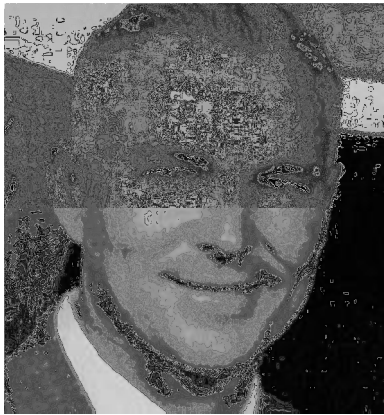


Remembering Dad's Death

Tomorrow will be another anniversary of Robert Kenneth Strachan who died on February 24, 1965. He was our dad, uncle, grandfather or great uncle, great grandfather or great granduncle. For many in my generation he was a key influence and his death a life-changing loss. You who never had the opportunity to know him have probably felt his legacy in the various ministries of the LAM. But it was his personal relation to each of us in my generation that shaped our lives and, no doubt, has indirectly shaped yours.

I thought on this anniversary, I'd resend some pieces I've written about him, some of which I've sent out in the past, that hopefully will remind you of our great legacy.



Quick Sketch Based on Mother's Stories

Though short (5'6") Dad was a star basketball player and accomplished diver at Wheaton and popular. Just before he was to graduate he was thrown out of college his senior year for violating the pledge, apparently by playing cards at a bridge tournament. Wheaton allowed him to return for summer school to complete his studies and get his B.A. while already at Dallas Theological Seminary. Though not a distinguished student up until that summer, he got all A's.

He believed God rescued his life, using Dallas Theological Seminary and marriage to Mother, and he returned to work with his parents in the mission. On his father's death he was made co-General Manager with his mother.

His leadership style was very different from Grandfather's, much less charismatic, more personal and warm. He, along with Uncle Dayton, Uncle Dit Fenton and Dave Howard, the other General Directors, attracted a talented group to the Mission, whom he insisted get involved in its leadership. The Mission continued to expand its activities into radio stations, a publishing house, schools, and other countries. It also managed Billy Graham's Latin America evangelistic campaigns, Dad rooming with Billy during at least one of the campaigns. Just before his death the Mission inaugurated even more comprehensive campaigns involving all church members, called Evangelism in Depth, a movement copied around the world and on which he wrote a book.

Mother's stories and descriptions seemed to me to juxtapose my grandfather to my father, perhaps unintentionally. Grandfather Harry Strachan was tall and strong and liked

individual sports like swimming and boxing. Kenneth was short and athletic and excelled in team sports like basketball and baseball. Grandfather was extroverted and charismatic and his presence filled any room he entered. Father was more reserved, didn't compete for center stage, yet had a quiet presence that suggested much depth. Grandfather was certain of the truth, fearless in his opinions, judgmental and probably dogmatic. Dad was more tolerant and ecumenical, prone to give others the benefit of the doubt. Grandfather Harry was successful from the start of his career, his leadership abilities never in doubt, while Kenneth was something of an underperformer during his school years, his capacity as a missionary doubted by the Mission Board at the start of his career.

Yet by the time I was old enough to hear the stories, Kenneth's special talents for attracting good people, his strategic vision, his good judgment, his personal humility and his skills as a speaker had made him one of the most influential missionary leaders of his generation. Though he felt he never measured up to his father, many of the missionaries who knew them both told me he was the more effective leader. Before his death his alma mater, Wheaton College, gave him the same honorary doctorate they had given his father. My mother's admiration and loyalty made it clear that if I was forced to choose between being like my grandfather or father, I should choose my dad's later traits.

Dad the Story Teller

I particularly associate our Strachan-Roberts family vacations at Puntarenas with Dad's stories. A wide boardwalk ran alongside the beach all the way from the Mission house down to the large pier which jutted out into the bay. A favorite after dinner ritual, particularly if our fathers had joined us on the vacation, was to walk down the boardwalk to the pier in the early evening after supper. People would be fishing off the pier; vendors would be selling *granizados* (sweet syrup on shaved ice). We'd walk arm and arm the two or three blocks enjoying the cooler breezes that had come up, feeling that we were a close family, many of the scuffles and tensions of the day left behind.

Back on the front porch in the early dark, we would beg my father to tell us stories of Puntarenas when he had been a boy, particularly about the pirate caves he'd explored in the beaches linked to the mainland. There was a story (I believe true) of how my father and grandfather had hiked among the caves on a beach closer to the mainland. Miscalculating the incoming tide, they were caught on the rocks near the caves and slammed by the waves coming in. They nearly got killed, at one point Dad apparently catching grandfather by the arm as he was being sucked onto the rocks.

