



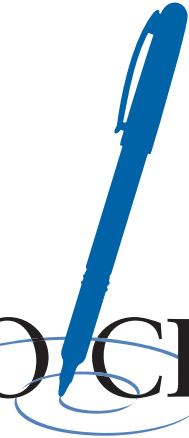
About the Author

The Rev. Fred Fenton retired in 2001 after 40 years of ministry in parishes in California and Louisiana. He and his wife, Billie, live in Concord, California, with their Tibetan Spaniels, Brandy and Bailey. The Fentons will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary in September.

About Vintage Voice

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VINTAGE VOICE



In Anticipation of Father's Day Next Month

By the Rev. Fred Fenton

“Life with father” has its ups and downs. It can be a challenge, especially for boys. Life with *my* father was a roller coaster ride. Yet, as I think about him — each Father’s Day and every day — I am grateful for the scary, wonderful, exhilarating ride I had with my dad. His erratic behavior, characterized by wide mood swings, was a mystery to my older brother David and me. For months at a time, he would exhibit great energy and excitement about life. Then, for a similar period, he would be depressed and barely able to function. Years later, Dad was diagnosed as bipolar. In the 1970s, Lithium eventually saved him from the wide mood swings that had complicated his life and ours.

I remember a Christmas morning when Dad was so low, Mother had to send us boys into the bedroom to encourage him to join the family for opening presents. When he was feeling high, nothing seemed impossible. A workman wanted what Dad considered an outrageous price to cut a doorway through a thick adobe wall in our house. Dad took a chisel and hammer and did the work himself. It took all day, but he got the job done. He spent the next three days in bed recovering!

Dad and my mom were family doctors in practice together. One evening after making hospital calls, Dad stopped by their offices on his way home. Inside was a man with a gun. He wanted drugs. Dad loaded him up and then asked if he could use some money. Surprised, the burglar said, “Sure.” Dad reached into a secret drawer where cash was kept and gave him a wad of bills. The man told my father to go into a closet and stay there for five minutes or he would be shot. Dad said he would stay an hour.

After he heard the man leave, Dad called the police and made a report. Then he went home. In the middle of the night, he was called back to the office. The police had caught the man after he drank too much at a local bar and began bragging about the doctor he had “suckered.” The police wanted Dad to identify the burglar, which he did. As everyone was leaving, one officer turned back. “Doc,”

he said, “the suspect says that after you gave him more than he asked for, you told him to come back tomorrow at the same time and you’d give him more drugs and money. Is that true?”

“The man had a gun!” Dad replied.

A lifelong fan of great preaching, Dad would occasionally drive 70 miles from our home in San Bernardino to Los Angeles in order to hear Dr. Louis Evans, Sr., preach at the evening service at Hollywood First Presbyterian Church. Once, he took me all the way into the city on a Sunday morning to attend the First Methodist Church in downtown Los Angeles. The place was packed. We sat in two of the last seats in the balcony. The preacher was Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, author of the soon-to-be released bestseller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

Both of my parents cared a lot about their patients. They would adjust their fees to little or nothing for someone who was poor. In a half-century of joint medical practice, they never used a collection service. A patient was billed for three months and no longer. Once, a woman asked my father to deliver her first child. Dad checked his records and said, “I’ll be glad to help as soon as you pay for your own delivery.” Embarrassed, the woman asked how much he received for a delivery when she was born. Dad said proudly, “Twenty-five dollars.” She promptly wrote a check for \$100 to pay for her own delivery, plus “a little interest.”

Dad and Mom were pillars of First Baptist Church in San Bernardino. Dad was president of the Board of Trustees. She was superintendent of the Sunday School and needed teachers. I was recruited at 12 years of age to teach a class of third-grade boys. The kids were supposed to memorize Bible verses. I was having no luck until Dad came up with a solution. He bought Hershey bars for me to give as rewards. After that, my class showed surprising aptitude for memory work.

Although they would have preferred for us to have been ordained in their American Baptist tradition, our parents were proud of my brother and me when we became Episcopal priests. Once, when I was about to speak at a civil rights rally, a worried team member came to report a man in the front row hiding a bulky tape recorder under his overcoat. The suspicious-looking man was my father.

Dad handled compensation insurance for the San Bernardino Police Department. He knew all the officers. When stopped for speeding, as often happened, he would get out of his car and look to see who had stopped him. “Johnny,” or “Tom,” he would say, “I remember the night you were born...” He never got a ticket. The officer would simply say, “Doc, you’ve got to slow down. You might kill someone or yourself.” Fortunately, he never did — slow down, or injure anyone!

One of my wife’s early memories of my father, who was her family’s physician, was the time he made a house call and discovered their new venetian blinds were not strung properly. While they watched in amazement, he proceeded to re-string them all himself. He must have been in one of his manic stages. Years later, he asked Billie if she was willing to date me. She was. He always claimed credit for an “arranged marriage.”

The church was filled for Dad’s funeral at the end of a long life. In spite of his demons, he was quite a guy. I hope my three sons will remember me that way.



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