

## Remarks, the Kieser Humanitas Award, Los Angeles, CA

*Thank you for those generous words, Father Frank, and thanks to all of you for this moment. I'm reminded of the occasion when George Burns was honored at an event like this. "I don't deserve this award," he said, "But I have arthritis and I don't deserve that, either."*

*I'm grateful to you for more reasons than one. My wife and I were walking down West 76<sup>th</sup> Street in New York when a woman ahead of us looked up and saw me. A glint of ambiguous recognition appeared in her eyes—the kind that often greets those of us whom television has made intimate strangers. Looking at me quizzically she said: "Hey, mister, do you know who you are?" "I'm not sure," I replied. In a flash the expression on her face changed and she turned away with a shrug, and said: "Well, if you don't know, I can't help you."*

*So much for notoriety.*

*I knew Bud Kieser. I'm no Bud Kieser. But I sure would like to be. He was a good man, a man of faith who never stopped believing in the moral promise of mass media. I once asked him why he kept trying so hard to move the bar higher, and he wrote back, quoting Somerset Maugham: "it's a funny thing about life...if you refuse to accept anything but the best, you very often get it."*

*Bud believed he was here to do battle with the Bastard Muses. Cleanth Brooks described the Bastard Muses as propaganda, which pleads, sometimes unscrupulously, for a special cause at the expense of the total truth; sentimentality, which works up emotional responses unwarranted by and in excess of the occasion; and pomography, which focuses on one powerful drive at the expense of the total human personality. Bud took on the Bastard Muses. It bothered him that we humans consume so much nonsense, trivia, and violence, and he puzzled over what it was doing to our sensibilities to feed on a steady diet of carnage masquerading as amusement.*

*But he didn't go around bellyaching, or pointing fingers, or agitating for people to eat their spinach. He chose instead an old-fashioned, somewhat unfashionable, but not altogether naïve strategy of affirmation. He wanted to offer an antidote to what the Greeks called 'aperokalia'—their name for vulgarity. As they saw it, vulgarity is the lack of experience in things beautiful. Bud acted as if life is a continuing course in adult education, that media could dignify life instead of debasing it, and that in the vast cornucopia of popular culture someone has to cultivate a garden here and there where people could be touched by the beauty of ideas, of honest emotions, something authentic—possibly to experience a small miracle in the soul.*

*He was right, you know. While I've missed the mark so often in my life and work that I think you've got the wrong guy here, I've had enough epiphanies to know Bud was right. Some of you remember my series on Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth. It got a good response around the country, and particularly in the creative community out here. It was, as you say in Hollywood, a low-budget job... two guys in coat and tie sitting around talking about mythology; it had little production value except the eyes of a man on fire with stories, and it appeared on the air in the heat of summer with not a cent of paid promotion. Nielsen gave it only a one rating, but something happened as people watched.*

*Word of mouth carried it as on the wind, and people began to petition their local stations for it to be repeated. And it was, again and again, until in the aggregate it has to be one of public television's most watched series ever.*

*At one point in our conversation I said to Campbell, "You're talking about the meaning of life." And he answered, "Oh, no. People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking, I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive—so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being in reality, so that we actually feel, for once, the rapture of being alive."*

*Well, millions have shared that moment, thanks to all the repeats. Among those millions was a young woman in her mid-thirties who stopped me on Eighth Avenue between 55<sup>th</sup> and 56<sup>th</sup> Streets in New York City about a year after the first series first aired. She wanted to tell me her story. She had come to New York from the hinterlands eight years earlier hoping to make her way as actress. The breaks were fugitive: someone else always got the part. Her boyfriend of many years left her for another woman. Her father died. She was broke and working as a waitress to make ends meet. She decided life was no longer worth living. So disenchanted and defeated she went home one evening resigned to getting it over with. She locked the door, pulled down the window, poured a glass full of bourbon, turned on the gas burners of the little stove, and lay down on the couch prepared to let the curtain fall. But she made a mistake. She left the television set on, and suddenly she was snapped to attention. She heard two fellows talking about the experience of being alive and her ears perked up. She listened intently, and when the program ended and the announcer said, "Be sure to join us next week as we continue our conversation with Joseph Campbell," she determined to stay around for it. She got up from the couch, turned off the gas, poured her drink into the sink, and opened the window...And now, standing on Eighth Avenue, she said: "I realized at that moment that I didn't have to be an actress but I did want to be alive. And I wanted to experience my life—every minute of it."*

*An exceptional story? No doubt. But hardly a week goes by that in my mind's eye I don't see that young woman, opening that window to life.*

*I like to think it happens often enough to justify Bud Kieser's faith in the possibilities, that it happens often enough to make all of us know that at some moment something we do with our craft touches someone like that deep in their soul.*

*The ancient Israelites had a word for the sensibility Bud urged on us. They called it 'hochma', the science of the heart. Intelligence, feeling and perception combine to inform your own story, to draw others into a shared narrative, and to make of our experience here together a victory of the deepest moral feeling of sympathy, understanding, and affection...and even, at times, redemption.*

*Essentially the work we do involves what Bud would call a moral transaction; people give us something they'll never get back...an hour or two of their lives...and we give them back something of value. Henry David Thoreau said it better than I can: "To affect the quality of the day, is the highest of the arts." No one challenged us to aim for that more than Bud, and to be recognized in his name today, by all of you, is a gift I will long treasure.*