

Dear Dad,

I am writing you a letter! Yes, really, I am actually writing a letter. I sit here in my study pondering your life, I hear the sounds of your favorite instrument playing in my ears. I hear the spring birds chirping outside and the lilacs you so loved are back again, filling the air with the smell of spring.

I remember as a child you used to read Huck Finn to me just before bed, every night, just like you did for my big brother Jim.

I can remember being carried away to another time and place by your words, and when you would fall asleep I would poke you in the ribs to wake you back up so you could keep reading to me.

Old Huck's wisdom makes sense to me now as I hear his words once again... Huck is you dad, it was you who was escaping back to childhood in these words...

We pick up where Huck is lazily gliding down the Mississippi on his raft. Here Huck is speaking to us:

"... We caught fish and talked, and we took a swim now and then to keep off sleepiness. It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big, still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed -- only a little kind of a low chuckle... Every night we passed towns, some of them away up on black hillsides, nothing but just a shiny bed of lights..."

Unfortunately, poor old Huck could not hold a candle to dad when it came to conversational prowess, come to think of it no one could. To give you an example in April of 1999 my dad and I flew out to Maui to visit my brother Jim in the hospital.

Our flight wound up taking 24 hours so we had lots of time to talk about Jim and a million other things. He was very curious as to the motivation of the horrible Columbine Colorado shootings. He kept saying he thought it was those "damn white supremacists again." After 18 hours he still kept steering back and questioning this event.

That night we slept sitting in the Honolulu airport and the next day he awoke from his chair refreshed and ready to start speculating on Jim's health and life, and of course that white supremacist conspiracy...

Ok I figured, I will go along with his lead, and speculate some more (I thought I had it figured out).

Well we got to Maui and visited with Jim a few times and once visiting hours ended we went for a drive around the island. During our drive our debate began again and after about 3 hours there was a rare silence that had snuck up on us until dad exploded and pounded his fist on the dashboard of the car and exclaimed, "SON OF A BITCH! THAT'S IT! IT'S HITLERS BIRTHDAY!!!"

I was stunned and almost swerved off the road as he woke me wide up from a jet lag induced daze. What the hell was he thinking now, I wondered almost aloud. Then I did wonder out loud, "What do you mean dad, what about it?" I asked.

He said "That's IT! Is those Fuc_ing white supremacists! They brainwashed those kids with hate!"

I rustled in my seat and wondered myself if this was it, after all, this was my dad the icon of wisdom talking, he knows everything. Well sure as sh_t CNN was talking about the possible connection between the shooting rampage and Hitler's birthday when we got back from our drive. It was obvious that CNN was also trying to understand this atrocity. I was proud of dad, he did know everything I thought to myself.

The part that wore me down was he just didn't stop, ever. He just kept speculating about everything, for seventy-five years! On our flight back from Maui he was blasting along with the energy of a spring chicken, wanting to discuss at length everything, anything conceptual and lofty. Finally after 5 straight days with him and literally non-stop conversation, (except for sleep) I capitulated, I had met the master, and I slumped in my airplane seat hoarse from talking, my brain was tired, fatigued. When I told him I was exhausted from talking he kind of chuckled and smiled like he had heard this before and gave me quarter to regain my strength for the next round.

It was then he told me of the marathon conversations he used to have with his college buddies Mark Kennedy and Bob Reinders (two household names that have become institutions in my world). Conversations that have basically been going via mail and verbally on non-stop for over 50 years. I wonder if that would qualify for the Guinness book of world records?

Dad, I want to know how you kept that fresh and vibrant boyish wonder, that curiosity at things in the world for so long. You were so naive and innocent, never believing people could be bad (except Hitler and Stalin, and Nixon of course) and yet so wise. That I think was your secret, keep an open mind but believe what you believe.

Back to Huck Finn... Dad I understand you were effectively an orphan as a child. After your passing from this life your childhood friend Julius Walker told us a little about your upbringing. Here is a reprint of it:

"Elwin Humphries Powell"

Ed and I grew up on the bald plains of the Texas Panhandle. He was a year or so older and while this made a difference when we were small, by the time we went off to WWII, the differences were erased. Ed's childhood was different from most of us, his mother was dead and his father was gone. His uncle was in the merchant marine and showed up from time to time.

Ed lived in a bunkhouse in his brother-in-law's back yard. It was neither well insulated nor well heated and Ed didn't seem welcome in the house, at least by his brother-in-law. However, he had a more or less normal bringing-up (paper route, boy scouts, small town intrigues, etc. – if that is 'normal') at least to the time he left for the Navy.

After the war he enrolled at Texas University with the thought of going to medical school. But he soon found Sociology and fell in love with it.

We roomed together in Breckenridge Dorm then later rented a ten-room house with six others. Our largest investment was for a used twelve cubic foot refrigerator. We kept it well stocked with Lone Star Beer which was the fuel for many all night sessions. Frequently he and I took long walks late at night or early in the mornings in Austin's beautiful artificial moonlight. Those were innocent days. We would stroll through the Capital in the wee hours discussing God's existence, Texas politics, problems confronting the laborers of the world and myriad other ponderables.

At times Ed cooked for the house. He had a set fee for his meals which usually were quite good, particularly if one had a taste for cooking oils. Once something went wrong with his cornbread. Although it was beautiful, it was hard as a brick. One of the guys chipped a hole in the corner and hung it in the living room.

All this was the picture of a fellow who was hard working, scholarly, pensive and amiable. Beyond this he was religious. But like Will Rogers who belonged to no organized political party – he was a Democrat. Ed belonged to no church group – yet he lived the life of a Christian.

