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Snow and Thunder

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It was early February and the snow was falling outside our conference center in the hilltop town of Castelgandolfo just outside Rome. Then came the loud claps of thunder. Quite unusual. But no more so than our gathering. My son and I had joined about 400 religious workers from 59 countries and five continents to speak of the things which make for a more just and peaceful world. Roma 2009 was not another conference in which people get together, speak about peace and go home. The vast majority of those in attendance came out of environments of conflict, human suffering or a history of violence and warfare.

Some were emotionally depleted from the arduous task of surviving in native lands where government and military are oppressive and overpowering. Most were invigorated by the opportunity to join together with other peacemakers and justice-seekers for mutual support and sharing of stories. Peacemaking often can be a lonely and thankless task. My role at the meeting, along with a few other academics, was to talk about our teaching, writing and research as it relates to peace. In my case, it meant discussing my recent book, Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton, and exploring the intersecting of peacemaking and interfaith understanding. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and celebrated author, had written much that was relevant to our gathering. He and his interfaith friends of the mid-20th century encouraged one another to become “signs or sacraments of peace.”

Since the majority of those present were Baptists of “all shapes and sizes,” I also spoke of the work of Martin Luther King Jr., who himself was a Baptist minister. In addition to Baptists, there were representatives of the larger Christian community. Also present were several Muslim peacemakers. A group of Buddhist monks from Southeast Asia, with whom I had intended to meet, were denied visas and could not attend. The week-long conference involved worship in many languages, skills-training workshops, storytelling and meals together.

As the week unfolded, I wondered what my real contribution to the conference might be. Then, it hit me all at once – like the snow and the thunder. I would leave behind the words of Dr. King for others. I knew these words best represent what I had been trying to say for over three decades at Linfield. And I knew it was what we were about at Castelgandolfo this past February. It all came down to love, but not just “any old love.”

When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response…Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door…This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: “Let us love one another; for love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.”

With this kind of love, we shall indeed overcome someday. Until then, my friends from the Castelgandolfo conference will keep working – and hopefully so will I.

— William Apel
Professor of Religion

David Lett proved that professional success can be accomplished with little more than vision, dedication and a willing hand. His story of persistence, tenacity and a belief in his dream was shared with the more than 600 members of the class of 2009 on a sun-drenched day in the Oak Grove. His son, Jason, Lett, told graduates the key to his father’s success was blending the three elements of being human: the heart, the head and the hand.

David Lett, founder of The Eyrie Vineyards and the father of Oregon’s world-renowned wine industry, was awarded an honorary degree posthumously by Linfield College for his vision and commitment that helped establish Oregon as a premier wine producer. Lett died last fall on the eve of his 39th grape harvest. “It would have given Dad great pleasure to stand here today and address you all,” said Jason, who accepted the degree on behalf of his family. “No doubt the things he would have had to say would have delighted those of you starting the next leg of your life’s journey and left those who helped get you this far feeling a little uneasy.”

Jason recommended graduates remember three things: make space for the cosmic brick, that moment of life-changing revelation; the value of education is not the knowledge, it’s the tools; and dedication trumps money. Expected to become a doctor, David completed his bachelor’s degree, applied to 12 medical schools and was rejected by them all. While in California in 1962 for an interview at a dental school, he took a side trip to one of the few artisan wineries in the Napa Valley where, over the course of one day, he found his calling.

He turned “winewards,” Jason said, and completed a degree in viticulture at the University of California at Davis. There he had his first taste of pinot noir from the Burgundy region of France and was captivated. He spent several months in northern Europe researching specific climate requirements of pinot noir and became convinced that Oregon’s Willamette Valley offered the best climate. In 1966, he and his wife, Doreen, established The Eyrie Vineyards, becoming the first to plant pinot noir in the Willamette Valley. They produced their first vintage in 1970. During tastings in France in 1979 and 1980, a 1973-vintage Eyrie pinot noir put the wine world on notice that Oregon vineyards could produce world-class wines.

Jason said one of the most valuable parts of David’s college experience were the contacts he made and introductions to growers in Europe who put what he had learned into a new context. “The only conclusion I can reach from examining my father’s education is that you should not be afraid to throw out almost everything you’ve been taught,” Jason said. “I know that’s a daunting thought. But your education has given you tools to think through and to build your own approach to things.”

Jason encouraged graduates to balance caring for the environment, love and time for family and friends, and professional success. “We’re all seeking our own balance of these three things, but we live in tippy times,” he said. “How, in tippy times, do we muster the resources to follow our dreams?”

Jason told of his father coming to Oregon with very little and working first in a berry nursery and later finding a job selling college textbooks that freed his summers to work in the vineyard. His limited resources became an asset as he learned the wine industry from grape to bottle. When he couldn’t get a loan to build and equip a winery, he rented an old ag processing plant and cobbled together equipment to produce his first vintage.

“Dad was dedicated to the hands-on details of his art,” Jason said. “He realized early that in the search for quality, personal dedication trumps financial might. His hands-on ethos was a great example to us winegrowers who follow him and it was one of his greatest legacies to us.”

— Mardi Mileham

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‘Dedication trumps money’

David Lett