

HARRY CLAY DEMUTH
October 1, 1915 – December 28, 1992
Rest in Peace

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When I was fourteen years old I took a summer job, at my father's suggestion, in the back office of the F.S. Moseley securities firm in the Chicago Loop, and found myself the youngest commuter on the Chicago & Northwestern North Shore line. I was conspicuous, waiting on the railroad platform with all those high-powered Kenilworth businessmen, not only for my youth but because I carried no briefcase and tucked the *Sun-Times* rather than the *Tribune* under my arm. Conspicuous but not intimidated. I knew we took the liberal *Sun-Times* because Dad had never forgiven the *Tribune* for aggressively promoting special benefits for World War II veterans, which he as a proud veteran regarded as an outrage and an insult. And Dad assured me that the briefcases mostly contained ham sandwiches for lunch.

About a week into this routine, a man I hardly knew, and whom I had never seen in the company of my mother or father and never would, came up to me and said: "You're the DeMuth boy aren't you—Harry DeMuth's son? Well, your father is a remarkable man, one of the finest there is. Everybody on this platform thinks so too. You're lucky to be his son, but you should know that he is special, and most people probably wouldn't just say this to you."

I remember this story because it is typical of the esteem people had for my father and because of what it leaves unsaid. Everyone here will have memories of what it was that made Harry DeMuth remarkable, fine, and special, but his interests and friendships were so diverse that any effort to encompass them is sure to leave out something important. So as the family's designated eulogist on this bitter occasion I will not even try to paint a complete picture and will mostly confine myself to why he was a fine and special father to me.

Dad rarely offered direct fatherly advice and never, ever preached: he was imperious about the best astronomy software programs and the fine points of preparing hollandaise, but on the big questions he would usually respond, like a law professor, with a question of his own. He raised his voice at me on only two occasions (outside the special context of the sailboat race). As a father he led by example, which was itself instructive, revealing the importance he attached to self-reliance, experience, and particularity. Three particular things I learned growing up in his home were integrity; love of knowledge, art, and music; and playfulness.

By integrity I mean that it was Dad's habit to approach subjects of discussion and questions of behavior from the standpoint of what was right and just rather than what was expedient. It was this habit of mind that led him to agitate against veterans' benefits following his arduous experience in the war, to fire off pro-labor union letters to the editor as a young business executive, and, much later in life, to condemn the political correctness movement in our universities, including his own University of Wisconsin. One of the few times I saw him lash out in anger was in reaction to an anti-Semitic remark overheard on a railroad dining car; I was six or seven at the time and hardly knew what was happening, but the incident left a permanent impression. On our spring vacations to a splendid resort on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the 1950s, he would make a point of driving us around some of the most impoverished areas of the rural South, and of showing us the White and Colored rest rooms and drinking fountains, and of questioning us about what we thought of all this.

While Dad's immense knowledge and playfulness made him great company, his integrity made him challenging company—an unguarded mean remark was sure to be contradicted. But as I said he was never preachy; he acted as though disinterestedness was the ordinary perspective of the civilized adult, like proper manners.

Dad's love of knowledge, art, and music was most conspicuous, of course, in his decades of study of Samuel Johnson and James Boswell and of the cello,

and in his expert devotion to classical and modern music and art. His children were blessed, more than they knew at the time, to be raised in a home where books and literary and scientific magazines were everywhere and great music filled the air from breakfast to bedtime. But we were also blessed—and this we knew at once—to live in a home that was the first in the neighborhood with a television set (a DuMont, in 1950 or 1951), and the only one with a network of radio antennas and towers on the house and garage roofs and strung throughout the trees, with a father who knew TV scriptwriters and jazz musicians and who sat in the radio shack bantering with friends on South Sea islands and who, in 1958, confirmed that Explorer I had achieved Earth orbit.

Stephanie and Philip, who were more musical and literary, may feel differently about this, but to me it was Dad's enthusiasm for the hard natural sciences that was most infectious. Very early on he had me devouring *Scientific American*, operating my own darkroom, and constructing radios and rockets and cloud diffusion chambers. A notable joint achievement was a reflector telescope; one week before his death he described with precision the method we used for determining, with candle flame and knife blade, when the concave mirror we were grinding had made the magical transition from a spherical to a parabolic surface.

