

Tribute to David Rempe, 12 February 2010

The first thing I'd like to do in this tribute is apologize to my dad. Being the center of attention was never his favorite thing, and getting a whole bunch of people together to focus on him is something he would have probably run screaming from if he were alive. Now just imagine all of these people are going to say really nice things about him – even worse. He never thought there was anything special about himself, at least nothing that deserved praise. Well, the people in this room know differently, and sorry dad, but we're going to say some nice things about you. At least you don't have to sit here and be looked at – although I kind of hope you are eavesdropping.

So here goes. I want to talk about the different facets of my dad, most of which the people in this room will already be aware of. He was a man of many strengths, and what faults or eccentricities he had were, for the most part, part and parcel of the very things that made him great.

He was an exceptionally capable man. Within his broad range of knowledge, there is no one whose opinion I trusted more or whose help was more reliable. Many of you have told me how much you appreciated Dad's understated competence. He was someone whose advice people sought, a man who people trusted implicitly. Dad never tooted his own horn, or held any high opinions of himself, but he knew his abilities and exuded a quiet confidence that was reassuring. His sense of responsibility meant that if he did something, it was always done with a thoroughness that I don't think anyone on this earth could match. Dad was not someone you went to for a short quick answer. If I asked him what computer he thought I should purchase, for example, he would spend hours with me, going over the various options, patiently explaining everything I didn't understand, and considering every possible angle.

This thoroughness carried over into every aspect of his life. He was an extremely thoughtful person who did not form opinions or make judgments quickly. As someone who was on a committee with him said, he was a person who would listen to every word you said and consider it before thinking of what he was going to say in reply. He was an excellent listener. No matter how different your ideas were from his, you know that Dad would try and understand your point of view. He didn't have any ego bound up in being right, he really wanted to understand. That is not to say that talking with Dad was easy. He would always challenge you, ask hard or annoying questions, sometimes make you explain things that seemed obvious. He did this so that he was sure of understanding you, but also to make you think harder. Dad didn't let you get away with fallacious arguments or poor reasoning. Critical thinking was a skill that he worked hard to pass on to his kids. He once said that one of the most important things he could do as a parent was to teach us to think for ourselves. Dad and I had some significant differences of opinion over the years, and one of the most important things in the world to me was that I knew I still had his approval and respect despite these differences.

Dad's meticulousness manifested itself in his personal habits. This became of subject of rather a lot of humor in our family. His management of information was the same, whether you were talking about an engineering project, a church committee, or what sneakers to buy. If he could put it into a spreadsheet, you bet he would put it into a spreadsheet. He had cabinets of files on every topic of interest or relevance in his life. His Bible is unmistakably his, full of tabs and notes and underlines. Then there were the fiddle packs, one of which in on display downstairs along with other things we will remember Dad by. Dad loved to be prepared for every eventuality, and he loved to have containers for everything. When he went anywhere, he always carried little bags or satchels with all kinds of compartments or pockets, into which he would put everything he might conceivably need. Brian dubbed them 'fiddle packs', and Dad had a million of them. When we went on vacation it seemed like the car was

overflowing with fiddle packs. The contents of these packs would vary, but I think that every one of these packs had to have tic tacs in them. And tweezers. I never knew what he used them for, but I knew he owned at least five pairs of tweezers.

He was also a stickler for table manners. We all needed to learn to hold our forks the right way, use a knife properly, and ask for food rather than reaching for it. One night he felt that we had our plates too far towards the middle of the table, and was proceeding to demonstrate how the plate should be properly perched right on the edge above our laps, when his plate tipped over and dumped the dinner into his lap. Needless to say he never heard the end of that.

But Dad's involvement in his kids' lives extended far beyond lectures on table manners or grammar. He was an incredibly supportive parent who, together with my wonderful mom, provided a loving, safe, and fun home for us to grow up in. He took a deep interest in us, and was keen to nurture our interests and ambitions. He attended every single recital, play, track meet and soccer game. He never gave me any sense that there was anything that I couldn't do just because I was a girl. While Dad wasn't generally a very demonstrative person, with his kids he was always free with hugs and kisses.

And he was a tremendous role model. There are two things in particular that he and mom taught me by example – kindness and integrity.

In keeping with his general demeanor, Dad's kindness wasn't particularly effusive, but it was very genuine and I think that people sensed it and responded to it all the same. He always put other people first, to the extent that it could be hard to get him to express his own preferences. He was friendly and respectful with everyone, regardless of who they were. He had a special place in his heart for animals, especially dogs.

