

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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Remembrances From Times Past

The Rev. William Kirkland, Ph.D.

I am a retired Episcopal priest, but when I grew up in rural Georgia I did not know that such a creature existed. Everybody was poor, and, except for the members of the African Methodist Church down the road, just about everybody was Baptist.

The Kirklands were somewhat exceptional. My father, having only a high school education, held two jobs. He was a rural mail carrier, and he led four “quarter-time” Baptist churches. Six days a week, the year round, he brought the mail and the *Augusta Chronicle* and, on occasion, a prayer for the sick, to the folks who made up his Sunday congregations.

Dad had grown up in neighboring Wilkes County in extreme poverty. His father, a sharecropper, died suddenly when dad was seven, leaving a widow and seven small children who had to move with the crop unharvested. They survived, thanks to kind neighbors, and especially to Dr. Hogan, a well-known Baptist pastor of three large churches, who gave special pastoral care and theological nurture to my dad, eventually willing him his library. “Dr. Hogan” was a name I grew up with.

On Dad’s eightieth birthday, I sent him my felicitations and filial words of wisdom. I noted the things we should all be thankful for on his behalf — good health, good friends, good battles, and good outcomes (belated, in some instances).

By Aristotle’s measurements, he was (or was *becoming*) a happy man. I suggested it was time for him and Mom to slow down. At long last, in a comfortable home, with a three-way pension, he should start to learn to take things easy. “Relax, Dad,” he quoted me as saying, “you’ve made it!”

That’s how his letter began, volleying my words back across the net, straight at me — the hardest return to handle.

“I appreciate your compliment,” he went on, “and I know what you meant, but that scares me. Let me tell you why.” There followed a short paragraph acknowledging that none of us likes to travel a road with potholes, one that’s always going up (he knew a lot about bad roads), “but if we got our wish, and all troublesome experiences ceased, it might be the worst thing that could happen.”

“Life isn’t having it made; it’s getting it made” he wrote. “Each necessary task requires an effort of will, and with each act, something in you grows and is strengthened.” I felt duly chastened. The letter was flawlessly typewritten, something that must itself have required an effort of will for my father, who was not accustomed to using the typewriter.

“The finest, happiest years of our lives,” he continued, “were not when the debts were paid, all the trying and difficult experiences had passed, and we had settled into a comfortable home with no mortgage on it. No. I think back to years before, when we lived in a three-room house on a few acres of land we had bargained to buy; when we got up before daylight and worked till after dark to make ends meet and to pay for that little place we called home.

“You won’t think me boasting when I say that, for years, I rarely got more than four or five hours sleep a night. But what I still can’t figure out is why, with all we had to do, I never got tired. No, I never felt better in my life. I guess the answer is we were fighting for survival, protecting and providing for those we loved.” I don’t think dad knew about the Great Depression till we were out of it.

But Dad still wasn’t finished setting me straight. “In this business of getting it made, it’s not the great climactic moments that count. It’s the little partial victories, the deadlocks and the waiting, and even, at the time, the defeats. If we are ever unlucky enough to have it made, then we will be spectators, not participants, in life. As somebody once said, ‘It’s the journey, not the arrival, that counts.’”

The letter ended with an old-fashioned, pious petition and a personal request.

He hoped the Lord would give us the wisdom, the grace, and the grit, to welcome the hard choices, the difficulties and troubles that must come in the world. And he hoped I would be more circumspect in my felicitations. “Son, when you call or write me on my next birthday, just tell me to wake up and get going, because I have one less year to get done things I’d like to do — and there are ten million things waiting to be done.”

The last time Dad came to visit us he was well into his nineties. He secretly decided to go outside and do some exploring (we live in the woods). When I found him, he was holding on to a bush near the top of a precipitous hill, just a few steps from the house. He hadn’t quite made it to the top, but the urge to journey, to continue climbing, was too great.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, in one of the published letters to his daughter, congratulates her for having gotten out of scholastic difficulties at Vassar: then, discerningly, he warns that we have to justify ourselves each week of our lives. Had she ever read Christina Rossetti’s, “And does the road wind uphill all the way? Yes, to the very end.”



Bill and his wife, Mary Beth, a retired schoolteacher, live in the woods. Until recently, Bill was a Sunday supply priest, but mainly throughout retirement he has pursued his “other calling,” ministering at the local animal shelter. It has been a rewarding part of his ministry — the dogs have paid well!



CHURCH

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