

A Tribute to My Father, Richard Morton Hess

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People think of my dad as quiet. If you were patient, and got to know him you would find that he was insightful and articulate. But, dad definitely was not one for idle chatter. My dad spoke with his actions.

I'd also like to suggest that my dad spoke a different language than most, and in that language he spoke forcefully and often. My dad was a craftsman, and he spoke the language of many great craftsmen before him. That language is based on a deep knowledge of the material being formed, expertise with the tool being used to form it, and the aesthetics of the end result.

In the language of the craftsman, fashion is not important—the timeless qualities of the material and classic principles of design trump trendiness and fads. The craftsman finds beauty in the grain of the wood, the pattern in a stone, the strength of metal, simple rules of proportion in design.

Dad knew that his jewelry was not always fashionable and the girls might wear it more often if it were. No matter to him. He communicated his love for family members through his creations for them. That was his language. If you appreciated craftsmanship, he would speak to you more.

The craftsman passes on knowledge to others through his work and through apprenticeship (in other words watching and helping the craftsman work). Examples and action count, talk does not. During the past several days a number of people have gone out of their way to tell me how important their apprenticeship with my dad was to them. Certainly that apprenticeship was formative to my siblings and me.

The student comes to understand the language of the craftsman at a far deeper level. Beyond mere appreciation, the student learns the feel of the tool as it cuts or tightens, the response of the material as it is worked, the satisfaction of creation. Craftsmanship requires discipline, no hurried short cuts. The craftsman becomes the master of the materials.

As we learned the language of the craftsman, we found that collaborating with my father on a project could be a joy. With no words being exchanged, we intuitively knew when to push, when to pull—when to lift and when to lower. Two people working as one—it was perfection.

We learned the incredible satisfaction of creating something new from nothing more than an idea in your head, resourcefully taking the materials at hand and using the tools at your disposal to build something never before seen.

We learned that creation is its own reward. Accolades are nice, but at the end of the day they are unimportant compared to the internal satisfaction of a task well done. Dad always did things for the right reasons, never for self-promotion.

Of course, we learned more than craftsmanship from my dad.

We learned that the other guy might be a little smarter, or might have better resources, but if you worked harder and longer, you would win. Dad had many little sayings to reinforce this to his kids, such as:

- “No job too big, no job too small.”
- “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”
- “Someone has to turn the lights on.”

We learned about taking the initiative, setting objectives, and meeting them. Life is all about making the most of your opportunities. Dad started with few. Raised in an orphanage, he even wondered if his parents loved him. Dad’s response was to volunteer for the toughest jobs. He knew that is where opportunity could be found. He volunteered to be a paratrooper (the first ones into enemy fire), and then having achieved that objective he volunteered to carry the Browning Automatic Rifle or BAR, a heavy, lethal weapon that made you the first one to be shot at. And he was shot at, barely escaping with his life, and requiring 9 months in the hospital. During his engineering career, he always wanted the most challenging assignment, because those assignments were where he could be most creative. Dad had absolutely no respect, none whatsoever, for those who looked for handouts or took the easy path.

It was interesting that in dad’s acceptance speech for his induction into the Packard Electric Excellence Hall of Fame he recalled this advice from his new employee orientation in 1949, “If you think small—you will do small things in life. If you think big—you will do big things in life.” Dad set big objectives throughout his life and met them.

We learned to think and plan for the long term. My dad planted thousands of trees over his life, raising walnuts and maples from seeds and evergreens from seedlings. If you were here yesterday you saw pictures of dad’s property and how it changed over the years. It started as a field; now it’s a forest. Someone who plants trees has a long-term view of life and understands that a small effort applied over a long period of time produces major changes.

We learned that a person’s position was unimportant; it is what a person does that counts. Actions. Dad had a quintessential and *deeply American* belief in meritocracy. Did an individual make a difference in others lives, or were they simply warming a chair? Dad was quiet in public, but among his friends and family, he was not afraid to voice his opinion about a slacker or self-promoter.

And, the last thing that we learned from my dad, was that even someone who has unstoppable initiative, the spark of creativity, and boundless energy...even a man

who does everything for the right reasons, a man who helps others who want to help themselves, **a great man**...will one day run out of gas. "Time and chance happeneth to them all." As my dad declined over the past two years, he wasn't able to create and build. He lost his capability for independent action. For him, it was like slowly losing his voice. He could no longer express the language of the craftsman, and it frustrated him to the core. We are thankful that he is now at peace, and his wonderful spirit can thrive once again in all of us.