

Memorial Service
for
Malcolm R. Sutherland, Jr.
December 6th, 2003

A Son's Reflections

It has been said that the apple falls not far from the tree. In some respects, that may be true in my case. But my father's professional demeanor and grace at a time of personal suffering may not have been genetically transferred to me in full. So, I ask for your indulgence for a moment or two.

On behalf of our family, I wish to thank Wendy and Carl for orchestrating the arrangements as Malcolm wished. I want to thank Star, Ray and the choir for the music he requested. I want to thank all of you here for your attendance and warm participation at this service, as we remember and celebrate Malcolm's full and rich life.

In his multiple professional capacities, Malcolm has, in various ways, touched and positively affected the lives of many of us here, and many more of whom we may not be aware. You may have known Malcolm as your parish minister, or as an active resident of your community, or as a close and cherished friend and confidant. He, along with my mother, Mary Anne, always seemed to be able to encourage people to feel a part of their family, which you may have experienced. It is from this family reference that I reflect on his relationship with me, through his words and deeds. You may find similarities with your own connection to him.

In the personal art gallery of our individual lives, each of us holds a portrait of Malcolm. No two are alike and no one portrait can reveal all that Malcolm was and is. But be assured that each portrait has an integrity of its own. These portraits may include colors that reflect a devoted husband, father, grandfather, friend; a theologian with international positions in the arenas of theology and science, religious freedom, world peace and social justice; a consummate parish minister, guiding your religious convictions each Sunday morning; an accomplished academician; an educator of ministers; an avid Down East sailor; a teacher of liturgics and homiletics; a jazz / classical pianist. Your portraits may even reflect how he pursued his profession diligently, made choices more wise than foolish, how he was focused and tried to be reliable and honest, how he took seriously the tenants of his religious and moral up-bringing.

The brush strokes of my personal picture of him, include those activities that we, as a family, shared, in Malcolm's role as a social reform activist: driving cross-country in woody station-wagon, to Mexico, ultimately Yucatan and Cuba, building an adobe tuberculosis sanitarium; learning to ride horseback during summer camps in Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado, while he assisted Navajo tribes in dealing with the Bureau of Indian Affairs; swimming in water holes and catching tadpoles at his summer service committee work camps in New Hampshire and Vermont; watching him march with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama; experiencing other cultures, as he brought students from all over the world to live in our house – your portrait may include Vietnamese refugees here in Harvard.

But these glimpses only prepare us for what I saw as the central quality of his life. The core of Malcolm's character was that he was a gentleman – a gentle man, sensitive, caring, generous, wise. In a world proven harsh, we need more gentle men. And surely Malcolm has shown us how to be one.

A little over a year ago - here - in this church - Malcolm reminded us that saying goodbye is not all bad. That what would be bad is our having never said hello. That what would be bad is having never shared and celebrated those marvelously happy moments of our lives, or not having been supportive and reassuring during moments of distress and pain.

Malcolm once wrote that “life is rendered worthless through worthless living,” and this is why death hurts us so much. Because, in its shadow, our lives seem pale, our objectives trite, our goals petty. On his passing, Malcolm asks us to support the causes he championed, to assume the burdens he carried, to cherish the qualities he reflected. If you think these are what made Malcolm’s life significant for you, so yours can be for someone else.

In his own reflections, Malcolm said “The underlying characteristic of my life is the perception of life as a gift, and thus an acceptance of a personal indebtedness which requires repayment.” When a life is so fully lived as his, and so generously shared, surrounded by family and friends, Malcolm saw that “death comes as a strain of music whose triumphant harmonies elevate us to a new devotion to our own tasks and our own commitments.”

Malcolm wrote that one of his tasks in life was to “achieve a quality of personal life and interpersonal relationships that merit characterization as loving, trusting, beautifying, which finally endows the human enterprise with meaning and joy.” Those of us who were fortunate to know him, to love him, and be loved by him, can attest that his life shown brightly as a daily reminder of this accomplishment.

He may have been Malcolm to you, he was always Dad to me. For me, a dad is someone who gives you the tools you need to build your life, and the knowledge to use them successfully. As he passed on what he learned from his own experiences, he gave these to me. Maybe he gave them to you as well.

A dad is someone who gives you the encouragement to overcome obstacles. Watching him wrestle through the challenges of southern racism, southwest ethnic persecution, and the lack of economic opportunities for the under-privileged in Virginia and Chicago, I, for one, am grateful he gave that encouragement to me. Maybe you have felt something similar.

A dad is someone who gives you the confidence to take pride in a job well done. His drive for world peace and social justice by establishing lasting, personal and productive relationships with the likes of Dana Greeley, Jimmy Carter, Martin Luther King, and Pope John, has shown me the positive affects of his accomplishments. Hopefully, you have felt his confidence rub off on you.

A dad is someone who gives you a living model of excellence to follow. He certainly provided that to me. Maybe he gave you this model as well.

As Mary Lee Hall so eloquently said –

If I should die and leave you here a while,
be not like others sore undone,
who keep long vigil by the silent dust.
For my sake turn again to life and smile,
Nerving thy heart and trembling hand
To do something to comfort other hearts than thine.
Complete these dear unfinished tasks of mine
And I perchance may therein comfort you.

It takes a special kind of man to set a course in life and follow through no matter what the obstacles. It takes a special kind of man to aim for the best, to be the best, and to pursue his goals with passion and enthusiasm. It takes a special kind of man, whose faith inspires faith, whose determination leads to admiration, whose perseverance always makes him a winner. Dad was that special kind of man for me. I trust Malcolm was that kind of person for you.