And his sense of integrity, like his thoroughness, could not be matched. He would stand up for what he thought was right, regardless of the consequences. As a young man in his twenties, Dad's integrity once got him fired from a construction project he was on in Liberia, because he dared to speak up when he knew a bad decision was being made. The company, however, hired him back for a different project in Jamaica. When his old boss from Liberia was put in charge of the Jamaican project, this boss publicly announced he was going to fire my dad again, but Dad's skill proved invaluable and the boss ended up offering Dad a public apology instead. Dad followed through on every commitment and completed it to the best of his ability. He was never dishonest or selfish.

So my dad was a stand-up guy. A straight arrow. But I'd hate to give the impression that he was staid or boring. My dad was also a fascinating and funny person. For one thing, my dad lived a pretty varied life. He spent several years working overseas and also took a year and traveled around the world. When they were here last week, my cousins Cathy and Mark were telling me how exciting it was to be around when their Uncle Davey came home from one of his many travels, looking handsome in a blue suit and bringing exotic gifts and stories. Ever since I was a young girl I have always loved to hear Dad's stories, whether they were about his international travels or about the characters he met while working on construction projects all over the US. Dad was always fun to talk to. He was very well-read and had a particular interest in history. You never knew where a chat with Dad would take you. You certainly knew that you would be laughing at some point. Dad tended to view human foibles, whether they were other people's or his own, through a lens of wry humor. While the rest of the family often goes in for silly humor and fart jokes, Dad's forte was subtle sarcasm and self-deprecating wit. This wit would often disarm people who may have thought he was an overly serious person.

I also don't want to give the impression that Dad was some sort of saint. My dad was always so calm and collected that I think most people would think he was completely unflappable. And for the most part he was, but not completely. As a kid and then as a teenager, you become an expert in trying your parents' patience, so we perhaps saw a side of him that few people did – Dad when he was angry. Because it was relatively rare, he didn't have to rant and rave to get our attention – a raised voice was usually enough to let us know we had crossed the line. What usually made him angry was any show of disrespect to Mom. I have "Don't you talk that way to your mother" etched in my memory. The times that Dad was, to my knowledge, angry outside the family circle are so few that they have kind of become mythical in our family. There's the time, during his very brief stint in the army, that his sergeant tried to take away his weekend leave, and Dad offered to 'take this outside' to settle the matter. When discussing the incident recently, Dad remarked dryly that challenging your sergeant to a fight was really not the best thing to do in the army. But he was lucky and the sergeant backed down. Then there was the time that someone was careless in traffic and nearly hurt an old lady, and dad shouted out the window, 'What are you, some kind of a nut?' And when a man accosted us in the parking lot of Shedd Aquarium, accusing us of stealing his parking space, and Dad said, 'Listen, Mac' – and we knew he was angry because he called people 'Mac' when he was angry. And... that's about it, actually. I told you they were few.

Finally, I'd like to talk about my Dad's bravery. Fighting a 15 year battle with cancer is not easy. There are the ups and downs, the false hopes and the setbacks and the disappointments. There is the gradual diminishing of ability, the growing discomforts and lack of ease, the indignity, the insidious creeping of this awful disease as it ravages your body. My dad was not some sort of superman – he hurt, he was afraid, he sometimes got depressed and bad-tempered. But throughout it all he kept striving, kept a sense of dignity, of hope, of good humor. His sense of humor was thankfully with him to the very end. A few days before his death, when he was finding it difficult to talk, I was talking with mom about meeting dad and when she knew that dad was 'the one.' She told me that she knew on about the third date, and dad looked up at her with a mock-hurt look and asked, 'What about the first two?'

Above all my dad maintained his sense of concern for others until the very end. He had spent years working to ensure that my mom would be taken care of after his death, and he was never sure it was enough. His concern that he hadn't done all he could stayed with him even in his final days when he was becoming increasingly disoriented and confused. I hope that now he is finally at peace, knowing that he did do everything he possibly could have done. And I'd like to pay tribute to my mom for doing everything she possibly could for my dad. It took a lot of work on both their parts to keep my dad living as normally as possible for as long as possible, and throughout this work they were, as always, a dedicated team.

I want to thank you all for the kindness and concern you have shown to my father and our family. We have felt very loved and cared for during this journey. We will miss Dad so much, and I don't know exactly how we are going to cope without him. But I also know what a precious gift we had in having him with us for as long as we did. The gifts he gave us will not fade. I am so lucky to have had him as a father. I love you Dad.