I believe that Dad's love of music, art, and literature was of a piece with his love of physics, mathematics, radio, computers, logistics, engineering, military history, geography, and good food and wine. The joy he derived from sheer physical existence was so intense that mastering the facts of it all was necessary but insufficient: he also needed to know how the greatest geniuses had experienced it, interpreted it, and variously given expression to their own wonderment.

Dad's own favorite mode of expression was play—not just musical play but sports and dancing and continuous joking and spoofing. He would perform astounding magic shows in the living room for Ethel and his three children, bring home *faux* uncles who could pull coins from our ears and swallow lit cigarettes,

and orchestrate elaborate practical jokes on friends and family, especially on his mother Bessie and her always-gullible sister Zelda. He always had some recreational passion on the front burner—curling, pool, square dancing, jigsaw puzzles, sailing, golf—and in the cases of sailing and curling pursued them through several national championships. And from beginning to end his conversation was thoroughly witty, ironic, lighthearted, and playful, and often so subtle that it was difficult to know for sure when your leg was being pulled.

I am not going to get into retelling jokes, but I want to assure everyone that Harry's fun-loving nature was with him to the end. In his final days, reduced to a skeleton by disease and malnutrition and with barely enough energy to sit up, he still made sport of absolutely everything—returning fire with the saliva spray bottle, giving parting instructions to Leilani on the use of bottle rockets to scare off the deer, and looking with mock forlornness about his bed for a place to conceal the latest unwanted serving of oatmeal, so as not to hurt the feelings of the day nurse.

Of all Dad's enthusiasms, the most durable was business. Although he was an intensely competitive man and proud of his business success, he was not in it for power, glory, or money. Indeed it sometimes seemed that he regarded the DeMuth Steel Products Company as an eleemosynary institution—especially in the eyes of his father Lester, the company's founder, who would interrupt family dinners to remonstrate against his son's scandalous patience with the accounts receivable and penchant for making easy loans to any customer with a good sob story. I think he was in it for the personal friendships it brought. I never knew a man who took more delight in friendship, nor a businessman more deeply interested in the lives and welfare of his employees and especially his customers, many of whom he cherished as much as his family. His business interests took him far and wide, but the letters he wrote back from Moscow and Hokkaido spoke not of the deals he was making but of the friends he was making, and of their cultures and interests and idiosyncrasies.

Having seen the whole world, and having once in his globetrotting days made the ridiculous statement to Stephanie that he regarded himself a "citizen of the world," Dad came later in life to realize that his greatest admiration was for the American farmer and small businessman, and that his greatest love was for his family and especially for Leilani. In recent years he finally let go of most day-to-day business operations, and this was for one reason alone: that he had finally, in his second marriage, found true domestic happiness. Dad's absolute love and devotion to Leilani is well known to their friends and has been a source of great joy to their four children. Stephanie, Philip, and I can also attest, what fewer now know, that his first marriage to our mother Ethel was also in its better times a source of happiness to both of them, and brought forth many acts of mutual tenderness and resourceful parenting.

My father was not a churchgoing man and only rarely pronounced a blessing or invoked the Deity. In part this was simply a consequence of his not being a joiner, and of his indifference to ceremony and dislike of public display; this was a man, after all, who cut his high school graduation, leaving Bessie in tears, because the atmospheric conditions happened to be favorable that morning for working new countries on the ham radio. At a deeper level, it was a consequence of his restless worldly curiosity and of his exuberance for living, which led him to despise rather than fear death. But I wish to point out that the two men he admired above all others were Samuel Johnson and Johann Sebastian Bach—men who were not only passionately religious but whose works were expressions of religious understanding and who, indeed, purposely set themselves to fortifying established, traditional religion against the growth of science, rationalism, and doubt in the eighteenth century.

I do not know how, in the end, my father reconciled his own rationalism with the profoundly religious legacies of his two heroes. But I do know that he understood the vanity of human wishes from experience as well as from Dr. Johnson: that in his hugely successful life he endured the horrors of war, was

stung by his share of personal and professional failures, and knew deep personal sorrow. I have no doubt that, through all his innate skepticism, he contemplated and wished for a higher life and higher understanding. Three weeks ago we sat and listened for the last time together to Bach's great cantata *Wachet Auf*, and as the glorious final chorale reached its crescendo, he raised up his head and hands and smiled broadly—a frail maestro but in command to the end—and lifted the chorus through its closing strains:

In thy city we are consorts
Of the angels high about thy throne.
No eye hath seen,
No ear hath heard
Such joy.
Therefore do we rejoice,
Io, Io!
Ever in dulci júbilo.