

Recalling Events, Public and Personal, of 50 Years Ago (Daily Pilot; September 7, 2013)

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Fifty years ago, Sept. 12, 1963, was a Thursday, under the sign of Virgo. Young people were listening to "My Boyfriend's Back" by the Angels. J.D. Salinger's "Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour, An Introduction," had recently been published.

Movies released in September included Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds," with Rod Taylor and Tippi Hedren, and "The Great Escape," starring Steve McQueen and James Garner.

Much of the news in the country was centered around the Civil Rights movement, which was in full swing, with almost daily demonstrations, especially in the South. Our role in Vietnam was growing. Three months earlier, on June 11, a Buddhist monk had immolated himself on a Saigon street to protest alleged persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government. The next day, June 12, civil rights activist Medgar Evers was shot and killed outside his home in Jackson, Miss., by a white racist.

Also on June 12, Alabama Gov. George Wallace blocked two black students from registering at the University of Alabama. President John F. Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard and had them escort the two students to campus to be registered. The day before, Kennedy addressed the nation in a speech that defined his position on civil rights. The bill that he submitted to Congress was ultimately passed as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Firefighters turned their hoses on civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Ala., in mid-July and folk singers Joan Baez and Bob Dylan performed during a civil rights rally on Aug. 28.

On Sept. 12, the Beatles were in their London EMI studios recording "Hold Me Tight," and "Don't Bother Me." The Porsche 911 was making its debut on this day in Frankfurt, Germany. And after 234 episodes, on this date, "Leave it to Beaver" had its last telecast.

But the event that shattered my life on this date 50 years ago was standing 15 feet from my father and watching him die of a heart attack. Our family had just finished dinner, and he and I had moved into the living room — just the two of us. He was smoking his pipe while lying on a sofa — his typical after-dinner relaxation. We were talking about the U.S. Amateur Golf Tournament, when he choked once, dropped his pipe and was gone. Life as I had known it for my first 14 and a half years would never again be the same.

The illusory beliefs that had allowed my world to seem stable, predictable and safe had been obliterated. In watching his sudden death, I had my childhood innocence irrevocably ripped away from me. I felt a sense of alienation and estrangement from my everyday world.

Two months later, on Nov. 22, the rest of the country was plunged in to a similar trauma with the assassination of President Kennedy during a Dallas motorcade. Since I was already numb in my mourning, I could only sit back and watch the horrific events of that time unfold with a sense of bewilderment. Did Jack Ruby just shoot Lee Harvey Oswald live on television? Is this really happening?

It was, for some time, difficult for me to decipher what events in my world were real and what felt like it had to be hallucination or fantasy.

Now, 50 years later, I have better learned to accept the unpredictability of the events beyond our control that effect our lives, sometimes in profoundly shocking ways. I have spent a career helping others cope with and mourn the their inevitable losses and assisted them in growing stronger from the trauma of living that is part of our existential predicament.

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