

Kerry Kennedy: Faith, Family, and Politics

By Catherine Censor

Kerry Kennedy agrees that we're having a "Kennedy year." Seated in a neighborhood coffee house not far from her Bedford home, she nods patiently as I recount recent examples of her family name at the top of the news: The outpouring of support for U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy as he heroically battles brain cancer, the magazine covers commemorating the assassination of her father, Robert F. Kennedy, 40 years ago, and the frequent invocation of the family's political legacy on the presidential campaign trail. She adds, "And in November, the state of New York is renaming the Triborough Bridge the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge."



"Robert F. Kennedy is particularly extraordinary because he never became president and he died 40 years ago. Yet people are still inspired by his life and message of social justice," observes Kerry, who turns 49 this month. She speaks eloquently of his ability to "call forth people's better angels" and his "understanding of people's pain combined with the vision of a greater America," but one senses that no matter how sincere and heartfelt her words, this is familiar turf—a topic she's had to address on countless occasions.

Kerry was just 8 years old when her father was shot, but that event seems to have catalyzed a lifelong search for spiritual meaning and passion for social justice. It was during the California primary in the 1968 presidential race and Kerry, along with siblings Courtney, Michael, and David, was traveling with the campaign. In the preface to her new book, *Being Catholic*

Now: Prominent Americans Talk About Change in the Church and the Quest for Meaning (Crown Publishers, 2008), Kerry writes, "We spent the morning at Disneyland ... The next day, when my parents and David headed off to the Ambassador Hotel to await the results and the much-anticipated victory party, Courtney, Michael, and I were sent off to bed. The following morning, I awoke early and turned on the television to watch Bugs Bunny. A news flash interrupted the cartoon. That's how I learned my father had been shot."

John Glenn, the astronaut and a family friend, came by a few hours later to confirm the bad news. Kerry and her siblings were whisked back to Hickory Hill, the family's Virginia home. Late that night, when her older brother Joe called to say that her father had died, Kerry remembers, "I ran into my room, buried my head in my pillow, and instinctively began to pray. For my father and mother. For our family. And then I remember clearly, praying, 'God, don't let them kill the man who killed Daddy.'" For those who know Kerry, the recollection speaks volumes.

Four decades years later, the faith that sent Kerry to prayer as a young, grief-stricken girl is still a vital part of her identity. A human rights activist and feminist, Kerry has lead delegations to South America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. She established the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights in 1988. She is the chair of the Amnesty International Leadership Council and the author of *Speak Truth to Power: Human Rights Defenders Who Are Changing Our World* (Crown/Random House, 2000). Her new book, published just this month, reflects her profound struggle to reconcile her faith with her commitment to social justice.

But because Kerry Kennedy bears a name fraught with meaning and history, politics is also part of her identity. At what is almost universally acknowledged to be a critical juncture in American history, our fascination with the Kennedys is as potent as ever. We want—no, need—to know what the Kennedys are thinking. Which candidate do they endorse? Does U.S. Sen. Barack Obama really offer, as Caroline Kennedy put it, “the same sense of hope and inspiration,” as her father, John F. Kennedy? Is he “a worthy heir” as Sen. Edward Kennedy proclaimed him to be? Who deserves to lay claim to the Kennedy mantle?



The Kennedys themselves had a spirited debate over these very questions. “There’s nothing our family likes to discuss more than politics,” Kerry acknowledges with a laugh. And although the family is now firmly united behind Obama, the family split allegiances during the primaries. Kerry, along with her siblings Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Kathleen Kennedy Townsend endorsed U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton, while Ted and his son, U.S. Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy of Rhode Island, endorsed Obama.

Kerry breezily denies any hard feelings over the rift. “Everybody is wholeheartedly working and campaigning for Barack Obama, who will be our next president, and I am so thrilled to be working for this man who whenever he speaks about his vision for a better world, causes our spirits to soar,” she says. “I think we’re on the path of creating great change in our country, particularly after the devastation both nationally and internationally of the Bush Administration.” In fact, Kerry is matching her words with deeds. On the same day as our interview, Kerry is headed to a fundraiser for the candidate at Hickory Hill, where her mother still resides.