Other stories of which I'm less certain described caves my father had explored with his Boy Scout troop full of skeletons and pirate treasure. These stories tended to end with some sort of mishap which collapsed the cave and reburied the treasure, so that the boys never were able to realize the riches they had found.

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One day he went fishing at the mouth of the Barranca River near Puntarenas. He went out on to the center of the railroad trestle so he could drop his line into the deep water. After a while he noticed that a shark had come up river from the sea and was circling his line in the water. This so distracted him that he didn't hear the train starting to cross the trestle until it was too late to make a run for it. His only means of escape was to hang from the beams of wood under the tracks. The train rumbled overhead, shaking everything, the shark patiently waiting for him to fall into the water below. The train gone, arms aching from holding himself up, he still had to find the strength to pull himself up onto the trestle and with shaking steps, walk the open planks back to the river bank.

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Once on the mission boat which traveled up the Magdalena River of Colombia deep into the remote equatorial jungle on evangelistic tours, seeking relief from the oppressive humid heat, Dad went under the cool trees on the river bank and lay down to take a nap. He dreamed he was in quicksand his feet sinking deeper and deeper into the sand unable to free them. Waking he looked down to see a boa constrictor which had already swallowed his feet all the way up to his thighs. He struggled mightily but the backward slanting teeth of the snake made it impossible for him to free himself. The snake gradually worked its way up past his waist under his arm pits. Dad in desperation wrapped his arms around two trees blocking the snake from further progress. This led to a stalemate. It was only broken when the snake said, "Okay, I'll let you go if you promise not to tell anymore of your snake stories!"

Dad's Tougher Side

I found out in my 1965 interviews after his death, that while many of the seminary students and missionaries had experienced Dad's compassion, tolerance and warmth, they had also noted that he had a demanding and impatient side. That squared with my own childhood memories. Weeding in a flower bed with my father as a young boy, I tried to pull out the grass but the blades kept breaking off in my hand. Exasperated Dad said, "Harry, come on, pull it up by the roots!" My hand was cut and raw, I was doing my best, but I knew I wasn't meeting his standards.

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In New Jersey on one deputation trip, in the late afternoon of a rainy day we got lost on the way to a meeting at which he was to preach. He stopped at a gas station to ask

directions for the church which we knew had to be nearby. The gas station attendant knew nothing about the neighborhood. As Dad got back into the car, we knew he was steaming with frustration. He told us in clipped words, “If you’re ever a gas station attendant, learn the neighborhood! There is no excuse for not knowing your job!”

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While Dad was not adverse to spanking his admonishments were generally more low-key. I came home from the 10th grade at Hampden DuBose Academy, having learned from the “in crowd” how to be sarcastic. After I had used this witty patter on my brothers and sisters for about 24 hours, my Father at the dinner table interrupted me. Drily and in a matter-of-fact tone he said, “That’s a pretty artificial way of talking, Harry. In addition, it’s not very kind.” I immediately knew he was right and determined to give it up.

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One prominent Latin pastor told me how during his first year in Seminary he had been caught with a girl violating the rules. He’d been in trouble before and this time the faculty of the seminary voted to expel him. Dad, as Dean of the seminary, got him a second chance. Without telling me exactly how Dad handled the situation he told me, “Your dad didn’t let me make excuses. He saw right through me; he was one of the few missionaries none of us could fool. But at the same time as he made me face my failures and their likely consequences, he saw in me a potential that even I could not see. He helped me believe that God had job for me which with His grace I could do. He gave me a second chance and later was my mentor, as he was to so many others.”

Albatross

One summer in Wheaton, I would go to the town swimming pool and practice the dives from the three meter board for which was famous – the full gainer and 1 1/2/ forward pike. I’d persisted through many painful flops and finally learned them.

Then I had a dream which captured both my desire to emulate Dad and earn his approval and my sense that I would never measure up. On his last trip to Boston during my first year of law school, knowing he was dying of cancer, I decided to share the dream with him.

In the dream the family is gathered at the Wheaton swimming pool. I swim over to ask, ‘Dad, would you check out my dives?’ “My first dive is the one and half forward pike and it’s one of the best I’ve ever done, though I’m aware as I enter the water that my feet aren’t exactly together.

