

A Tribute to Papa

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Every day, somewhere in the world, there are deaths that are tragic, due to accident or violence. And every day, there are untimely deaths, resulting from illness or, sometimes, neglect. But I am happy today because my grandfather's death this past Monday was neither of these—it was not tragic, and it was not untimely. His death was simply the passing of a man on to the reward for which he had spent most of his one hundred and three years on this Earth in preparation. So I rejoice in his victory. And I celebrate the life he had on this Earth. And, ladies and gentlemen, what a life it was!

On the last occasion I had to spend Christmas with my granddad, I told him that one of the things I admired most about him was that he had distinguished himself in three separate areas of endeavor: He was a gifted teacher and academician, earning the respect and admiration of countless students and colleagues. He was a talented administrator, with vision, and the ability to persuade others to that vision. And he was able to bring people along with him toward the accomplishment of that vision. But after retiring from academics—and even before then—he made valuable contributions to the United Methodist Church as a lay minister, finally rising to the office of president of the Disciplined Order of Christ. To excel in a single pursuit is commendable; to succeed in two is remarkable. But to achieve distinction in three areas of endeavor is extraordinary, and Papa was, without question, an extraordinary individual.

When you encounter someone who has had such a vast array of accomplishments, it is natural to ask what qualities they have that contributed to their extraordinary success. My granddad was highly intelligent—I would even say brilliant, although if he were here, I am sure that his modesty and humility would force him to deny that. But there are many highly intelligent people in the world, and there are many brilliant people. Yet few can boast the accomplishments that my granddad achieved in his life. So I don't think that it is intelligence alone. There must be other factors that contribute to greatness. Of Papa's

many outstanding qualities, I think I can identify two that were at least partially responsible for his success.

Papa loved people. He loved talking with people, he loved listening to people, and he loved hearing their stories. He made friends easily and quickly. Your presence here is testament to the lives he touched in this community. There was a time when I thought that Papa couldn't find a town in the United States—and this was true for many foreign cities, too—in which he didn't have a friend. He cherished all of those friendships. He was, before it became a business buzzword, the consummate “People Person.”

But the second thing that I think contributed greatly to Papa's success was his marvelous sense of humor. He loved hearing stories, he loved telling stories, and he loved to laugh. He loved to laugh. You simply could not spend any amount of time in the same room with Papa without sharing a laugh with him. I'm sure you all recall amusing stories he told; I remember many. I'll share just one of them with you. I think it's my favorite, but perhaps that's only because it was one of the most recent. I was visiting with him several months after his hundredth birthday, and he was lamenting his failing eyesight and his diminished strength and stamina. He said: “Roger, boy what I wouldn't give to be ninety again!” Such was the wonderful sense of irony and humor he had.

When I received the call on Monday informing me that Papa had died, I was home with my kids, since they were out of school for the celebration of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. I was struck with the thought that there must be some significance to his death on the holiday to celebrate the life of the civil rights champion. I struggled for the connection, and recalled that both my granddad and Reverend King were men with academic credentials; they both had a vision of the way the world should be. They both were gifted speakers—although their styles were different—and could draw others to their vision. They both were men who had an unshakable faith in God. But I was still not satisfied that I had found the link—the unmistakable connection—between my granddad and the Reverend Doctor King. Later that evening, I pulled from the bookshelf Papa's book—his memoir of his years as president of Illinois Wesleyan University. He was

inaugurated as president of IWU when I was three years old, and he retired about the time I entered high school, so most of my childhood memories of my granddad were in that setting. I got to know him when he and my grandmother lived in the president's house. I browsed through his book to reminisce about that time, to look at the pictures of him in his younger years, and I admired his beautiful writing style. And then, it was there. On page fifty-six: A picture of my granddad and Martin Luther King, Jr. The photo was undated, but I presume it was taken in the early nineteen sixties, and the occasion was Dr. King's visit to the IWU campus to address convocation. I learned just last night from Reverend Simms that Dr. King spent several days at my grandparents' house. The connection I was seeking was there before me. Two paths that crossed forty years ago had crossed once again on Monday.

I imagine my grandfather now strolling through the idyllic gardens of eternity, no longer burdened by the body that had grown so frail after one hundred and three years of service to him on Earth, reunited, and hand-in-hand with the woman who shared seventy-eight years of his life as his wife. And I expect that he is naming the genus and species of every single flower, tree, and insect that he sees. And maybe, just maybe, on one of those strolls, he will encounter the Reverend Doctor King—I suppose that you could make a convincing mathematical argument that in eternity, their eventual meeting would be inevitable, and that is just the kind of argument that Papa would enjoy. But supposing that they do meet, I imagine they will shake hands, and remind one another of the time they spent together so many years ago. And perhaps they'll sit to have a chat; Mammo will fetch them a tea. And these two great men will share their memories, and somewhere in that conversation Papa will recall an amusing story, so they can share a laugh. And Mammo will smile politely, and warmly, as she listens to a story she has heard many times before.

God bless you both, Papa and Mammo.