In our many religious discussions he struggled mightily with the idea of God. Belief was not so difficult for me but I understood Ed's problems with the concept. Nevertheless, he lived a life of respect and love for his fellow man. Actually, his regard for others was the hallmark of Ed's life. While he never seemed to take himself too seriously, and was quick to deflate others when egos were on the rise, let a situation occur in which injustice threatened and Ed was ready to do battle. Maybe less in a physical sense than morally, through demonstrations, marches, placards, letters, etc.

...He was of a size and had an exterior which could make anyone think twice about challenging him. One weekend, when we were living in the big house, Ed and several of the guys drove down to Mexico. I've forgotten the destination but they ended up in a town where the actor Anthony Quinn was shooting a movie. The Texas party found itself in a bar late one evening when the movie clique came in. To his great chagrin, Ed turned and bumped rather solidly into the leading lady, who lost her balance and tumbled. Quinn was on his feet in a second reaching for Ed. After he got a good look at him he seemed more ready to accept Ed's apology..."

Thank you Julius for your insights...

Over the years dad stuffed his head full of knowledge and information, and with his friends churned it into wisdom and understanding through countless hours of talk.

He earned his Ph.d from Tulane before he was 30 and was ready to take on the world, to seek justice and argue injustice to death.

In the mid-1950's he met and married our mom, Juanita and eventually he found his way to Buffalo in 1958, where he accepted a teaching position at UB.

He had done it, he had created the perfect little nuclear family. 2.5 children a nice home and a dog. Every thing was normal, for a while at least.

Then 1966 this idyllic little nuclear family had a meltdown, with dad stuck at ground zero, again. By the end of 1972 the meltdown was completed when our mom had died leaving dad alone, to care for us.

But he was strong, real strong. He burned with the fires of ideological passion and love for Jim and I.

Faced with this loneliness and in need of help with his two kids he came up with an idea... He needed a live in nanny for us kids, that would do it... and he filled the house with a group of revolution-crazed ideologues called hippies. It was the perfect plan, they get free room and some board, in exchange for taking care of the boys. It can't fail! Well most of you know the rest of that story. What an awesome time!

The 1960's,70's and even 80's were action packed years for dad. He produced a mountain of writings and letters and articles and attended countless demonstrations, all in an effort to ferment revolution.

Was he a communist in the 60's someone recently asked me? I easily replied, hell no! It was simple, if he thought Marx was right he would have joined the party and flown the red flag proudly in front of our house. The FBI agents permanently stationed outside our house would have known right away. In fact, his FBI dossier documents his efforts to stop the Marxists from taking over SANE a group that he fathered. He was no communist.

In fact, he was the truest of all Americans, a Jeffersonian democrat inspired by Paine and Locke, Plato and Socrates. He knew the power HAD TO BE WITH THE PEOPLE, there was no other way.

Nonetheless he ruffled some feathers in the "state" and pushed some of their buttons, hard.

When I was 9 I gave him a card for fathers day that said: "Get to know yourself, call your local FBI office." And I even listed the phone number on the card.

Finally with the help of a former student turned powerful lawyer he did call the FBI. At first they were not forthcoming with any information, despite this new Freedom of Information Act.

Then hesitantly, reluctantly they gave it up. Over 30,000 pages of information according to someone's recent account. And they had take the great pains to go through every page and cross off the names of the informants that had contributed to this great work. Some had even lived at the house with us.

He was aghast and incensed when he read the conclusion of the summary report of the file when they decided he was "actually a pretty nice guy" and was not a terrorist threat. He always preferred non-violent revolution.

Eventually the passions of the 60's melted away and people moved on. And eventually, Jim and I grew up and moved out. For years he kept roommates in the house for company, but inside I think he was lonely.

He had spent his life studying and searching for community. More specifically, family and familial love, something denied him as a child.

It was in the mid-1990's when his prayers were answered and he was married to Karen. It was with her in his final years he had found what he had always sought, a mother's love and the love of her companionship, and caring and, most important, family belonging. I am glad he got to experience that.

Those are the events of his life but who was he really...

I think he was a man, just a man, and he was keenly aware of that fact. He was modest and blushing, a bear when it came to politics and a teddy-bear when it came to caring and nurturing others.

After he died he left us a quote to ponder, and ponder we did. It goes like this:

"...Nothing that is worth doing can be accomplished in your lifetime; therefore you will have to be saved by hope.

Nothing that is beautiful will make sense in the immediate instance; therefore you must be saved by faith.

Nothing that is worth doing can be done alone, but has to be done with others; Therefore you must be saved by love."

-Reinhold Niebuhr as (illegible) by Edward Dewey, Cycles, 1973,p201

A day or so later after mulling this riddle I repeated it to a close friend who instantly understood its significance. And it all became perfectly clear to me.

My friend said, "of course not, no good work can be completed in a lifetime because every good work you do, touches someone else and that is a lifetime in itself."

He then told me he had painted a Buddha the day before and he had burned dad's name in the back of the frame, and he added a quote from his book "Design of Discord."

It reads like this:

"...I am part of all those who have touched my life."

It was then that I understood my father's life's work. It wasn't scholarship, ideology, or writing books. It was living the life of a true Christian or Buddha. He lived selflessly to help others, and that he did a lot of.

I leave you with the following passages from the King James Bible. A passage that reminds me of his time here.

"Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away."

-Corinthians 13:8

And I found another passage marked in his personal copy of the King James with one of his famous index cards and 3:16 marked in red flair marker, as if left for someone to read on this day for him.

"And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him perfect soundness in the presence of you all."

-Acts 3:16

You were a great father and my best friend.

Thank you dad, for everything.

Love, SP