

A great generation

Colossians 1:1-14

July 11, 2010

Tom Brokaw called them the “greatest generation,” the men and women of the generation of Americans born in the 1920’s or thereabouts.

They were the soldiers who served their nation and the world on the battlefields of World War II. They were the citizens who tightened their own belts and retooled domestic industries to support the war effort.

They were the entrepreneurs who fueled the emergence of the United States as the economic and technological and cultural superpower it is today. And they were the townsfolk who laid the foundations of the social and cultural and charitable institutions that sustain and enrich our communities.

We were given a reminder of our indebtedness to this generation with the Waterloo Courier’s recent designation of the “Eight over Eighty” honorees. These are men and women whose names we readily recognize as those who have been at the forefront -- for decade upon decade and still -- of many of the good and exciting things that happen in Waterloo and Cedar Falls: Louis Beecher and John Deery, Tunis Den Hartog and Milt Roth, Betty Jean Ferguson, Ed and Cathy Gallagher, and two we are proud to call our own, Harold Brock and Ike Leighty. Both of whom, as you know, left the eighties behind a while ago and are still going strong!

My thoughts were drawn again to this generation when Lynne and I received news of the death last Sunday of Rusty Hunt at the age of eighty-three. Her name was Gladys, but she was always “Rusty,” so-named for her bright red hair. She was a contemporary and college classmate and dear friend of my father, and our friend, too ... a friend of Lynne and myself, from before we were married and since.

She and her husband, Keith, and my father, and others I remember so well were among the pioneers of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship here in the United States. InterVarsity is para-church organization focussed on campus ministry, emphasizing discipleship and evangelism and mission. It began in the late 1800’s in Great Britain. moved across the ocean into Canada in the 1920’s and into the United States, first in Michigan at the University of Michigan, in the late 1930’s. My father and Rusty Were classmates at Michigan State University in the early 40’s.

These are the people I grew up among, and the people who explicitly shaped my faith, and who, in shaping my faith, also very much shaped my sense of identity and purpose. I learned from them a style of faith that is a life calling, not merely a Sunday morning duty. There is no way you could separate their faith in Jesus from the rest of their lives because it was so closely and intimately intertwined in everything they thought and said and did.

It is interesting that, for me, the compelling invitation to center my life on Jesus came from outside the church, from experiences and relationships outside church in its traditional forms. And yet it is precisely those experiences and those relationships and that faith born outside the church that led me here into ministry in the church!

Hearing of Rusty's death made me think again of those formative years, of my father and his InterVarsity colleagues, and Lynne's father, people of that great generation of Christian men and women to whom I owe so much. And remembering them made me want to tell you about them, so they might inspire you, too!

They were passionate people, passionate about their faith, passionate about Jesus, passionately sharing Jesus' love with friends and strangers alike.

They were gentle people, strong and capable and smart, but gentle and humble, not needing a lot of attention or accolades.

They were people of depth and integrity, practicing what they preached, their faith, as I have said, seamlessly woven into the fabric of their lives.

They were warm people, fun people, accessible and gracious and welcoming.

They were faithful people, serving God and God's people with all they had, all their lives, until the end.

And they all had those qualities of character Paul prayed that the people of the Colossian church would have: knowledge and strength and joy.

Paul wrote to the Colossians:

We ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will, with all the wisdom and understanding the Spirit gives ...

The culture of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship was and is very much centered on a faith that engages the mind, a faith that is well-informed, well-thought out. There is a strong emphasis on Bible study, both the regular discipline of personal Bible study, and intensive, practical Bible study in small groups.

The preferred format is a method termed inductive Bible study, not one teacher telling the rest of the group what the Bible says and what it means, but the group exploring the Bible together, getting at its meaning together in response to open-ended questions: What does it say? What does it mean? How do we apply it to our lives? Because that's the point of Bible study. That's the point of knowing about God. That's the point of knowing God: to know what God wants, to know what pleases God, and to do it.

My father and his colleagues practiced and taught the disciplines of daily devotional Bible study and prayer, and they trained students to lead on-campus Bible studies. They didn't lead the studies themselves, but equipped and empowered student leaders. And InterVarsity has had a strong publishing presence, both Bible study guides and resources, but also well-regarded books dealing with issues of culture and theology and ethics.

