



# First Friday News & Views

January 2014

Volume 19

Issue 1

The Monthly Newsletter  
of the First Friday  
Breakfast Club, Inc.

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Reverend Harold Wells*  
by Jonathan Wilson

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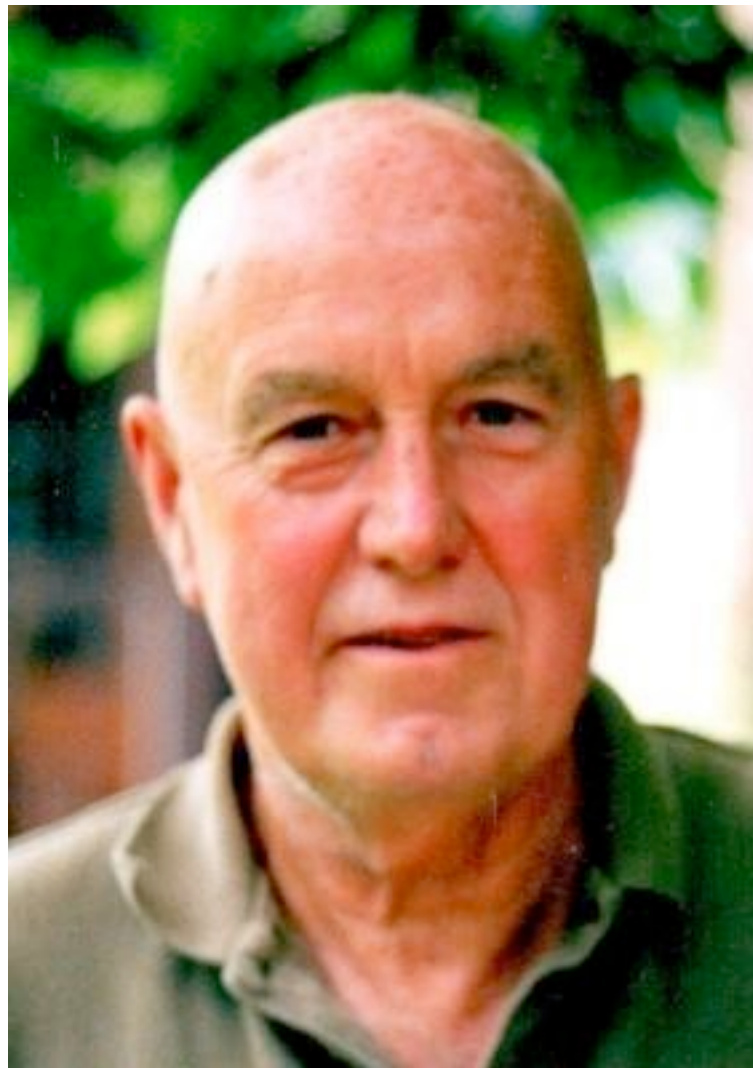
▼ The next FFBC Meeting is 7:00am,  
Friday, January 3, 2014, at Hoyt  
Sherman Place, 15th & Woodland,  
Des Moines, IA

▼ RSVP by December 30 to  
[JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com),  
or phone 515-288-2500

## The Exit of The Reverend Harold Wells

By Jonathan Wilson

### Harold James Wells



**August 6, 1936 - December 12, 2013**

*Continued on p. 2*

## **The Exit of The Reverend Harold Wells** *Continued from p. 1*

In gratitude, this issue of the First Friday Breakfast Club newsletter is dedicated to Harold Wells.

Harold Wells was a friend of mine. He and I were friends before that could be accomplished by the click of a button. Make me a real friend of yours, survive me, and you might just get a newsletter issue dedicated in your honor.

He was an enlightened, empathetic, and courageous human being. There are lots of additional, laudatory adjectives I could use to describe him -- and they'd all be true -- but those three I consider to be the most important attributes of any worthy person. Most good people among us simply aspire to them; Harold Wells achieved them and kept on, and on, and on, achieving them throughout his adult life -- maybe longer, but I didn't know him before he was an adult.

Harold Wells was a pioneer spokesperson for the GLBT community, of which he was an unapologetic, well-adjusted member. He was a spokesperson long before it was safe to be outspoken on the subject and LONG before it has become more popular. Because of his reputation and stature within the gay community, he was sought out by many in search of a viable path out of their own closets. I was one of those many. He was anxious to share from his wealth of experience and gentle, reassuring insights and his good humor.

