

My Father's Dreams

BY DOUGLAS W. KMIEC

My father dreamed—even when he was not asleep. Scarcely a world problem went unresolved in my father's dreams, and there was scarcely a powerful political figure or captain of industry whom my father did not readily let in on his dreams through ample, handwritten messages.

These dreams, as my father dreamed them, created jobs, reduced global warming, delivered health care to the poor and the elderly and made substantial headway on a cure for cancer—all before lunch. Sadly, it turns out the cancer cure still needs work. But until that illness ravaged his physical strength, my father communicated his dreams freely, expecting neither credit nor recognition. In fact, few of his dreams were even acknowledged.

Neither Bill Clinton nor the Bushes nor George Steinbrenner ever referred to my father's counsel. My father greatly admired the philanthropic and disaster relief work of Bill Clinton as an ex-president. But married to Mom for 60 years, he was troubled and saddened by President Clinton's "fooling around," as Dad put it. Nevertheless, as far as the world knew, President Clinton decided to give greater honor to his marital vows all on his own, even without Dad's note to him urging fidelity and circumspection. Was it Walter Mitty braggadocio for Dad to take personal satisfaction in watching

the president "straighten out his act"? Maybe to some, but Dad's advice was seldom just a repetition of the prevailing headline. From the beginning, Dad

menting in a personal essay about continuing military commitments, I will let you draw your own inferences about what Dad had to say. These



thought the president deserved a private conversation with his pastor, not public impeachment. Dad reached this conclusion long before much of the nation—and later the special prosecutor himself—had second thoughts about what many now see as a mistaken use of prosecutorial authority.

Dad wrote the Bushes a lot. Because ambassadors must avoid com-

were one-way conversations.

Putting to one side whether Dad should get footnote credit for much of recent world history, I found his life to be an invaluable lesson in political participation. Especially salutary was his firm belief that in our democracy it is up to the regular guy—not just David Brooks or Mark Shields or even Glenn Beck or Bill O'Reilly—to demonstrate

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an appreciation for freedom of speech.

Dad did not dream only politically, either. With the skin-flinty corporate owners of the Cubs keeping Chicago out of World Series since well before his birth, my father seldom hesitated to let George Steinbrenner know how his checkbook was “ruining the *game*” of baseball. Steinbrenner didn’t take the hint—if one can call a letter in all caps, pressed hard on school notebook paper a hint.

Most famous personages would ignore my father’s dreams. Sometimes the lack of response would perturb him. After Mom passed away five years ago, Dad felt even more intensely the loneliness and separation shared by millions of the elderly who had followed the sun, far from their children and grandchildren, in Buffalo, Philly, Detroit, St. Louis and other rustbelt cities. Life for young families today is two-income busy, and any time left to share dreams with seniors is but a truncated add-on to Disneyworld or Busch Gardens or Christmas visits sandwiched into the lines of holiday travel.

Dad did discover, however, a way to open the minds of others to his dreams. By sending \$5 or \$10 to a growing list of charities, he shared widely not only his dreams, but his poetry, songs and inspirational prayers. In return, gratitude, for the money at least, would flow in abundance to his numbered mailbox at the trailer park where he lived. Bulk mail would overtax the “mail lady,” for whom my father made dutiful expressions of empathy. Mother Nature appeared to follow Dad’s lead, matching his philanthropy for disaster victims with an increased frequency of earthquakes, tsunamis and airport-closing volcanoes.

Often my father cleaned out his closets—removing baseball caps, shirts and years of accumulated Father’s Day stuff he was too nice to say didn’t fit. Driving into his neighborhood, one would encounter many poor children



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and their parents wearing his Ralph Lauren shirts with their tattered jeans, not to mention a disproportionate number of Notre Dame and Cubs' fans, to judge by the caps.

My father was a lifelong Democrat, the workingman's party, and he thought highly of President Obama's experience as a community organizer. "Tell the president," Dad would insist (as if Barack and I ate breakfast together every morning), "that he needs to direct every dime he can to jobs."

My father understood intimately the dignity of work and the indignity of foreclosure. Vivid in his memory was the sight of his own mother pleading with the sheriff, during a notorious Chicago thunderstorm, not to toss the family's furniture and the six Kmiec children into the street. That was after the crash of 1929. In a brief autobiog-

raphy inspired by Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*, my father described how his "mother was crying so hard," he couldn't "differentiate her tears from the driving rain and her sobs from the relentless thunder."

Until the financial collapse of September 2008, many smugly assumed that nothing like the Great Depression could happen again. We know better now, though the present economic pain has been more unevenly felt than it was in the 1930s, when 10 million were put out of work.

In a similar way, this generation's experience with military matters is more ambivalent in light of the attacks on Sept. 11 and the tragically executed Iraq war. An all-volunteer force immunizes many from the costs of war and that may plague us with an insufficient strategic assessment. By contrast, my

father's generation faced military service as an "enlist or be drafted" proposition. After he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces, the B-17 Flying Fortress bomber made real Dad's heroic dreams as he played his part in the unambiguous good of stopping the Holocaust. The military also gave him three squares at a time when he was just plain hungry.

It is less clear that fighting the shadowy, highly mobile, not easily understood Al Qaeda conveys a comparably noble feeling. It should, so long as it shares with my father's military service the need for vigilance against the common enemies of all good dreams—ethnic or racial hatred, poverty and the pernicious misuse of religion to slaughter the innocent in the name of God.

The name Kmiec is of Polish origin, and the small farming village from which my father's father emigrated is not far from Oswiecim (Auschwitz). My father knew what a genuine war crime looked like, whether perpetrated near his ancestral home or in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania by 19 men in possession of commandeered jets and lacking respect for the sanctity of human life.

My father died a few weeks ago in home hospice care in Florida. To both his sons at his side the Father's Day lesson is inescapable: As we check our voice mails, BlackBerries and inboxes, let us not be too busy to notice all those who, like my father, freely give of their dreams. By the Cross and Resurrection, Christ offers us a vision of unconditional love. The dreams of men are frequently their Christ-like offers of love. We can't lose in taking them up. Why? Listen to my father's voice, now fallen silent but forever clearly heard by the family and friends who took the time to share his dreams: "because we have faith, courage and enthusiasm."

With those qualities, Dad, we are confident your dreams of eternity are being fulfilled. **A**



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