

Tribute for Eric William Stevenson

I have known Eric for over 60 years. Although our life journeys were in many respects very different, I developed a great respect for him. About 15 years ago he asked me to conduct his funeral memorial. Over the years he sent me copious details about his life and his wishes. Definitely no traditional religious service. He left a list with Ken White of “people whom I think should be told if I drop off the twig”

He listed his cv of jobs he had been involved in, papers about his spiritual journey and a paper titled: **“This is your life - Eric Stevenson”**

He was born during the great depression and the Second World War started when he was 11. He started work as an apprentice electrician. In his teenage years he became very religious, extremely legalistic, unquestioning acceptance of doctrines, judgmental and naïve but sincere, strictly honest and compassionate. He worked with Open Air Campaigners, Youth for Christ, Beach Missions. He attended Melbourne Bible College for Missionary training for 2 years and was accused by one of the students of being too pious.

He met Ruthie, his earlier love, again at the Sydney Youth Convention and she agreed to send out his newsletters when he became a missionary.

He went to Papua New Guinea Highlands and established a radio station and helped with the excavating of a hydro-electricity canal. He came home and got engaged to Ruth Anderson (Ruthie). He returned and became the Senior Electrician for the Highlands.

He became disillusioned with the destruction of cultural artifacts by missionaries and with the help of Rev Cecil Gribble became a candidate for Methodist Ministry. He was accepted and they married in 1958. He started his studies at the Theological College and quote “At the bus stop on my way home on the first night at college I wrote in my diary that **“from then on I would open myself to truth no matter from whom or from where it was revealed to me”**

He completed his Licentiate of Theology, his Bachelor of Arts and his Masters of Psychology at Macquarie University. He became the chaplain at the Gladesville Mental Hospital and developed volunteer services.

Gough Whitlam had started the Australian Assistance Plan and Eric became the Social Planner for the Sydney South West Region managing and distributing

over 3 million dollars to community services. This program ceased and he became a counsellor with the Methodist Marriage Guidance Council. At the formation of the Uniting Church, he was invited to become the founding Director of Unifam where he served for 17 years. He retired in 1995.

Most of the papers Eric left me deal with his spiritual journey. His world view broadened especially through his university studies and working with mental patients and his encounter with progressive religious thinkers, philosophers and scientists. It was a growing search for truth and love. He willingly entered a world of doubt, uncertainty and danger with less or no emphasis on the supernatural.

He recognized more and more that life for many is terrible, full of prejudice, injustice, persecution, abuse, grief, abject poverty, disability and disasters

He had great respect for those who have chosen to grow like flowers within these terrible situations. Eric tried to be like them quoting the words of John Shelby Spong, he tried "to love wastefully, live fully and be the best person that I can be."

He was brutally honest, stubborn, practical, clear thinking and generous.

He tried to find meaning outside institutions and institutional structures. He lived life to the full without the supernatural and yet, in my opinion, a true follower of Jesus, caring for others, especially the disadvantaged, and helping others to live their lives as fully as possible.

Talking of practical: When I looked through lots of pages about his spiritual journey, there was this little note saying:

"P.S. Do you need any firewood as there is a heap of it in the back sheds at 4 Woodlands Road which you are welcome to. Eric."

The last few years have been very difficult ones for Eric. We acknowledge today his courage and patience and positive attitude which stopped him from moaning and complaining. But his struggle was not alone.

His last instruction to me was this, I will read it verbatim:

"Finally, Tom, I want your oration to include a vital statement. It is what I have appeared to have achieved in life has been done at times at great cost to my family and some of my colleagues. It has occasionally, (secretly if not publicly) besmirched my own character. Upon reflection, in my enthusiasm to

do good for others, I have sometimes neglected and/or ignored and/or betrayed my wife and children. They deserve much of the credit for any good that I have done. I can recall instances when my behaviour in connection with my work was utterly selfish and when I let my status achieve unworthy ends. Do-goodism is a deceiving way of life; it is often a self-fulfilling egocentric activity disguised as an act of pure humanitarianism.”

I want to pay tribute today to Eric’s family and friends. They will miss this very special person in their lives.

The death of a loved one is a very difficult and confusing time. On the one hand we are grieving and sad and full of sorrow. On the other hand, we talk of thanksgiving and celebration. And both are necessary for us humans. The Lebanese philosopher and artist, Kahlil Gibran, wrote a poem about this struggle between Joy and sorrow.

The wise person in his poem points out that they are the two sides of the same coin. It is precisely because we have so much to be thankful for and remember with joy that we feel the pain of loss so deeply. Here are some lines from this poem.

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.

And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter’s oven?

And is not the lute that soothes your spirit the very wood that was hollowed by knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."

But I say unto you, they are inseparable

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

Verily you are suspended like scales between your sorrow and your joy.

Only when you are empty are you at a standstill and balanced.

When the treasure-keeper lifts you to weigh his gold and his silver, needs must your joy or your sorrow rise or fall.

We who love and respect Eric, give thanks for everything in his life that reflected goodness and commitment and love and we are grateful that for him the suffering and difficulties of this life are past. Thankyou Eric!