

W.C. Kirkendall's Eulogy of Walter Murray Kirkendall

Delivered during funeral of Walter M. Kirkendall

July 17, 1991

Saint Michael's Catholic Church

Houston, Texas

Thank each of you for attending and for your thoughts and prayers. I can't tell you what a comfort this has been to my mother and our family during this all too sudden travail. After the service all of you are invited across the street from the church here for a gathering. Please join us.

My brother Tom and I want to share with you some remembrances and thoughts from the family about Dad and his life.

We are comforted in a sense in knowing that life goes on -- birth and death are the eternal cycle from which none of us are immune. Dad died in the Chicago-area while there to attend my cousin Sarah's wedding. As my brother Jim mentioned, that really is a beautiful symmetry.

But although this is the natural course of things that Dad too should pass from this temporary existence, it is not only fitting but necessary that we pause to reflect on the life of this truly remarkable man.

I've heard many wonderful anecdotes from many wonderful people this week about Dad, his foibles, his passions, his humor - but anecdotes aren't adequate to tell the full measure of this man. Very few people can honestly say that their father was the best person they ever knew but I believe Walter's kids can.

When I think of Dad, the foremost attribute I remember - the underpinning of all the others we will mention - was his integrity. Somebody called him "the last truly honest man" and in many ways he was.

He didn't lie

He wasn't obfuscatory

He was rarely disingenuous unless absolutely necessary to win an argument at the dinner table when he had taken a clearly untenable position simply for the sake of argument.

He was totally honest about everything - except, of course, golf, about which he was an incurable optimist. My cousin Joe said that the night before he died, Dad was trying to find a driving range to practice on. Totally unrealistically, he believed the next swing might be the perfect one.

Dad once told me that "an honest man never minds having his change counted." He lived by that bromide - in fact, I suspect no one ever made change for him that he did not count. Quintessentially fair, though, he expected his to be counted as well.

He never sought an unfair or unearned advantage in any situation in his professional or personal life---although some of his golfing friends might dispute that after being subjected to his 1st tee soliloquies. One friend of mine, a notoriously parsimonious dentist in Seguin, played once with my dad several years ago with a new friendly wagering game Dad was promoting, called "Wolf". When the game was over and the wagers computed, my friend had shot about an 80 and Dad shot his usual 105-110 — and my friend owed Dad about \$30.

Thereafter this friend wanted to know whenever Dad came to town -- so he could be gone.

In addition to the sense of fairness (or possibly because of it) he had the rare habit of expecting the best from people because he expected people to act as he did.

But he understood one truism of life--you can never be happy with other people if you hold them to the same standards you hold yourself.

Quite possibly some former students or residents would dispute that but you must remember his altruism--the people he was concerned with while teaching were not so much his pupils as their future patients.

He would demand excellence but no more than a person was capable of. Because of these attributes he could extract that which was good from everyone he encountered and promote their continued excellence.

He could be understanding and forgiving, with time, and, unlike many at his level of achievement, adaptable.

That is not to say he was passive or never angry or frustrated but he got over it, put it in perspective and his belief in people allowed him a remarkable resilience and persistence. Which, of course, is the major reason he survived in the politics of academic medicine--surely the most labyrinthine since the court of Louis XIV.

A true egalitarian, he never met a person from whom he couldn't learn something. He could as easily have a good time speaking to the gas station attendant as to a judge or university president. Being in politics and elective office myself, I pride myself on that quality but Dad outstripped us all because he noticed people. He could joke with them or share a frustration with them. He had many, many patients

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from very different walks of life with whom he remained close because they had made that "connection" he was so good at making. Naturally and incurably curious, Dad regarded each person as a resource.

He had no personal pretensions of any kind. When the young kids would visit his office, we would wonder why everyone else's office was so neat, no piles of articles, no notes pinned to wall, no boxes piled up in the corner. The fact is that Dad didn't care a whit what his work area looked like as long as he knew where everything was and he could work in relative peace and efficiency.

Service to people and to the community was one of the most important attributes he preached to us. When we wrote his obituary, it was amazing how often the word serve or service had to be used:

he served in the army;
he served as a teacher;
he served as a doctor;
he served as a consultant;
he served on numerous boards and committees;

and all without regard to compensation. That is not to say he didn't enjoy it when he got compensation but it was never the primary reason. His goal, his primary goal, was to be productive (which was possibly his favorite word in the English language) and to leave the world a better place.

He knew that the only way for the world to work is for everyone to make the best contribution possible--and he did, every single day of his life.

But the defining aspect of his life will always be his family. He told me once that he always knew that his greatest joys and his greatest sorrows would be in his family. He got his priorities right very early.

When we were young he worked long hours and very hard but he gave up everything else to raise a family. No golf until we were old enough to join him, no private hobbies or sanctuaries. Every moment away from the hospital was devoted to his family.

This man who liked order and the scientific method in his work loved chaos at home--the more the merrier. Remember the song from *Les Miserables*? "Master of the house, keeper of the zoo. . ." That was Dad. Nothing thrilled him more than seeing a half dozen or more cars in the driveway when he came home.

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Mom and Dad will leave many legacies but their family is the greatest. Not many people can say they have done the sheer physical act of having and raising 10 children but to have 10 productive & reasonably well-adjusted adults thrilled him to no end. And he has had, and the lessons he left will have, the same kind of impact on his grandchildren.

Funerals for Christians represent sadness at a temporary separation. We will always have Dad here in spirit but we cannot help but grieve at all our loss.

Jesus said "in my father's house are many rooms. . ." When we someday join Dad in that house I know that he will have explored every room, in the company of his beloved grandson, Walter Hugh, who predeceased him this year, will know every person in those rooms and will be impatiently wondering what took us so long.