Ask Kerry why she backed Clinton, however, and you’ll get a quick introduction to the issues that drive her. “I have worked in international human rights for 27 years,” she says. Although her voice stays calm, her intensity builds as she ticks off a list of injustices: “Around the world, one out of every three women is sexually assaulted during her lifetime. In the United States, one out of every five will be sexually assaulted by the time

she's 21. There are 700,000 rapes in the U.S. every year. Women still make 79 cents on the dollar made by men. In many states, women have to pay for birth control while Viagra is covered by insurance. And I'm the mother of three daughters. What we have learned around the world is that to create dramatic change in human rights, health care, development—all the measures of what makes life worthwhile—you have to empower women. And I thought that Hillary Clinton as president of the United States would have empowered women in our country and inspired women around the world.”

At a nearby table, two older gentlemen, who just minutes before had been arguing about politics as if they were panelists on a small-town version of *Crossfire*, have fallen silent, politely eavesdropping on us. Kerry, her face animated by passion, is unmistakably her father's daughter and this small audience has taken notice. If Kerry is aware of their attention, she doesn't show it. She picks at her fruit salad and sips her herbal tea, outwardly oblivious to the attention—but to me, it's palpable, a tiny taste of what it's like to be a Kennedy.

To be a public touchstone is more complex than merely being famous. It carries, I realize, weightier burdens of expectations and assumptions. The endless curiosity, no matter how polite, must be exhausting at times. And Kerry has been the subject of some not-so-polite curiosity. She was divorced from Andrew Cuomo, the attorney general and son of former governor Mario Cuomo, in 2003 after an unhappy marriage. That's all she wants to say about the subject but the tabloids, of course, were not nearly as reticent.

The flesh-and-blood Kerry has a far less risqué existence than the woman depicted in the *New York Post*. Her daily life is built around the schedules of Cara, Mariah, and Michaela, her three middle-school-aged daughters. Human rights activism and writing are sandwiched in between soccer games, basketball tournaments, and bake sales.

Kerry's home is a singularly unpretentious place that looks as though it was put together with comfort and family in mind. Mementoes crowd every wall. Photos and letters from the likes of Bill Clinton and Mahatma Gandhi jostle with pictures of her on her father's lap. Kerry resides comfortably among it all, both active participant and curator of a great American heritage. For her mother's (Ethel Skakel Kennedy) recent birthday, Kerry compiled a book of more than 75 essays and 350 family photos.

Historically, Catholicism has always played an important role in the Kennedys' political and personal lives. During JFK's historic presidential campaign (his election as the first Roman Catholic president was both a milestone and source of pride for many Catholic Americans), some darkly speculated that a Kennedy win would put America in thrall to the Pope in Rome. And while the Kennedys' political positions have often departed from

church doctrine, the family's faith has been a source of comfort and strength through the years. For Kerry, however, the conflict between her faith and her humanism required closer examination.

"I felt that religion was always important to me and I felt torn by the gap between my perception of what Jesus stood for and what I was hearing from some in the hierarchy of the Catholic church," she says. "The pedophilia scandal and the failure to protect victims and demand accountability, homophobia, the issue of women's reproductive rights, condom distribution in the age of AIDS, and end of life issues—these are a few of the areas where the actions of some in power in the church were at odds with mine. I was struggling with balancing being a Catholic and being a human rights defender. So I wanted to take some time to explore the issues and to deepen my spirituality. I decided to speak with Catholics of all different stripes about their faith and ask how they grapple with these issues, how they envision heaven and hell, and what they would do if they were pope. The answers were deep, full of meaning, sometimes funny and wonderfully insightful."



