

DAD

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Each of us has our own memories of dad. Some are associated with him as our father: disciplining us when mom lost control; lining us up to sing in churches on deputation; stopping-- always stopping for us for potty breaks on our treks across the U.S.; making sure each of us was one the train when it started moving. Others are images of his eccentricities: frantically looking for his keys, forgetting aged neighbors in Reedley, piling luggage on tops of giant racks on top of cars, adding 'Christian' to his name so Anna's love mail would not go first to the other two John Nicholas Hieberts living in Mountain Lake. Other memories are tied to places: Wanaparty where dad bought a horse and *jutka* to entertain us as children, Kodai with its endless picnics at Fairy Falls, Bear Shola, Coker's Walk and on the punts on the lake, Salt Creek where the car got stuck on the bank of the river on an outing; sliding around the cabin for three days during the typhoon in the North Pacific when all hope of survival was fading; the stifling hot black-out evacuation from India to the U.S. during World War II on the S. S. Brazil via South Africa when the Germans torpedoed the ship behind us; the endless trans-continental drives crowded in a small car with a water-drip cooler. Still others are etched in our memories: his illness, the funeral at Reedley, the grave near the school he built. Our memories of dad in America are tied to him at home--in the private sphere of life. We never really knew him in his public ministry, as an evangelist, teacher, preacher, scholar and diplomat.

There is much we took for granted. In retrospect as parents we wonder how he did it all. There was always food on the table, clothes on our bodies, beds at night, fees for Kodai, piano lessons, and time for family outings. How did he manage to trail a family with a herd of kids

with all their luggage, shots, passports and visas on trains to port cities, and around the world three times on ships? Doing it with two or three children in our days seems a nightmare. We all took these for granted, and never questioned whether things would work out--whether we would ever get back home after a trip, or the U.S. for college when we grew up.

Dad in Public Life

There is much of dad we never knew. We saw him at home, in his private life. But much of dad's life was involved in the public sphere--in earning a living, organizing and administering schools, and, above all, following his sense of the call of God on his life. It was that call to follow Christ that, more than anything, shaped his life.

The Evangelist

In his early years, before he went to India, Dad was a widely recognized evangelist in M. B. churches. As a single young man, he traveled widely around the Mennonite Brethren churches in the Midwest on evangelistic tours. Later, he and mom sang duets, and dad would preach.¹ I have met many older people in the midwest churches who tell me that it was his ministry that led them to follow Christ, and to grow in faith. In India, too, he was an evangelist. Most of his first years were spent in 'touring' the villages. Sometimes he took the family, often he went alone, taking me with him to visit the villages. Mom used to say that if he had ground coffee and 'reshta zieback' he could live happily in the villages for weeks. In the early years, we

¹ It was at one of his evangelist meetings, held in the Minneapolis Southside Mission, that I went forward and became a committed Christian. Dad was not only my physical but also my spiritual father.

camped in tents in a mango grove near a large village--a large one for dining and study, another larger one for cots, and a small one as a toilet. Later dad built a trailer on an old truck axle which could be pulled by oxen. This made life in the villages for the family much more comfortable. In the mornings dad and his Indian evangelists visited the neighboring village. Mom often used to visit with women in their homes where men were not allowed to enter. In the afternoon dad would hold two to three hour Bible classes for the four or five Indian evangelists who were part of the team (early nonformal training). In the evening, the team laid out *tsapas* in the public square and began singing to draw an audience. A sermon followed and anyone who was interested was counseled. Each night another village chosen, and every four or five days, when it was too far to walk to a new village, camp was broken and moved by oxen and later by car to another central spot. There were only ox cart trails, and often the car or trailer would get stuck in gray clay mud. Neighboring oxen were hired, and an hour was spent getting them free, only to do the same thing a mile or two down the way. These tours often lasted three or four weeks. Then the family returned to the mission compound for a week or two of rest before setting out again. In the Indian villages, I have met a great many people who speak with great respect of dad. He was not a 'dora' or colonial missionary. He loved and identified with the people, and they knew it. Even today others have told me that the Indian Christians remember dad as one who identified with them, and was their brother.

Dad was a good preacher. On furloughs he spoke widely in conferences and Bible meetings. He pastored the little Baptist church at Salem, Oregon, while completing his B.A. at Wilamet University. He was associate pastor at Reedley while he was founding Immanuel

Academy. During those years he preached each Sunday evening on the local radio station.²

In India dad was known as an excellent Bible expositor. He knew Telugu fluently, and continued to study both folk and classic Telugu throughout his years in India.

