

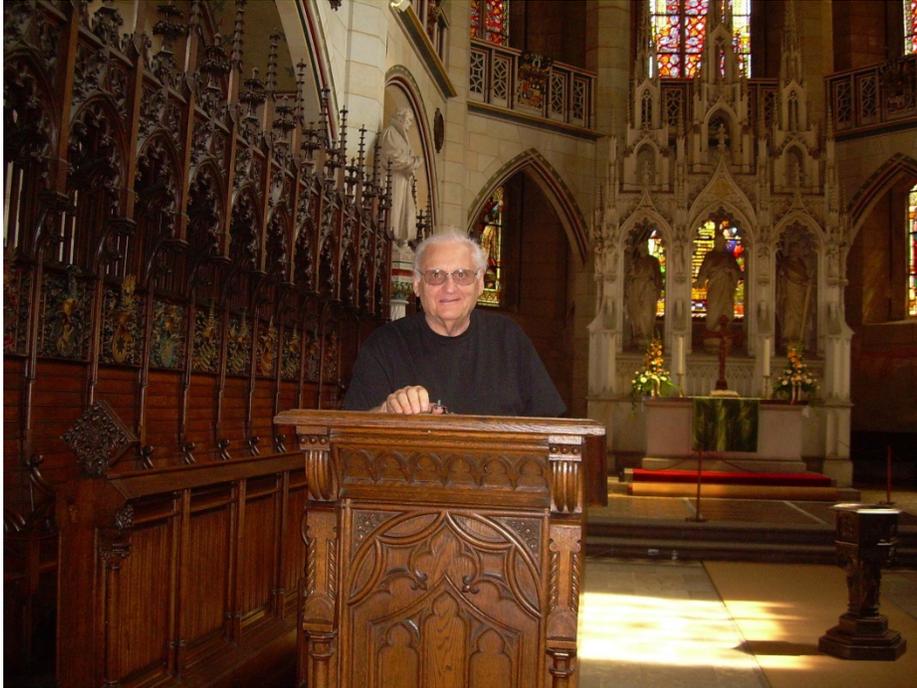
EUGENE LEWIS CONROTTO

OBITUARY

and

FUNERAL ORATION

Written May 22, 2010
81st Year



ELC's *bona fides* to "preach"—
at Luther's pulpit at Wittenberg...



...and his *bona fides* to expound on
all matters in the universe—at the
Great Wall with Kathy.

Eugene L. Conrotto / Obituary

Eugene Lewis Conrotto of Modesto died on May 30, 2019. Conrotto was born 89 years ago in Gilroy, California. His parents were immigrants from Italy: his father, Enrico, from Piemonte; his mother, Carolina Pastorino, from Liguria.



He was preceded in death by his wife, Jeanne Lawrence Conrotto, and their only child, Duane Lawrence Conrotto. He leaves his second wife, Katherine O'Brien Price Conrotto, whom he married in 2008, and Duane's two daughters, Tjiska Elaine and Kimberly Clare. "I was blessed," Conrotto said of his two wives, "with having two remarkable women in my life—and equally blessed with two outstanding granddaughters."

Conrotto earned a degree in anthropology from Stanford University after which he began a 17-year journalism career in Southern California. He was editor of the Antelope Valley Press, Desert Magazine, and the Palm Desert Post. While at Desert, he earned a California State Fair Gold Medal in Journalism. He was a former president of the Palm Desert Chamber of Commerce.

The Conrottos left the desert in 1967 and purchased Shady Oaks Ranch in Sonora. He earned a master's degree in English at Stanislaus State University, and taught at Oakdale High School from 1972 to 1992. He was chairman of the English Department there, and introduced Advanced Placement and GATE to the school.

He is the author of numerous magazine articles and several books, including *Lost Desert Bonanzas*, *Miwok Means People*, *Avanti America*, *Lost Gold* and

Silver Mines of the Southwest, Classroom Management for the Subversive English Teacher, and Delmonico's Game Recipes.

A life-long agnostic, Conrotto's **HEROES** included his uncle Federico Pastorino, a World War I hero turned anarchist; Galileo Galilei, who proclaimed the true student does not seek the "truth," but challenges it; the antitrinitarian Michael Servetus, burned at the stake by Calvin; the Renaissance man and Nobel physicist Richard Feynman; William Saroyan, the author of *My Name is Aram*—the book whose perfect prose and ethnic California theme awakened in the young Conrotto the transformational power of literature; Miriam Coleman, the high school English teacher who "began the process of civilizing me"; the philosopher David Hume for his argument from miracles; and his brother, Richard, who lived Kurt Vonnegut's philosophy that "we are put on earth to fart around."