Kerry interviewed a prominent and diverse group for her book—everyone from comedian Dan Akroyd to author and Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Anna Quindlen, author Frank McCourt, and Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick. Did any one of her interviewees strike a special chord? "Cokie Roberts attended the Convent of the Sacred Heart, as I did. She combines the greatest admiration for the nuns with a refreshing dismissiveness towards any silly proclamations by some of the men in the church. Nancy Pelosi was brilliant as always, and said her mother wanted her to be a nun but she wanted to be a priest. Susan Sarandon is very funny. She said, 'I was told at a very young age that I had an overabundance of original sin.' And there were people who surprised me. Politically, I'm so at odds with Andrew Sullivan [a conservative/libertarian political commentator], but he has such extraordinary depth on spirituality issues and was particularly eloquent about his HIV-AIDS. It was interesting to hear why he's a Catholic despite being openly gay."

"It was interesting to contrast his take with Cokie Roberts. She says that when she hears something from the church that's anathema to her values, she just dismisses it. 'They're a bunch of old, white men. I don't pay any attention to them,' she told me. Andrew said, 'I try to go back and research and look at their logic for their stance and take them on with their own arguments. I look at the same books they look at to justify their stance. He also points out that it's a central theme of Catholicism to quest for the truth. Truth is not to be measured by your popularity or your ability to convince others of it.'"

Kerry says that one of the most moving stories she heard came from Irish actor, writer, and producer Gabriel Byrne who, as a child, was sexually abused by a priest. “In the book, he talks about his attempt to resolve that. He ran into the priest who assaulted him at a football match and he decided to contact him. He got him on the phone and felt like a child again. He said he just wanted the priest to like him and couldn’t get himself to say what he had called to say. A few years later, he tried again, only to learn that the priest had died. He wrote an open letter of forgiveness to the priest that ran on the front page of the *Irish Times*, which is like the *New York Times* of Ireland.” After it was published, Kerry says, Byrne waited for a reaction that never came. “No one said a word,” she says, marveling. Gabriel Byrne, Kerry says, is one of the biggest movie stars in Ireland, “yet no one responded. This was the 1980s, and I think you’d get a difference response today but nobody mentioned the article, ever. Gabriel said, ‘After I’d written the piece, I was left with the feeling that I’d stood up in front of the class, said what’d happened to me, and that I was greeted with total silence and then told to sit down.’ ”

That feeling of speaking and being greeted with uncomfortable silence is familiar to Kerry. She had a similar experience of her own when she met Pope Benedict XVI last year. “I was in Rome for a conference on Africa,” she recalls. “There’s an annual conference in Rome for winners of the Nobel Peace Prize and I had been asked to come to the conference to participate on the panel. All of the participants were invited to an audience with the pope. Now, this was not a private audience. On Wednesday morning, the pope meets 300,000 people in St. Peter’s square and on this occasion, I was one of them. When he came by to say hello, I felt that I needed to take that opportunity to speak, just to whisper something in his ear on behalf of people who were suffering and would never have that opportunity. I felt a little hesitant because I also thought that this isn’t, perhaps, the proper time. But it might be my only time. So I said, ‘Your Holiness, in view of the suffering in Africa and on behalf of the 30 million people who are going to die of AIDS by the year 2020, would you reconsider the church’s position on condoms?’ He said, ‘God bless you, my child.’ ”

Was she ashamed? Does she regret the incident? A slight smile forms on Kerry’s face. “That was in November, but by February he had announced that he had formed a committee to look into the use of condoms,” she says. “You just never know when what you say or do makes a difference and why somebody in a position of tremendous power decides to take up an issue. Maybe what I said had something to do with it. But probably not. HIV-AIDS is a major issue for the church which, aside from governments, is the largest provider of social services in the world.” And with that, Kerry gathers up her belongings and heads out the door. On this evening, a presidential candidate is invited to an audience with her family and one can bet that Kerry will once again be speaking her conscience.

Captions: Top: Kerry, holding a proof of her latest book, wears a bronze leather jacket and metallic top by her friend, designer Charles Nolan. Earrings by Judith Ripka courtesy of Neiman Marcus, White Plains; necklace, Kerry’s own; Middle: Blouse, sweater, and skirt by Charles Nolan; earrings by Judith Ripka courtesy of Neiman Marcus, White Plains

Photography: Darryl Estrine

Hair: Katia Glass, Billy's Hair Salon, Mt. Kisco

Makeup: Petra Kotyzova, Salon O, Greenwich

Style: Jené Luciani

Fall and Hair Makeup

We consulted some of the region's most fashion-forward hair and beauty experts for their take on runway-to-reality looks this season.