The Educator

Dad was a scholar and educator. At a time when higher education was suspect in Mennonite Brethren circles, dad went to Tabor to begin his B.A. studies while mom stayed in Mountain Lake. When they decided to go to India, they went one year with Phyllis, their newborn, to study at Nyack, the Christian and Missionary Alliance Bible School in New York.³ On his first furlough, dad took the pastorate of the Salt Creek Baptist Church near Salem, Oregon, and completed his B.A. at Wilamet College. During the war years he was asked to start a Christian high school in Reedley. He and two others founded Immanuel Academy, which, today is a large school in the San Juaqene Valley.

Dad spent his summers at the University of Southern California, and completed his M.A. in South Asian History. Professor Walbank invited him to join the faculty at U. S. C. as

² I bound copies of his radio sermons in a book, and have copies of many of his sermon notes. Since he went from church to church, he often used the same notes, and I think most of us can remember more than one of his outlines.

³ A. B. Simpson, founder of the Bible School, believed that Christ would return shortly so he build only wood frame buildings for the school, thinking it a waste of money to invest so much in buildings that would be used only for a short time. The large wood frame chapel with its old wooden seats still exists, and in 1985 I had the privilege of sitting in the chapel on those seats imagining what it was like for dad and mom to be there as a young married couple forty-seven years before.

professor in South Asian History, but he and mom decided to return to India in 1947. There he started the first high school of the India M. B. churches in Mahbubnagar.

Dad had a wide reputation as an first class educator, so when there was a crisis at Tabor College in 1948-1950, he was invited to come to the U.S. as president of the college. He turned this down twice, feeling he was needed more in India. Finally, under pressure from the M. B. Conference and the reluctant approval of the Mission Board, he and mom returned to take up the assignment. He asked for six months time to study and prepare himself for the work, but was told he had to begin immediately. He was not paid for the first month so he had to find funds to bridge the transition. There was a very conservative clique in the college board who wanted him to fire Dr. Schellenberg, the highly respected previous president and professor of psychology, and turn Tabor into a fundamentalist school. He refused and he was castigated for not yielding to their pressure. He had been told that the conference was unanimous in its support of his return to the U.S., but he found that it was the work of a few in high offices. He was trusted by both moderates and conservatives, and each wanted to use him to further their own ends. Caught in this denominational war, he fell into despair. He was given no support by the board, which was itself deeply divided, or by conference leaders. He was given no time to move from the taxing load in India to the crises at Tabor. Medical treatment for mental depression was primitive at the time, and when he was sick, he was sidelined as the denomination battle continued.

Dad was a great educator. He read widely and thought deeply. I remember someone asking him how he understood the complex currents in India during the move to independence, and he responding that he read the Blitz [the Indian Communist paper] and the Current [the

conservative pro-British paper], and assumed that the truth was somewhere between the two. He was a specialist in Indian history, and on India's movement to Independence. He was one of the few of the missionaries who favored Indian Independence, and the rapid indigenization of the mission work. In his last years in India he worked unceasingly to train Indian leaders to run the schools, hospitals and churches. He is still remembered in India as one who sided with the Indians.

The Leader

Dad was widely recognized as a good leader. In India his advise was sought in many mission matters, even when he was a junior missionary. In India, he was known as a bridge builder— one who could mediate between factions in the mission. In the U.S. he was seen as a diplomat who could bridge hostile factions, and as a reconciler.

Dad believed deeply in empowering others. He was not a kingdom builder. Rather, he took pride in training young leaders and turning work over to them to run. He brought in young missionaries and mentored them to take over his work so he could move on. He encouraged the Ernest Schmidts to come as young missionaries to Mahbubnagar, and groomed Ernest to be the principal of the high school.⁴ He talked the Herb Krauses (principal at Windsor School, the 1- 8 grade country school we attended near Reedley, CA), and Ms. Ruth (our Reedley piano teacher) to come to Kodai to teach.

⁴ Later his work was undone by senior missionaries, and Ernest and Evelyn returned to California broken and disillusioned by the seniority system in India.

Dad was an early feminist. He encouraged mom and his daughters to study and think for themselves.

To be continued:

Paul Hiebert