A debt of gratitude is owed to those, like Harold Wells, who led the way, who took the risks and abuse when there was no assurance that today would ever come. People who put their professional careers and personal relationships on the line to advance the cause of GLBT citizens being treated with acceptance and equality. We cannot now thank directly those who, like Harold Wells, have died while paving the path out of the closet for us, those like Harold Wells who were instrumental in creating

a culture where GLBT children of God need never live in the closet in the first place.

It has to have been gratifying for Harold Wells to witness the progress that has been made. He was already 36 years of age before the American psychiatric community finally determined that homosexuality is not a mental illness (and homophobia is). At that time same-gender intimacy was a crime in every state in the Union, and gay marriage wasn't legal anywhere on the face of the earth.

There used to be an expression that something considered impossible would happen sarcastically, when mankind walked on the moon. That had to have been the expression that would have been used to describe the idea of gay marriage around the time that Harold Wells was 36 years of age. And, sure enough, about that time Neil Armstrong made his historic first step on the moon and anything -- everything -- enlightened became possible.

There is work yet to be done. More ignorant people are being born every day; they are learning from their elders to take pride in their ignorance and make the all-too-vocal choice to be homophobic bigots. The United Methodist Church, in which Harold Wells was ordained, continues to embarrass itself in an on-going struggle over this very issue. It continues to cling to the indefensible moral notion that homosexuality itself is incompatible with Christianity -- the notion that whether a gay person is in a monogamous, committed, same-gender relationship for a lifetime or is utterly promiscuous with as many people of the same gender as possible until death comes from exhaustion or worse -- it's a moral equivalent -- it's the same thing. Holding such a notion is itself immoral.

Here's the fact. The only way to thank people like Harold Wells for their courage and sacrifice is by reaching out with a helping hand to those who are coming along behind us. That is the only tribute that he and others like him would ask of us. Would expect from us.

## God's Presence Makes the Lowly Holy

*Continued from p. 6*

which saved us. By coming into this world, Jesus' life redeemed what it means to be human. The pain and suffering of childbirth. The struggles of growing up. The reality of human desire. The difficulty of relationships. The effort to find meaning and purpose in life. The nature of death.

Indeed, as biblical scholars like N.T. Wright have emphasized recently, the early Christian vision for the end times was the redemption of this world and not some promised otherworldly heaven. John 3:16 reminds us, "For God so loved *the world* that he sent his only-begotten son..." (emphasis added)

Looking back on the bustling Christmas season, I implore you to remember what it is actually about, in a Christian sense. You, your body, whether gay or straight, male or female or trans, have been transformed by the presence of God in the world. Our bodies are sacred and are the subject of redemption. What a great message to hear in the deep, darkness of winter! "God is with you."

## My M.O. by Steve Person

*Continued from p. 8*

Washington, D.C. While there, Coolidge delighted in wearing and posing in a ridiculous cowboy outfit. His calculating Commerce Secretary, Herbert Hoover, took Coolidge's absence and the President's announcement that he would not run in 1928, as an opportunity to promote himself.

Henry Ford, a "crackpot" as Bryson points out, was on the verge of losing his automotive edge to General Motors and Chrysler. Ford's idiotic scheme to build a self-sustaining rubber plantation in the jungles of Brazil cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and never came to fruition.

Al Capone grossed over \$100 million in 1927 thanks to his illegal activities in procuring alcohol for a booze-starved American public. Texas Guinan, New York's premiere speakeasy proprietress, welcomed customers into her establishment with the cry of, "Hello, suckers!"

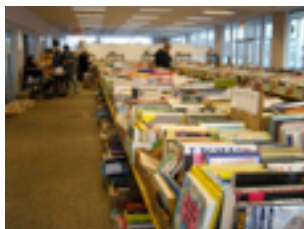
It was an age like no other, and Bryson tells it with extraordinary skill and detail.

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## Briefs & Shorts

Be sure to RSVP for the January 3 meeting no later than December 30. Our speaker will be Anne Starr, Director of Orchard Place.

Be sure to peruse the front table for a book you might like to read. Book donations are always welcome. Thanks to Barry McGriff for coordinating the book exchange.



Consider an end-of-the-year tax-deductible contribution to the First Friday Breakfast Club's scholarship fund.

Thanks to Roger Ferris for introducing our December speaker, Rabbi Edelman-Blank of Tifereth Israel Synagogue.

Thanks to Senator Matt McCoy for keeping us updated on what's going on under the five domes.