Matthew Yasgur, co-founder of Static in White Plains, says Victoria Beckham's iconic bob, which was last year's must-have haircut, is still on-trend for the coming season—with a few critical updates. “Of course we'll be deconstructing it, layering it, shattering it, and even turning it into a pixie cut,” he says. “Or we'll simply add bangs to the style to freshen it up.” To complement fall's romantic mood, Yasgur predicts, “Pin-straight hairstyles parted straight down the middle will be all the rage. Think Cher circa 1975. The longer the better, so extensions will play a big part in this trend.” For a “groomed-yet-easy” style, Yasgur likes twists and braids. Need some how-to help? “I love the e-how website for silly stuff like this.” Lastly, Yasgur says, long, curly hair is newly appealing thanks to *Sex and the City*: “Think Sarah Jessica Parker or Catherine Censor [Editor-in-Chief of *The WAG*], whichever you find hotter.”

“Hair color, as always, will revert to cool, neutral tones, but this fall, there will be mixes of warmth left from summer. Blondes are coming back, so blondes, get ready for some bright, sexy color this fall, and brunettes, time for low-lights to mix in deep color to add depth without completely removing the summer warmth. But hair color should not be trendy. It should always be what works for the client's style, vibe, and skin tone.”

Omar Roth, owner of Salon O in Greenwich, says this season's coif is anything but. “Waves are definitely in again. Not necessarily ‘big hair,’ but just hair with some movement.” When it comes to makeup, less is more. “A light shimmer on the brow bone is so elegant without looking overdone.” He advises adding more drama to eyebrows and lips and less to cheeks. “I have struggled with what I call ‘suburban blush.’ [Women in this area] tend to wear too much blush and it's unnecessary.”

Rosemarie Pomilla, former Frederic Fekkai makeup artist and owner of N.Y. Prostyle (www.nyprostyle.com), a makeup studio in Dobbs Ferry, says that fall's jewel-toned fashion dictates a subtler approach to color cosmetics. “This fall, faces will be enhanced with earth tones and subtle shades of gray. Gold will be applied to illuminate facial features, giving interest to a very neutral palette. Dior Impression Cuir eyeshadows will warm up the eyes, while Chanel's Facettes D'or gold loose powder and Gold Light Glossimer will highlight the cheeks and lips.”

Vasken Demirjian, owner of the new, super-chic salon that bears his name at Trump Plaza in White Plains, says fall color calls for rich, translucent, luscious tones. “It is all about changing the playfulness of summer into the sophistication of fall. We will work with carefree summer looks, utilizing the lighter pieces of color, treating them with warmer tones to create a softer, translucent color. By warmer tones, I am referring to butterscotch for blondes, suede for brunettes, and sable for our darkest clients. By and large, we keep in mind the condition of the hair as our most important criteria, giving conditioning treatments to every single color client.” One trend Demirjian would like to see die? Wide stripes of bleached color. “Forget the thick, chunky highlights, you will see more low-lights, corresponding to the above richer tones. Having said all this, we always keep in mind the individual, strive to achieve what suits the person and bring out their best attributes.”

Demirjian says fall's hottest cuts and styles will be “simple but high definition looks” with a European accent. “We have our usual trend seekers, coming from the streets of London, Paris,

and Milan, and all agree that haircuts will be shorter, layered above the shoulder, with sculpted bobs more apparent than ever. My up-do specialist, Aysen, has already changed her up-dos to more of a sophisticated French twist, achieving a slick look. Throughout the New York Fashion week, we saw these super-sophisticated looks. You will also see lots of hair extensions. Our specialists will concentrate on the clip-on version, rather than permanent, giving every woman the option to enjoy long glamorous hair for just one night or a long weekend. We have also increased our range of curling iron sizes, as we believe we will utilize them more than ever.” Demirjian’s final word on the season, however, is that it ultimately doesn’t matter. “Our looks are all about the client,” he says. “Fashion is cyclical, but style is innate and timeless.”