Words of Celebration
and Remembrance

Otto Friedrich
1929–1995

Delivered
May 24, 1995

Memorial Service
Saint Peter’s Church
619 Lexington Avenue
New York, New York
To go back, to go back almost half a century, some of you may recall a novel titled *The Poor in Spirit* and the flap copy written by Alice B. Toklas, who said: “There is a young — a very young — man named Otto Friedrich who is now working on his fourth novel and who may easily become the important young man of the future.”

She was right of course, and that is what brings us together here today. Young! He was nineteen or twenty when I met him in Paris in 1950, where he appeared precipitously — he always appeared precipitously — on his way, as I remember it, to Italy to interview Max Beerbohm for *Life* magazine, much to the consternation — I can’t even say envy — of those of us busy talking about the novels we were going to write and excuses for not writing them, while he was doing it, doing the work. And that is the way it has been through the forty-five years since.

Thus I can hardly say he was an inspiration, but rather something nearer a living rebuke to our laziness, our excuses, the disorderly conduct of our lives in general.

Recounting those early years in his memoirs, here was a man with no use for sentimentality, no refuge from misfortunes which would floor most of us in self-pity; a man for whom ethics, principles and integrity were not the cant and hypocrisy of our politicians and weepy confessinals, but simply matters of hard fact. As things worked out some five years later, here he was as he has described it, with “four children under the age of three, all screeching and scrabbling through a tiny cottage on the south shore of Long Island” while he walked the mile in any weather to the mercies of the Long Island Railroad for his job at *The New York Daily News*.

I saw it all up close since I lived on the property and they rented that “tiny cottage” from my family. And so what I saw up close was not simply Otto’s undaunted performance but the undaunted performance of Priscilla, whom he’d met in Paris — we all met in Paris —

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laying this foundation for the incredible trials in the years ahead.

You may in fact see a rendition of the “tiny cottage” — it was pink — in a children’s book Otto and Priscilla wrote together called *The Easter Bunny Who Overslept*.

Otto was also at the time working on and seeking a publisher for his look at American Literature, titled *The Dark Tradition*, in which he rescued James Thurber as a profoundly troubled man, from his reputation as a lightweight cartoonist, much as Mark Twain had been seen in the public eye as “America’s favorite humorist.” I don’t know if it was ever published.

What was always remarkable through his dim view of the human comedy was the warm generosity of spirit he showed for those whose work and efforts he respected, and I have always counted myself immensely fortunate in believing I was among that “happy few.” But the wry insight was always there. In 1955, when I was preening myself over one of the infinitely few fan letters that accompanied the publication of my first novel, he observed “those are the people who come after you in the middle of the night with an axe.”

His basic approach to his work, as I am sure you will hear from those who worked with him in journalism, seemed always to be: “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” Inevitably this raised hackles here and there, among them I would imagine those of the pundit Stewart Alsop in his copy for the *Post* which, I was told, Otto would read through, put a fresh page in his typewriter, and rewrite.

This self-imposed discipline extended everywhere, from work to pleasure, and especially to his music. I remember, not all that long ago, we called Priscilla to ask them in to a Thursday dinner. “Oh no,” she said, “on Thursdays Otto plays Bach.”

And in the matters of tragedy, I feel I cannot presume to intrude, but I was hugely honored to be named their son, Tony’s, Godfather, a role that humbled me from the beginning as through the frightful
end. And when I asked Otto how they could possibly bear it, he said simply, “You endure.”

And so, as they said of the architect, if you want to see his monument look around you. At his life, at his books and their extraordinary range, but most of all I think at these remarkable people he leaves with us, Priscilla and those children screeching and scrabbling through that tiny cottage, and what they have made of themselves today from what he gave them, and what they gave to him.

William Gaddis

(Read by Liesel Friedrich for Mr. Gaddis, who was unable to attend the memorial service due to illness. Liesel began her recitation by stating, “I am not William Gaddis.”)