## Informative and Entertaining: It Gets No Better Than That

By Bruce Carr



The First Friday Breakfast Club's guest speaker on December 6th was Rabbi Steven Edelman-Blank of Tifereth Israel Synagogue. This conservative Jewish congregation, now numbering some 300 families, was founded in Des Moines in 1901 and has worshiped and

communed in its synagogue on Polk Boulevard since the early 1930s.

Rabbi Edelman-Blank began by noting with gratitude, and characteristic humor, that his invitation to speak to us came during the Christmas season; his talk then continued to a practical introduction to the three traditions or "denominations" (orthodox, conservative, and reform) of Judaism, with a handy outline of what Jews "are" (an ethnic group) and "are not" (a race). Like any other ethnic group, he assured us, Jews come in all sorts: rich, poor, smart, stupid, liberal, conservative, homosexual, and heterosexual.

Further, he commented, every one of these flavors is represented in his congregation.

Regarding attitudes and practices relating to same-sex orientation, Rabbi Edelman-Blank said that in late 2006 the highest legal body in Conservative Judaism had voted -- following years of debate -- to allow the ordination of gay rabbis and the celebration of same-sex commitment ceremonies. And he mentioned with some pleasure that his move to Des Moines had come in April 2009 -- right on the heels of the *Varnum* decision by the Iowa Supreme Court.

Steven Edelman-Blank was most entertaining and informative, as well as both devout and practical. As he has written on Tifereth's Web site: "I believe that the Jewish tradition is rich with wisdom that can make our lives more meaningful on a daily basis. This belief is at the center of my deep love of Judaism and my tremendous pride in being a member of the Jewish people. Jewish texts and religious practices can continually provide lessons on how to answer some of life's most difficult questions. I do not mean only intellectual questions though. Sometimes, the most important question we need answered is how to get through the day. I particularly see Judaism as a source of comfort and hope from which we can draw in times of need."

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Steven Edelman-Blank received his Ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. A *magna cum laude* graduate of Harvard with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Studies, his eclectic experience includes interning at Temple Emanu El in Burbank, California; directing youth programs at Congregation Beth El in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; assisting with research in the field of psychology at Boston University; serving in AmeriCorps; and an array of

community service. His professional passions lie in community development and making Torah meaningful in daily life. Rabbi Edelman-Blank's wife, Deborah Edelman-Blank, is a clinical psychologist in Des Moines whose clinical interests (it is of some interest to note) include multicultural competence, therapeutic humor, LGBTIQ affirmative counseling, and religion/spirituality. Steven Edelman-Blank can be reached on Facebook and at [office@tifereth.org](mailto:office@tifereth.org).





## REDUCE INEQUALITY TO GROW IOWA'S MIDDLE CLASS

During the holidays, Iowans give back and help those in need. This year, the Legislature encouraged charitable giving by increasing tax credits for donations to the community foundations and providing \$1 million for Iowa food banks.

Those measures won't be enough, however, unless we see more board-based economic growth. Even though the worst of the national recession is over, many of our families, friends and neighbors continue to struggle. According to the [Washington Center for Equitable Growth](#), this uneven recovery has increased the gap between the very well off and just about everyone else.

A shrinking middle class would be bad news for Iowa, a state with many small businesses and communities. This year, the Legislature took a comprehensive approach to strengthening and growing Iowa's middle class by:

- **Investing in education.** We fought for and won two years of significant increases to help K-12 students get the best start possible. To boost student achievement, we are keeping class sizes small for young learners, raising standards, improving teaching and encouraging innovation. We also froze in-state university tuition for the first time in 30 years, so all Iowans can pursue the opportunities that lead to good careers.

- **Cutting taxes.** We cut property taxes, with special emphasis on helping our small local businesses the most. Working families who pay the largest percentage of their income in taxes will get a boost from an increase in the state Earned Income Tax Credit.

- **Creating good local jobs and training Iowans to fill them.** The landmark, bipartisan investments made this year by the Legislature are helping Iowans improve their skills and their family's prospects while at the same time expanding Iowa businesses and easing shortages of skilled workers.

- **Expanding access to affordable health care and mental health services** for all Iowans, whether they live in the city or rural communities. With new health care security, medical bills will be much less likely to force middle-class Iowans into foreclosure and bankruptcy.

If middle-class Iowans can't make ends meet, all Iowans will be in trouble. This year's investments can make a real difference, but there is more we can do to grow Iowa's middle class. Finding those solutions will be at the top of our agenda for the next legislative session, which starts January 13.

