

A Question of Ethics

How Do You Measure the Life of a Man?

“How do you measure the life of a man?” So began the eulogy I delivered at the end of July. The funeral was for **Truman King**, a longtime family friend who had recently passed away. My father had passed away just four days before Truman. I wrote a eulogy for him, too, but never gave it. I knew I wouldn’t make it through. Both men were in their 80s.

The process of writing eulogies brought back the memory of **Dick Watson, CPCU**. Dick became a mentor in my formation as a CPCU. His encouragement and example led me to volunteer for Society service. Dick passed away following an accident at home in 1997. I was with my father when I learned of Dick’s passing, and was able to tell him of Dick’s influence in my life. I delivered his eulogy at the next St. Louis Chapter meeting.

I’ve heard a number of eulogies over the past several years. Most describe the deceased’s successes in business and other activities. It’s typical to hear about the good qualities — the contributions to family, friends and community. We need to hear these things as we honor and celebrate the lives of our departed family, friends and associates.

Each of these three men were successful in business, were good fathers and husbands, pursued outside interests with zeal, and were active in their communities. Although I could say many things about each of them — at first thought, something more important than all the others comes to mind. Integrity. That’s it. And it matters more than the rest.

A Different Time

All three men had their characters — and their ideas and ideals — formed through the crucible of the Great Depression. Tough times bring trial — trial that demands solid judgment



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Truman’s father could not find a job, so Truman quit school as a teenager to support his parents for several years. My father was oldest in a large family. He had polio as a baby, and walked only with great pain and difficulty while he was growing up. In the end, he overcame the disability. However, the medical bills drained his family of what little they had.

“Tough times bring trial — trial that demands solid judgment and strength of conviction if one is to survive.”

Having very little was part and parcel of the time. Most families were poor in a material sense, but their poverty was seldom one of spirit. Dick, Truman and my father had personal integrity drilled into them as children. They, along with many of their generation, learned the value of honesty, commitment and dedication at an early age. They were committed to their principles, and dedicated to doing what’s right.

A man or woman’s reputation was all that there was.

A New Beginning

Dick joined the Army Air Corps (now the Air Force) at the outset of war.

He became a pilot, and flew missions over China, India and North Africa. After the war, he returned to the University of Missouri and received his law degree. He then joined Bierman-Condray Inc., adjusters specializing in handling property and aviation claims. He retired as CEO in the mid-1990s.

Truman returned to school at night. He earned his high school diploma, and then went on to earn his B.S., MBA and Ph.D. in business — all while working during the day and starting a family. He was head of human resources at Wagner Electric for many years before leaving to found his own firm, Truman L. King and Associates, in 1976. His firm provided a broad array of HR services. Truman specialized in labor negotiations with unions.

Dad studied economics at Washburn University. He had to work fulltime in order to pay for his books and tuition. In the late 1940s, he began a long career with Reynolds Metals Company. He oversaw operations in a 12-state area of the Midwest, South and West.

Choices and Challenges

One day at his office, Dick was approached by a man offering to sell him some expensive jewelry at cut-rate prices. The jewelry had been stolen. Instead of turning him away, Dick indicated interest and agreed to meet with the man again. In the meantime, he contacted the authorities. Ultimately, the “fence”

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was arrested, convicted and sent to prison.

One of Truman’s most important clients in the early 1980s was a large industrial firm. Truman worked on labor issues with the executive in charge of one of their largest facilities. The two men had a strong working relationship. At least once, Truman witnessed the executive verbally (sexually) harassing the head of human resources. The executive was a man and the HR head, a woman. This occurred long before modern legal protections were in place. She took it up with senior management.

The abuse had taken place over the telephone. Truman was sitting in the man’s office, but was not part of the conversation. He could have taken a safer route and denied hearing it or even being there. When asked, he told the truth. In doing so, Truman destroyed his relationship with the executive. By getting involved, he could have lost a key client. He took that risk. It worked out, though, and his client appreciated him even more. The executive was replaced and eventually fired.

Dad was approached by a co-worker who wanted him to cooperate in a scheme to depose the senior executive in their office. The senior exec was an alcoholic and a poor manager to boot. No one wanted to work for him. Dad declined politely, after which the co-worker set out on a vendetta to destroy Dad’s career.

Some months later, Dad was contacted by a couple of friends from home office warning him of what was transpiring. At that point, there wasn’t much he could do but wait it out. Eventually, the senior exec was transferred. A couple of months later, the new VP told Dad that he

had been instructed by the company’s president to find out what was going on in the office and to fire Dad. He never did. Instead, he reported back that Dad wasn’t the problem. About six months later, the VP stopped by his office on a Saturday to get something. He found someone going through his desk. It was the co-worker Dad had turned down. The following Monday, the co-worker was transferred to the West Coast.

Things don’t always work out that well. An accounting manager I worked with many years ago was fired soon after refusing to falsify a report that was destined for home office. I didn’t know about it because I was working elsewhere at the time. I ran into him by chance about six months later. He had a worn and worried look. He hadn’t found a job yet.

The Ultimate Achievement

We found a plaque at Truman’s house after he passed away. It was inscribed with the following:

“To Truman L. King
Best of luck to a worthy adversary
Sometimes a foe
Frequently an antagonist
Habitually ironclad
Repeatedly authoritative
Severely arbitrary
But always fair, sensitive, honest
and humane
To his fellow man
Presented 1977
By Local 1104 I.U.E.”

I believe that these words accurately reflect the character of Truman, Dick, my father and many others of their generation. They held their convictions closely and lived by them. **Tom Brokaw** has rightly described

this group of individuals as “The Greatest Generation.”

But they weren’t perfect. Regardless, we ignore the lessons of the past at our own peril. While it has been left to our generation to correct some of the injustices of the past, we also have created our own.

The Torch Has Passed

In the immortal words of **John F. Kennedy**: “The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans.” Indeed it has, but this time not to John Kennedy’s, Dick Watson’s, Truman King’s and my father’s generation, but to our own. Are we ignoring the torch as we stumble aimlessly looking for the right? Are we using that torch to light a path to our own calamity? Or are we building the light, making the torch brighter, to light a path to prosperity and justice for our generation and those that follow us?

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