Conrotto's **FAVORITES** included: Opera: *La Boheme*; Symphonic work: *Daphnis et Chloe*; Novel: War and Peace; Art Movement: Impressionism; Foreign City: Rome; Dessert: apricot pie; World War II Battle: Midway; Wild Animal: desert tortoise; Movie: Room With a View; Actor: Leo Gorcey; Actress: Dame May Whitty; Parent: (tie) Mother, Father; Pet: Tronka, a German Shepherd-Lab mix; Poets: Whitman and Dickinson, poets of the macrocosm and microcosm, respectively; Cowboy Actor: Buck Jones; President: Franklin Roosevelt; Cousin: Peter Giretti; Color: orange; Boyhood Chum: Frankie Arena; Flower: carnation; Heroes: Dude and Barbara Angius for their devotion to a stricken son.

Conrotto said after 80 years of searching, he discovered the secret of life: "Breathe in, breathe out, repeat." And happiness, he contended, was "Having a job to which one looked forward going to every morning."

Conrotto's ashes will be inurned at the Gavilan Hills Cemetery in Gilroy. It is his wish that instead of flowers, an act of kindness be made to a worthy stranger in his behalf (or, if the florist seems in need, go ahead and buy the flowers).

Eugene L. Conrotto / Funeral Oration

Thank you for being with me for the last time, at least in this dimension. Death should be viewed with dignity and a great sense of adventure. I also think a bit of levity helps balance things out because life is essentially tragic—look at my present situation. Every time I went to a funeral—and by reason of my years, I have been to many—if it was a Catholic service, then it was all about Jesus; if Protestant, the theme was to build up the church with cash donations; if Buddhist, I was always reminded of the movie, “A Bridge Too Far,” but here it was always “A gong too far.” We can only speak from the grave with what we write. This funeral will be about me because I wrote this script.

I always felt some sort of relief at funerals because the grave yawned and someone else fell into it. But, alas, now it is my turn. So please bear with me. This will not take long.

I am an economic egalitarian, a skeptic, a romantic, an agnostic, an anti-status quo-ist, a lover of the ironic and absurd, a meritarian, a futurist, a contrarian—my credo is: “If someone denies it, assert it; if someone asserts it, deny it.” Not a very good formula for making friends and influencing people. Incidentally, I believe friends are a good thing to have, but I always told my students that if they wanted to get ahead, they should dump their friends and make newer, better ones.

I had a blessed life. I was raised in a family that valued humor, work, music, and good food. Like a phoenix I rose out of the ashes of a decaying, disintegrating neighborhood. I did not realize then the affirmative benefits of living in three rooms behind a barber shop and bar in South Monterey Street—between the white anglo world and Gilroy’s Chinatown—a crumbling neighborhood invaded first by Okies and the smell of cheap cuts of pork sizzling in fat, and then Mexicans....

I was ashamed of my “home.” I remember the distress I felt when my high school Spanish teacher, a young WASP, assigned a paper to be presented orally on a description of one’s home. Everyone knew my home did not have a lawn, a picket fence, an ivy-covered porch. I was in Gilroy’s social basement.

But, deep down I knew better. I was a member of a well-regarded extended family. I was mentally quicker than my school mates; I knew more; I had been exposed to more. We subscribed to three newspapers. The radio was either on a news channel or the Texaco Opera. We had maps on the barber shop wall.

I early fell in love with the power of books to “create a new world into which I was drawn and wherein I seemed to live with the illusion that I was seeing life steadily and whole.” (I quote from Mortimer Adler’s *How to Read a Book*.) I traded Baby DeCarli, an alley neighbor, a pen knife for the first book I ever owned: Percy Keese Fitzhugh’s *Pee-Wee Harris in Luck*, published in 1922. It is the story of a country kid who meets a couple of vacationing college boys. Pee-Wee’s new friends exude sophistication, the love of adventure, wit, knowledge, but most of all freedom. My circle of acquaintances in Gilroy did not include such people. I determined that I too would go to college. I wanted to say interesting and provocative things. In short, I did not want to die ignorant and trapped.

I hope the following anecdote punctuates my interest in books. During the War, we 7th graders did our part by collecting and bundling discarded newspapers. The paper shed was across from St. Mary’s Church at the north end of town. One afternoon while doing my work, there emerged from the stack of papers a copy of Washington Irving’s *Life of Washington*. Someone was actually throwing away a book! I debated. Should I take the book for my own, or should it be used as intended, to help defeat the Japs. I decided to take the book, thus starting a foundation for my views on patriotism. I hid the book outside the shed in some weeds. After work I peddled my bike home down the entire length of Gilroy’s main drag. After dinner I peddled back to the north end of town, retrieved the book, and returned with my treasure.

