

The Soapbox

Engaging the culture, changing the world.

March 2005



By Philip W. Eaton | President, Seattle Pacific University

My father died a little over a year ago. I suspect not a day has passed in that year that I have not thought about my dad in some way. A sound or sight here or there, a word, a tone of voice, perhaps a story — something triggers, and I think about my dad, if only for an instant.

Amazing, isn't it, how enduring and indelible the impact of someone else's life on our own? Sometimes that impact can be terribly destructive, of course, sometimes very positive. Most of the time I suspect it is a mix. I know my dad lives on in eternal form, but he lives on as well in me, for better or for worse, in the way I live, in the worldview I carry with me, in the way I treat others.

It's that worldview thing I want to think about in this *Soapbox*. Maybe you and I can think together on how we pass on a worldview to others, what matters in that process, and maybe what doesn't matter. In some ways this process is at the heart of what we do at Seattle Pacific. I'm not sure this is always the goal of higher education these days, but I believe it is critical to the mission of Seattle Pacific.

To give someone a way of seeing the world, a way of thinking about things, some sense of what to hold dear, what to abhor; to provide some big story that makes sense of it all, something that tells us how to live, how to make choices — this is hugely important work.

Recently our family sent out a large number of checks from our folks' estate, the final contributions our dad and mom would make to the Christian organizations they loved so much. We received a letter back from the senior pastor of the church they helped to found and supported so faithfully over the years, and it was clear from that thank-you letter that the current pastor did not know who our dad was.

How can that be, I thought? So many hours and hours in board meetings at the church over some fifty years. So many gifts given with a generous heart, right to the end, and the pastor didn't know him? To be sure this is not the pastor's fault. Naturally, the church has moved on. My dad was no longer important.

But I found myself thinking about what endures in all of our busyness and our commitments. The point is not to stop going to those meetings (although as a child I thought my dad had too many meetings on his various boards) and certainly not to stop sending checks (I say quickly as a Christian university president), but to ask ourselves how we might better leverage our commitments with what really matters.

The summer after our dad died my sister showed up at a family reunion with boxes and boxes of pictures, letters, and stuff our folks had collected over the years. One part of that treasure that fascinated me most was the meticulous notebooks my dad wrote as he studied the Bible. He copied passages, some of which I know he memorized, notes of interpretation, notes from a sermon on something he was studying, reflections on how a text might connect to something particular in his life or to some world event.

OVER

The scriptures were endlessly fascinating to my dad, rich and nuanced, clear and yet mysterious. The scriptures were the framework within which his own life and the whole world could make sense.

That love, that fascination, that centering were all passed on to me as a child after dinner each evening. I feel blessed that we were one of those families that gathered around good food and good conversation most evenings, the place where we learned to tell stories, what had happened during the day, what was going on at school or in the world, what was happening in my dad's business or my mom's many activities. We talked politics and world events and theology. We learned to debate and argue, most of the time with civility, always earnestly.

But after all the lively conversation, my father would reach for the Bible. This was a time to pause. This was the time when there was an intrusion of some bigger story into the swirl of our little stories at the table. This was the time when my dad's voice would change, a voice now full of reverence and respect. Something big and awesome was about to occur — the holy text was about to unfold some new dimension of mystery and beauty, some richness, something totally transcendent, sometimes out of reach of our understanding, and yet profoundly connected to the little stories of our lives.

And what did my dad pass on through his lifelong, intense regard for the scriptures? He gave us a love of beautiful language, to begin with, a recognition that text, especially holy text, was critical to shaping a good life. He gave us a sense that there is a big drama out there, a big picture beyond our own small sphere of understanding, and we had the extraordinary opportunity to engage in that world. He gave us an appreciation for mystery; though life is full of failure and suffering, we can yield quite simply and wholly to the mystery of God's presence in it all. He gave us a moral universe, a moral context for life. In the long run he gave us a vision of hope in the great, sweeping story that God's love and grace through Jesus Christ would transform broken lives and a desperate world.

Sometimes my dad could be tough, unforgiving, inflexible, legalistic. He expected a lot out of himself and others around him. I wished at times he had more grace in his style and his theology, more tenderness in his love, a posture just a bit less demanding. But he gave me something profoundly worthwhile — I guess it is the worldview thing. He participated in shaping my view of the world. Maybe that is what is really lasting out of all he was and all he did.

Maybe if we leveraged all of our meetings and our dollars with something like this as our goal: that we will intensely and intentionally invest in shaping our own view of the world in light of God's big story of hope and love and grace, and then we will invest in passing that view of the world on to others. Maybe this is a truly lasting way to spend our time.

In the 103rd Psalm we come to understand that “the days of mortals are as grass; blossoming like a wild flower in the meadow: a wind passes over, and we are gone, and our place knows us no more.” This is what I felt in the pastor's letter. It is painfully true, to be sure, and it's sort of sad, isn't it? We're not such a big deal after all.

But it seems a wonderful reminder that if we focus our energies on the things that matter, something like passing on a worldview to others, maybe it will all add up to something. I'd love to hear your thoughts on these things.

To view *Soapbox* online visit: www.spu.edu/president.



**Seattle
Pacific
UNIVERSITY**

Engaging the culture,
changing the world.

Office of the President
3307 Third Avenue West
Seattle, Washington 98119
Phone: (206) 281-2111
Fax: (206) 281-2115
www.spu.edu