on Bob Holmes's contributions to Montana and its culture and life is more than a daunting task. In writing a memorial tribute to anyone we want to do justice to their lives and memory—however, in remembering Bob Holmes we are confronting and remembering a spiritual, cultural, moral, and intellectual giant, whose “main mentor,” as he often said, was



Bob Holmes (1925–2005)

Jesus Christ. Bob Holmes was not just a student of Christ—he was a profoundly attentive, conscientious faithful student of his main mentor and we are forever grateful that the following statement from his obituary is true and we can stake our lives on its insight into his life: “*The attentive compassion of Christ was his model, his strength, and the path he followed to his last breath.*”

I can speak for many of us who knew Bob, as I did for the past twenty-five years, and say without the slightest hesitation that Bob Holmes was one of the greatest people we have ever known—a profoundly compassionate person, a man whose tough and creative mind and tender heart nourished us and hundreds of others in amazing ways and whose loving presence we still feel and follow. We who were blessed to know him know that Bob Holmes was a man whose heart and mind were overflowing with a beautiful music of love and intelligence and transformation and empowerment that got deep into the secret parts of our souls. He loved so many of us so deeply and made us clearly feel and know how much he loved us that we knew that in Bob Holmes we had found a second, beloved father to whom we could turn at any moment. The fruits of Bob's love and generosity and encouragement to so many people in encounters that were far from the public eye will always be remembered in secret. But they are

secrets that we will always be ready and willing to share—humble of heart, following his main mentor, he would never broadcast his actions, but we will always treasure and share the secrets of those moments and times when he was there for us in our darkest nights, those times when we needed him most and when he passed over sympathetically into our lives, when he was there with us shoulder to shoulder like one person, as our profound companion who shared the good news, the life, love, and light of his main mentor.

The range of Bob's more public contributions to Montana and Montana's people is also vast—they range from his day-in-day-out work as an ordained minister and as a college chaplain and teacher, to his important stands on issues of war and peace, human rights, poverty and the needs of low-income people, single mothers, gays and lesbians, children in poverty, people in prison, the elderly and other people whose voices are not heard by the political system, to his planting of life-lifting seeds, seeds of compassion and transformation and creative possibilities.

At the time of his death at the age of eighty, Bob was a retired Methodist minister who had served St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Helena for many years. A week before the fall that led to his hospitalization with a broken neck, with his long-time friend Rev. George Harper and many Helena friends, he was making plans to launch a new Helena television program in which he and George would reach out to Helena citizens looking for a progressive Christian perspective on the weekly news. This proposed adventure would have been a refreshing alternative to the "television evangelist" of the sort that preaches a gospel of bondage and subservience while asking for money and would have continued Bob's work over the years in radio and television as the

author of a popular radio and TV series of one-minute "LifelifTERS."

As a chaplain of the Helena Police Department for twenty-two years, he rode shifts with Helena's peace officers, stood in solidarity with them in their difficult and trying work, listening to them and encouraging them to do their best with honor and respect for all the troubled and dangerous people they had to deal with.

He listened to Helena's police officers and gave untold numbers of hours to this work. While he was famous for his speaking abilities and in constant demand as a speaker across Montana and across the nation, he really should be famous for his listening. He listened and listened for untold numbers of hours not just with Helena's police officers but also to hundreds of others and spread the gospel of listening. In one of the greatest gifts he gave to Montana, Bob Holmes shared and taught the art of empowering listening. He was the Montana initiator of a profound form of counseling (called Co-Counseling or Re-Evaluation Counseling) in which counselors learn to listen, profoundly listen to others, and use the Co-Counseling process in which people of all ages and of all backgrounds learn how to exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from the effects of past distress experiences.

Bob was rightly known as a great speaker, preacher, and teacher. He lent his speaking gifts to the Montana Committee for the Humanities Speaker's Bureau for many years and was in constant demand as a speaker at the local, state, and national level. Preaching for Bob Holmes was always also teaching with profound respect for his hearers. Whenever he preached and taught, he lived by the words of Chaucer—"all gladly learn and gladly teach." Whether he was leading his "Heretics Club" seminar or presenting a keynote speech at some national or state conference, he was

always trying to share his insights by laying out for consideration the evidence that he thought backed up those insights, respecting his hearers and their questions and intelligence.

He was invited to deliver a series of sermons for the national Protestant Hour broadcast and he worked those into a book entitled *Why Jesus Never Had Ulcers and Other Thought-Provoking Questions*. Bob could speak with and did speak with and respect people of all social classes and levels of education. Bob Holmes was a scholar and published author (of the book of sermons just mentioned and of *The Academic Mystery House: The man, the campus and their new search for meaning*—and two unfinished books). Bob was one of the people we call a “zetetic”—a person with an active and persistently inquiring mind. He was a voracious reader (of newspapers and books, and journals on all sorts of topics in politics and culture and economics and the arts—not just on traditionally “religious topics”), and was always ready to dialogue with anyone from the standpoint of his original research and study.

Bob Holmes also held many academic degrees (bachelors and masters and doctoral degrees from Illinois Wesleyan University, with graduate degrees from Northwestern University, Garrett Theological Seminary, and the Pacific School of Religion). But unlike many academically oriented persons and ordained ministers, he regularly used his studies to prophetically speak out against the injustices of our lives and times when faithfulness to the truth meant that silence was a sign of complicity with injustice. He spoke out and spoke out often—whether it was President Reagan’s “contra war” against the people of Nicaragua or President Bush’s invasion and military occupation of Iraq—or the neglect of the needs of the children and the poor and of women and of workers

denied their rights to fair pay and decent working conditions—or of injustices against our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters—or against the United States’ threatened use of nuclear weapons.

