Dedication Trumps Money

Mardi Mileham

Linfield College

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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 intersection of peacemaking and interfaith understanding. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and celebrated author, had written much that was relevant to 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.

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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. 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.

Dedication trumps money

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 dreams 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 “winemaker,” 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 1975-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.

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