As I came up from the dive, I sense that the dive s been noticed by those around the pool but swim nonchalantly over to the board once again. My full gainer is also the best I'd ever done. It causes only a minor splash as I enter the water straight up. This time I hear a gasp of approval from around the pool.

When I reached the edge of the pool, Dad came over to the edge, knelt down, and with a smile said, 'That was very good, Son, now you want to make sure you keep your hands together and your toes touching...'

Dad is, of course, correct but a tidal wave of despair sweeps over me. I don't want him to see it so I turn away start swimming up and down the pool until I feel I am drowning. The choking that wakes me up is caused by the tears I just can't stop.

When I finished telling my father the dream, he stopped, looked me full in the face and said, "I'm so sorry, so sorry, Harry. I was so hoping I would not be an albatross around your neck." He went on to tell me about his experiences with his father and the pain he felt at never meeting Grandfather Harry's expectations.

He concluded "I always wanted to make sure you did not have the same experience. I am so sorry! So sorry!"

Two Unforgettable Lessons

On one of his visits to H.D.A. where I was going to high school we walked down to the side of the lake at twilight. Looking across the still waters to trees on the opposite shore line, he pointed out the symmetry between the height of the trees on the horizon and the depth of their reflected images in the water. "Have you ever noticed, Harry, that the capacity to experience the ups seems to be related to the ability to experience the downs of life." At the time, I felt Dad was telling me something profound, perhaps related to mood swings, but later realized this also applied to intimacy. The desire to avoid rejection can cut one off from the pleasures of deep love.

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Home from high school one summer, he took me with him to a pastor's conference in Guanacaste with perhaps five hundred people from all over Latin America. Dad was the featured speaker and treated by the participants with great veneration. I noticed that he went out of his way in his speeches to make it clear that he "put his pants on just like they did, one leg at a time," that he and they struggled with the same challenges in their lives and ministries. After one of his messages, I pointed out that while he might put on his pants one leg at a time like them, when he got up to speak he wore a tie and coat,

something none of them were wearing. He didn't take it as a smart aleck comment or criticism but answered it seriously. "No, Harry, we are really all in the same boat. Many of these simple pastors, I know for a fact, are better people and will receive in heaven a far greater reward than I. I stand in awe of them. The reason I wear a tie and coat when I stand up to speak to them is because I am honoring them and the role they have given me in this conference."

Dedication from *INCAE Memories*

To my father, Robert Kenneth Strachan (1910-1965)

A missionary statesman
A social entrepreneur, whose legacy continues
An effective leader, mentor and role model to many
A man of deep personal integrity, humility and warmth

He died before INCAE was born. In my early years as Academic Director, I often wished we could meet to discuss the situations I was facing. I tried to imagine how he would respond to them.

In early 1981, as Rector, I was struggling with how to engage the administrative staff which was under great stress. I set up meetings with each administrative department of the school. Rather than calling everyone to a big meeting in a classroom, I went with the Administrative Director to visit the small groups in their place of work: the cleaning women in the dorms, the mechanics at the garage, the kitchen staff in the dining room. In each meeting I shook hands with each person. I'd repeat their name and generally try to ask something personal about their job or their family. Then I'd explain INCAE's situation, which was difficult, as briefly and simply as possible. I'd describe the strategy we were trying to implement, some parts of which might be threatening to them. I'd thank them for what they'd done in the past, re-affirm our commitment to them, explain why their work was important to our success and ask for their support. I also tried to answer their questions honestly.

In one of these sessions, at the car pool with the drivers and mechanics, I saw myself, as if from on high, shaking hands, tilting my head to hear better, asking questions in a humorous way. Suddenly I realized that I was copying my father's style, even down to some of his mannerisms. Unconsciously when I was put in a leadership situation, he was the model I tried to follow. It's a model that has served me well.

In a conventional sense, I did not pick up the family mantle and become a missionary, but I recognize that, in ways that go deeper than my consciousness, my involvement with Latin America and INCAE has been a way of adding to the legacy I admire so much.

Concluding Tribute

Dad has always been the role model I most wished to emulate. Though I suspected I was genetically more Walker than Strachan, he was the person I most wanted to be like. His deep integrity was the value I most admired, even when I felt it was leading me to abandon many of the dogmas of his faith. His personal humility, his clear hard-headed thinking, his compassion, his love of sports and cards and his capacity for hard work are all traits I've wanted to copy. His set of values have worked for me and perhaps been the secret of any success I've had. Probably the deepest grief of my life is that he died so young and that you of the fourth and fifth generation never had a chance to know him personally.

Harry Strachan
February 23, 2013