Bob combined his profound knowledge of the Bible and that Bible’s God’s concern for justice and the cries of the poor and the oppressed with his constant study of the news and of the reality of what was happening that wasn’t being reported adequately in the daily news. He and his wife Polly Holmes traveled to Nicaragua in the 1980s to see for themselves what was going on in that country—and Bob came back to help lead the opposition to the United States’ illegal war against Nicaragua.

While some in the Christian community in Helena and across Montana wished he would keep quiet, he did not. He often said, “You have to get people to believe absurdities to get them to commit atrocities” and he fought for truthfulness even if it meant going against popular opinion. He apologized in a sermon—entitled “Why I’m Only 70% Christian”—for not having spoken out even more strongly against U.S. foreign policies and the U.S.’s support for repressive military regimes in Latin America and across the world. However, the historical truth is that Bob Holmes often stood alone to speak the truth out of his understanding of Jesus’ message of compassion for all.

He was an active member of innumerable organizations working for social and economic and social justice—including the Montana Low-Income Coalition, Montanans for Social Justice, WEEL (Working for Equality and Economic Liberation), the Methodist Federation for Social Justice, the Montana Workers’ Rights Board, the Helena Service for Peace and Justice, and the Helena Peace Seekers, to name just a few.

This Harley-riding chaplain of Rocky Mountain College from 1965–1981, born in 1925, in Mitchell, South Dakota, is now at rest. As the obituary written by his family says:

He was a Navy ensign in WWII, a big band leader, vaudeville comic, jazz pianist and arranger, rock climber, model train buff, honorary elder of a band of Lakota Sioux in South Dakota, personal counselor, radio show host, author of two published books, reader at Montana Talking Books Library, and deftly played the musical saw. . . . Yet it was Bob's personal relationships that transformed people. His caring, compassion, attention, and personal generosity changed the lives of many people who encountered him. Because of him, people have joined the ministry who otherwise may not have. Because of him, people quit drinking or became better parents who otherwise might not have. Because of him, there are many who believe in their better selves who might not have seen their own inner light if Bob had not seen it first.

He led us in prayer and in action to a deeper sympathy and response. He often said as he led us in prayer, "Lord, a lot of your people are suffering today." With his life and his last breath, he seemed to say (if I may borrow words from Bruce Cockburn and the Benedictine Monks of Weston Priory in Vermont):

Lord, let me be a little of your breath moving
over the face of the deep—I want to be a particle
of your light and love and life flowing over the
hills of morning to your people. Everything you
see is not the way it seems. Tears can sing and
joy can shed tears. You can take the wisdom of
this world and give it to the ones who think it all
ends here, not knowing that You—the freshness
of birth every morning, the grace that encircles
our days—are here with us now and forever with
your lovingkindness, asking us to follow you as
your sons and daughters. You search our hearts and
You know us. Our lives lie open to You. Waking
or sleeping, in the dark and in the light, Your
friendship enfolds all our ways. Lead us in paths
that are faithful,
And call us from death into life.

Bob Holmes once suggested a spiritual breathing exercise, to think these words as we breathe rhythmically: "I'm breathing out old memories, I'm breathing in new ideas. I'm breathing out old prejudices, I'm breathing in new truths. I'm breathing out old fears, I'm breathing in new courage. I'm breathing out old resentments, I'm breathing in new forgiveness. I'm breathing out old obsessions, I'm breathing in new freedom." And he commented:

You can write your own rhythms, for that's how
life is lived, rhythmically. But I think it's safe to
say that the person who lives deeply breathes

deeply. When you're sick, concentrate on each deep breath bringing new health. When you're tired, concentrate on each deep breath bringing new strength. When you go to bed, concentrate on each deep breath bringing rest and relaxation. Breathing is fundamental. And it's not by accident that the ancient Hebrews thought of breath as the soul.

Bob wrote in a sermon on August 26, 2001, entitled "Beyond Change to Transformation":

Jesus' objective was to call people to a new vision of the way things ought to be with themselves and with the world. He called it the Kingdom of God and he said it is "at hand," "within you," "in your midst." The only thing standing between you and its final arrival is your need for transformation. Now, if you have a bunch of untransformed people together, you have an untransformed society, and it doesn't take many reads of a newspaper or viewing of TV news to see how radically our society is in need of transformation, needing not just some changes here and there but transformation. A

nation like ours—the wealthiest in all history, where one-fifth of our children don't have enough to eat—is in need of a moral transformation. A nation like ours—capable not only of solving our own social problems but easing the pains of much of the rest of the world as well, but where the desire for profits supersedes the desire to help—we are a nation in need of a moral transformation.

As Bob Holmes now breathes in new freedom at a cosmic level, we still down here are in need of a moral transformation. Following Bob's lead, we can discipline our minds and cultivate a tender heart, the better to reach out to those who are left behind by and are of no concern to the so-called rulers and powerful leaders of our lives and times. With Bob Holmes's passing we say goodbye to a person who leaves us a legacy of kindness and compassion and an invincible commitment to seeking peace and truth. I thank God for the privilege of knowing this great man. Knowing that our dear friend and mentor Bob Holmes is now on an even more cosmic adventure thrills me to the bone, for the rest of the universe now gets to know a great person who was always glad to learn and glad to teach. Peace be with you, dear, dear friend, now and forever.