These were people who worked hard at growing their personal and communal understanding of who God is and what God wants. These were people who wanted, more than anything else, not just to know about God, but to know God. To borrow the title of a much-loved book in InterVarsity circles, their faith was about "The Pursuit of God," about a hunger and thirst for God himself, because it is God himself who makes all the difference. And it was that relentless pursuit of God, the passionate desire to know God, that gave their faith substance and depth and integrity and resilience.

The second quality of character Paul prayed for on the Colossians' behalf was strength.

May you be made strong with all the strength which comes from [God's] glorious power, so that you may be able to endure everything with patience ...

My father and his fellow InterVarsity staff members did not have it easy. They were not well-paid and the majority, if not all, of their support, they had to raise themselves. And because there were few of them in the early days, they had heavy workloads. My father served as regional director for the Middle Atlantic states, which meant he supervised the work of InterVarsity on college campuses in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware.

We lived in Philadelphia, but he spent much of his time on the road, and I've already told you about our cross-country automobile adventures! And the work itself was challenging, working relationship by relationship to build a nucleus of spiritual nurture and Christian witness in the midst of the secular and sometimes hostile university environment.

Such hard times and heavy responsibilities and challenging work demand strength, but they also build strength. Weakness comes from inactivity, from disuse, but strength comes from being tested and stretched.

Hardship made them strong, but they also built strength through discipline, disciplines of personal Bible study and daily prayer, disciplines of worship and service and generosity. When we are used to relying on God, used to giving ourselves away freely, used to making do with less, we are less likely to be knocked off balance by things that provoke or threaten or deprive us and more likely to find a real source of strength in our faith and in God to meet whatever comes our way with patience and with hope.

These were people who were spiritually fit and they showed it in the ways they met the challenges, and even the tragedies, that did come into their lives. Because even in the shadow of death itself, Jesus has something to say to us, and God has something to give to us.

The last thing Paul prays for the Colossian people is joy.

With joy give thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to have your share of what God has reserved for his people in the kingdom of light ...

Joy is a good thing to pray for! Joy is a great thing to have! Don't you think?

My father and Keith and Rusty Hunt and Don and JoAnne Fields and the rest of their colleagues were fun people. They played outdoor volleyball and ping pong. They read Winnie the Pooh aloud and acted out crazy skits. I remember my father playing the part of Little Red Riding Hood in one skit -- much to my embarrassment!

They loved the outdoors, loved to enjoy the beauty of the world God had made. My father taught me to swim and sail and canoe and hike. They loved each other, forming lifelong bonds cemented by their sense of belonging to each other in Christ.

And they sang! Wow, did they sing!

InterVarsity folks love to sing -- lustily, joyfully singing their praise to God creator and savior; gratefully, humbly singing their thanks for God's grace and mercy offered in Jesus Christ. They sang classic hymns. They sang psalms. They sang rounds. They sang grace around the tables before sitting down to eat. Their lives were filled with song, song that sprang from the joy in their hearts.

Can you see why faith became so real for me? Can you see why it became so important to me? These were my witnesses, my teachers. They were a great generation.

I call them a great generation, not the greatest generation. To call them or any generation greatest demeans the unique struggles and achievements of other generations and means the best we have to hope for is already past. But the best, my friends, is still to come! And it is your duty, your calling, whatever generation you are part of, to make the achievements of your generation the best this world has seen.

My father once said to me something that startled me. He said he expected me to surpass whatever he had done with his life, to outshine him with what I would accomplish. No, I have not done that, Dad, but your encouragement, your witness, your faith have shown me the way, the way God wants me to go, the way I want to go, the way I want to invite all of you to go.

Now it is my job, now it is your job, to embody these same gifts of knowledge and strength and joy. May we seek to know God before and above everything else; may we face the blessings and challenges of our lives with equal courage and strength; and may we let the joy in our hearts show, especially for the sake of the generations that come after us, so they will see too that faith is real and that God is good, and so they too will become a great generation.