### Additional information

*This is a legislative update from Senator Matt McCoy, representing west part of Des Moines, portions of West Des Moines and Cumming in northwest Warren County. For newsletters, photos and further information, go to [www.senate.iowa.gov/senator/mccoy](http://www.senate.iowa.gov/senator/mccoy).*

*To contact Senator McCoy during the week, call the Senate Switchboard at 515-281-3371. Otherwise he can be reached at home at 515-274-0561. E-mail him at [matt.mccoy@legis.iowa.gov](mailto:matt.mccoy@legis.iowa.gov).*

*Senator McCoy is an Assistant Senate Majority Leader, chair of the Commerce Committee and chair of the Transportation & Infrastructure Budget Subcommittee. He also serves on the Appropriations, State Government, Transportation and Ways & Means committees.*

## God's Presence Makes the Lowly Holy

By Rev. Jonathan Page

"I loved my Jesuit education," Andy said to me. It was an odd place to be talking about religious education. We were walking down the street in Campustown in Ames on our way to grab a drink at a bar.

"What did you love about it?" I asked in return.

"I loved the Jesuit focus on the sacredness of human experience."

"Oh?"

"Yes. The Jesuits regularly emphasized the holiness of life, that God was present even in the mundane aspects of life. Spirituality can and should be explored in the midst of the world."

"You mean, God could even be present in a bar?" I prodded him.

"Without a doubt," Andy replied. "We believe in the Incarnation: that God's very self came into this world to make it holy. Of course God is present at a bar, and everywhere else for that matter!" I stopped and looked around me. People, mostly ISU students, were mingling on the street, caught up in their conversations and the enjoyment of the evening. I tried to picture God present there. God in the midst of a conversation between a guy and his girlfriend. God in the playful embrace of one frat brother to another. God in the laughing I heard echoing down the street.

"That's a powerful concept," I added.

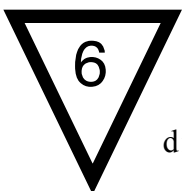
"It is, Jon. And it's also what we believe. It can be so easy to forget when we are outside of church or a soup kitchen. God's holiness is everywhere."

outrageous sweaters. "That's the ugliest sweater I have EVER seen!" "Why, thank you!" It is a time when you can forget about the diet (praise God!) and dream up that perfect gift for your niece or nephew. Being a good gay aunt or uncle is essential. But from a religious perspective, Christmas is important because it celebrates the Incarnation.

Queer and Feminist theologians have, for years, grappled with the problem of the body in Christianity. The writings of Augustine of Hippo and others through the years have emphasized the denial of the body and its desires. Self-denial, and especially bodily self-denial, took on the form of a masochistic cult in some parts of Christianity. Prolonged fasting, strict celibacy, self-flagellation, exposure to the elements, these and other forms of self-inflicted pain or denial have had many religious supporters through the years. At a less extreme level, Christians have advocated complete abstinence from alcohol and have fetishized sex and sexual desire, drawing careful boundaries around when sex is acceptable (in heterosexual marriage, preferably for procreation) and when it is not (all other times).

This denigration of the body and of this world flies in the face of the great news of Christmas. At Christmas we proclaim that, by coming into this world, God seeks to redeem it. And not just to redeem the soul, but the flesh and everything that makes up creation. In the Gospel of Luke, the evangelist describes Jesus' birth in ugly terms. Jesus is born in a feeding trough to a couple forced to travel an arduous journey. The heralds of this great news are shepherds, the paradigmatic low-lives of first century Palestine. Shepherding was dirty, lonely work with no status and with all the aromas of country life. Yet it was there, and not in a pristine palace, that Jesus was supposedly born. God chose the most humble of circumstances to show forth the greatest example of grace in the world. The message is clear: that it is in the mundane, the lowly, the everyday that God can be most present.

The profundity of the Incarnation was not lost on the early Church. The great church father Irenaeus of Lyon wrote about how it was the Incarnation itself *Continued on p. 3*



Of all the seasons and times of the year, the most important for gay Christians is Christmas. Yes, it means lots of fun holiday parties with unusual drinks, kitschy decorations, and

## THEATER REVIEW

By Gary Kaufman

### **Irving Berlin's WHITE CHRISTMAS**

I have observed over the years that the one difference between seeing a show on Broadway and seeing a traveling Broadway show such as those that play at the Civic Center is not the stars of the show, for often the traveling versions have the same headliners. It is usually the quality of the supporting cast. When you see a show on Broadway, every actor is top notch, even the bit players. But this weekend, when I had the opportunity to see Irving Berlin's **White Christmas** performed at the Civic Center, each and every actor was right on with their roles. Perhaps because there were no well-known named headline actors, it allowed more resources to be devoted elsewhere in the production.