Only after I got out in the world did I realize the blessing of living so close to the raw humanity bubbling up around 59 South Monterey Street. My neighborhood was vibrant, alive, passionate, unorthodox, full of surprise, manageable danger, wonder, and no place to go but up. Black sheep drunks from the best families of white Gilroy sat at our bar. Lost souls came and went—we were their friends. Kindly penniless philanthropists. A Cherokee prostitute. The waiter who spent his tips in our slot machine. The scarecrow woman who berated her new companion: “You son of a bitch,” she said. “You told me you were a cabinet maker and I find out you make coffins!” The drunk Mexican whose patient wife sat in the family’s battered car. The lonely bachelor paisanos, Catholics, communists, anarchists, philosophers, connoisseurs, dreamers.

Then there was the soft-spoken anglo who came often with his frail, pretty blonde wife. He would drink a Rainier Ale in silence; she would read the Gilroy Dispatch. Later, in a vacant lot next to the Byers Brothers Ford Agency, he killed her then turned the gun on himself.

I have little patience with parents who think it is a positive thing to hide life’s ugliness from their children, censoring TV shows, using artificial language in the home...this is imposed ignorance.

I feel sorry for my younger kin raised in gated sterile communities, segregated by “tribes.” They cannot but have a “them and us” mentality regarding this world and their place in it.

I was always a good student. I knew that education was the only way to escape the hot agriculture fields, the din and sweat of the F&P Cannery, or the stifling security of being a PGE meter reader. My folks may have been uneducated immigrants, my home a dump—but thanks to free public education I had a milieu in which to shine. I paid attention. I relished learning. I esteemed my teachers who merited respect; I dismissed those who catered to the well-connected, who equated worthless rote learning such as grammar to being respectable. I knew then that a teacher’s greatest attribute was not knowledge

of a particular subject matter or the ability to articulate, even to inspire—but fairness.

I was able to go to college—not just any college, but Stanford University. One pays a steep price for learning: The comfort of certainty is replaced by the distress of doubt. Put another way, Bertrand Russell writes: “The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.”

Certainty, writes Voltaire, is a “ridiculous condition.” “Blind faith,” writes Thomas Huxley, “is the one unpardonable sin.”

One is fortunate to have one incredible woman in one’s life; I had two. I twice married way above my station in life. Two beautiful, intelligent, compassionate, independent, interesting women. Jeanne was the bride of my youth, my life companion; Kathy the great good fortune of my old age. A day did not pass that I blessed them both.

And there is the blessing of my son’s memory, and his two daughters who will propel our DNA into the future.

And I was blessed, also, by having work that was creative and rewarding. Ninety-nine percent of my work life, I woke up each morning looking forward to going to the job. This is my formula for happiness.

Finally, and I promise briefly, I want to touch on a subject that has always intrigued me. Science has steadily pushed back ignorance and superstition, that is, as we gain knowledge of how this world works, we have discarded systems of belief that rely on scripture or so-called sacred writing. The most celebrated example of this is Galileo and his telescope, which replaced earth as the center of creation, with the sun.

Does this mean, then, that one must choose between the two belief systems, science or religion? Between, as it were, the head and the heart? I don’t think so. Listen carefully to Charles Darwin: “I cannot persuade myself that a

beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. On the other hand, I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe, and especially the nature of man, and to conclude that everything is the result of brute force....”

My “on the other hand” are all the people I have known, those in this room, and those of my kin and friends yet unborn.

I think science and religion can co-exist. In fact, reason and religion must rely on one another because they both have the same objective: understanding the great mystery of existence.

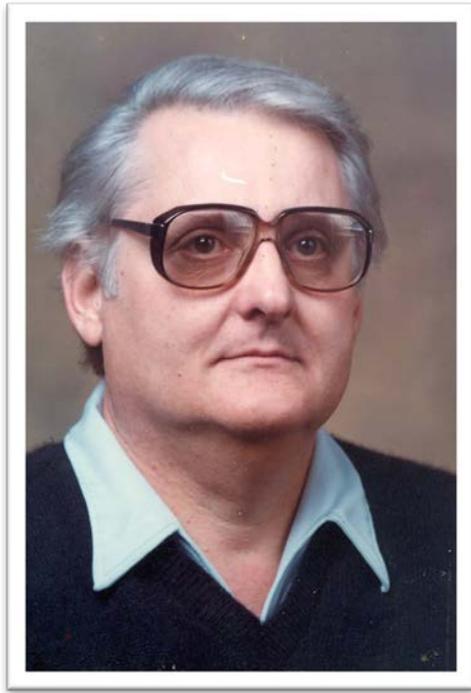
My theology mirrors most closely that of the 16th Century Italian heretic Socinus who declared God is neither omniscient nor omnipotent—God learns and grows as the universe unfolds.

It is difficult to say goodbye. Let me call on Walt Whitman:

*This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done.
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,
Night, sleep, death and the stars.*

And finally to my favorite Whitman quote:

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*



Gene through
the years...

