

Great Men - Fine Men

Tribute to My Father on Mother's Day, 1975

My father was not a great man. Great men win renown by the power of their minds or their ability to command influence over the events of other men.

My father was a fine man. Fine men do not wield power but affect others by their quality as human beings. Most great men are not fine men. Few fine men aspire to be great. Rare is the man who commands the power of the great and who displays the integrity and insight of the fine human being. Such men are of the Gods.

My father was not of the Gods.

My father was an example of a fine man among his fellow humans.

What makes a fine man? We have only personal ways to probe at the array. At best we have a clear picture of a partial view. For me, there is one outstanding event for my father: immediately after completing a full professional education to become a professional medical pathologist, he contracted tuberculosis and lay most of four years flat on his back in an Arizona sanitarium. At the end of that time and with nearly no progress in a recovery, the opportunity arose to elect to be the third open chest surgery patient to remove the most infected lobe of his lungs. He went to Chicago, underwent this experimental operation, and the operation was successful! He recovered!

Having reached the bottom of existence, where he aspired only to be able to dig ditches, my father was reborn to life, wife, family and career – all in full measure! But he never forgot where he had come from and the great privilege of life that he enjoyed in being “reborn.” In his subsequent success, he never lost perspective on what was really important: quality relationships and always striving to make a positive personal and professional contribution to the lives of others. No surprise, Dad died last year on the night he retired as Past President Emeritus and Executive Board member of the American Society of Clinical Pathology, the professional organization that he founded with two other distinguished colleagues.

Nearly everyone is committed to life. The difference among men is in whether the commitment is complemented by serious action and motivated by deep and pure sentiments. Men respond to encounters with death with the encrusted drum of indifference, with the dance of superficiality, with the hymnal of religion or with the lyric of life.

My father loved the lyric.

TB [Tom Burns]: the son of the father. TB [Tuberculosis]: the “father” of my father's lyric. Tuberculosis was the abyss, the prolonged threshold. Not like the near car crash, an instant avoided – luckily, and gone. TB shadowed my father for years and made much room for reflection. TB carved in relief the cream of enlightened intention and the milk of responsible process.

Lyrical commitments to life keep always this bold relief before them. The relief always searches out intention, insists on process, and shuns imbalance. After TB, the lyric relief was the guide for my father's life.

There is beauty in a long life that is shaped by the lyric. Death is always formative, always the soil, yet always understood with the chills of intimacy. Death is always fought, always the target, yet familiar and not feared. Those who fear death are those whose life has not been shaped by the lyric, those who have missed the encounter, not known the relief.

Fine men are lyrical human beings.

My father's was a fully lyric life.

Lyrical lives will always be examples to others until there is no death.

It is through fine men that the rest of us can sense this relief, can touch the lyrical.

1975