The sets for this traveling production of **White Christmas** were incredible. The stage could be almost instantly transformed from the backend of a Vermont barn to the most elegant of New York nightclubs, and then to a most beautiful and detailed set for a Vermont hotel. Costumes were often dazzling and occasionally over the top, and it was a musical that was almost all music, with very little in between. Without the headliners, it gave an

opportunity for the supporting cast to shine, and the one that shined through the best was the very talented, Ruth Williamson, who played Martha, the hardworking keeper of the inn. Her stage personality is best illustrated by her song, "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy," and she also had a blast when she bemused among the girls about how "Falling Out of Love Can Be Fun." It was indeed fun to watch her!

We even carried it with us into the night after the afternoon performance. When we discovered that she had appeared in the Mel Brooks musical movie version of **The Producers**, my lover and I sat all the way through the movie, which I have on DVD, just to catch her. Turns out she is the lady who jumped out of her seat and said, "I never! Talk about bad taste!" and left the theater in a huff when they were doing the song "Springtime for Hitler." Anyway, in this tour of **White Christmas** the costumes shined, the sets shined, and the cast shined. For that matter, even the audience shined, as the program ended with "snow" falling on us in the theater. A very satisfying holiday experience. Hope you are having one as well!

---

### ***Ponder this...***

*Never trust your tongue when your heart is bitter.*

*Being honest may not get you a lot of friends, but it'll always get you the right ones.* John Lennon

*Do not regret growing older; it's a privilege denied to many.*

*A friend of mine started reading a book about anti-gravity, and simply couldn't put it down.*



*One night I stayed up all night to see where the sun went, and then it dawned on me.*

*I wondered why it seemed like the baseball was getting bigger, and then it hit me.*

*If pain in child birth were, as touted, God's punishment for*

*Eve's sin, why do other animals have pain in birthing offspring, and why can't born-again women give birth painlessly?*

# FFBC

First Friday  
News & Views

Des Moines, Iowa

January 2014

First Friday  
Breakfast Club

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MADE ON A  MAC

## MY M.O. (MONTHLY OBSERVATIONS)

by Steve Person

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, one of America's most popular television variety series was **The Gary Moore Show**. It was an hour of comedy sketches and musical interludes, the kind of show that would be impossible to air today because it was clean and funny. The last fifteen minutes of each show was devoted to songs and memories of one particular year in American history. While the content was pure vanilla, it was an enchanting conclusion to each show.

Bill Bryson, originally from Des Moines, and the wunderkind of today's humorist writers, has outdone "The Wonderful Year" format with his in-depth and sometimes cynical look into a single year in American history. **One Summer: America, 1927** chronicles one of the most dramatic and never-to-be-seen-again years in American history.

Bryson concentrates on the exploits of pioneer aviators, sensational murder trials, major league baseball, industrialists, the stock market, politics, and the social mores of a nation nearly a decade after the First World War. It is a fascinating look at a time fondly recalled by many as "The Roaring Twenties."

Perhaps more than any individual of that year, Charles Lindberg became what many have conceded was our last national hero. His daring and fool hardy solo flight across the Atlantic that landed in Paris on May 21 of that spectacular year set him up for a fame for which he was totally unprepared. "Lucky Lindy," as he became known, was mobbed wherever he went for the remainder of that year and for many years later until he became an obvious supporter of Nazi Germany and its skewed view of racial superiority.

Babe Ruth, a pudgy and aging baseball icon, seemed, as 1927 rolled in, to be near the end of an already stupendous baseball career. Along with Lou Gehrig, Ruth became a homerun king that year, batting in sixty homers, with Gehrig not too far behind.

The humorless yet entirely laughable Calvin Coolidge oversaw a nation bursting with confidence and material wealth. Coolidge inherited the presidency upon the death of Warren G. Harding in 1923. As the editor of **The Nation** observed, "I doubt if it (the presidency) has ever fallen into the hands of a man so cold, so narrow, so reactionary, so uninspiring, so unenlightened, or has done less to deserve it...." In 1927, Coolidge and his wife took a four-month vacation to the Black Hills in South Dakota (where Gutzon Borglum's Mount Rushmore project was getting underway) to escape the heat of *Continued on p. 3*