

Ken Belden

1912 - 2002

David Belden, speaking at his father's funeral in St. Martin's Church, Knebworth, Hertfordshire, England, on December 6 2002.

Well, he's gone. It's wonderful to see so many here to say goodbye. One of Dad's many talents was this: he was a great speaker at funerals. Also at weddings. Also at meetings of all kinds, and believe me, we had meetings of all kinds when I was growing up.

You would think a teenage son would tend towards embarrassment when his father gets up to speak in public. One difference between me and you, Rowan (*my son, aged 14*), was that by the time I was your age I had heard my father speak in public dozens of times, whereas this may be the first time you have heard me do so. I have to say that for me, when my Dad got up to speak, it was always a pleasure and a relief. He would be funny, warm, interesting and intelligent, and would make everyone in the room feel included.

I'd like some audience participation. Is there by chance anyone here for whom my father gave the speech at their wedding? (*Quite a few hands are raised – seven or eight?*). Anyone who remembers my father speaking at a friend's wedding, or at the funeral of someone you were close to? Or at some other large meeting, perhaps at the Westminster Theater, or Caux? (*A good majority of the hands are raised by now - perhaps 150 people in the church*). Well, I think you all know what I am talking about, about how he included everyone.

My father's ability as a public speaker was just one part of what I think was his shining characteristic: he was a great creator of community, and especially of the warmth that we all wish for in any community to which we may belong. Public speaking, public leadership were a part of that for most of his life, but so was his every contact with people, to the very end. One day in his last week, he was sitting up in his chair, in hospital, his speech such a soft mumble it was hard to catch what he was saying. Another old man, a patient, came to the door of Dad's room by mistake and looked in, confused. Dad said perfectly loudly and clearly, "Come in! You are welcome!"

We have had so many emails and letters from people about him. This one from Kay Hassell put this point beautifully: "Ken was one of our family's great friends. He gave the address at Dad's memorial service. He was one of the most caring, compassionate and visionary people I know. Many people will write to you of his talents, his writings, his work for the Westminster Theatre and the whole world of the Arts, but I suppose I remember him most as one of the "leaders" of MRA who always greeted me with a twinkle in his eye, and never made me feel small or insignificant."

That twinkle! Jean Bunton writes from Australia: "Your dad always had a twinkle in his eye: He really loved people, and communicated that so easily. He was very much a father figure to a lot of us, and whenever Uncle Ken was around we knew there was going to be some fun. He made you feel that you mattered, however young you were, and that there would be a great future ahead. He was optimistic. And even if he was surrounded by crowds of people, there would always be a smile for each person individually." In a poem she sent us, Janet Nelson, who lost her own father when she was very young, called Ken "Dear second Dad."

Of course the person he loved the most was my mother. This was a love affair that lasted. She delighted him when he first fell in love with her and proposed, she delighted him still more when she accepted his second proposal eight years later, and she delighted him constantly through their marriage. He had a great ability not to let the things and the people he appreciated grow stale on him, and that was especially so of his wife. She would sometimes express astonishment at his devotion.

One of the finest things he did in his long life was to bring Mum home when she had Alzheimer's. He had been caring for her at home to the point of his own complete exhaustion, so that the only option was for her to go into a residential facility. I was amazed when, within weeks, as soon as he had begun to recover, he decided to bring her home again and hire someone full time to look after her – though all the night time care would still be up to him alone. It was agonizing that she was with him, and yet simultaneously gone. Yet even then, they shared quite a few laughs together, and his love for her was undiminished. A wonderful result also, that unexpectedly redounded to his own benefit, was that the people he hired to look after Mum, stayed on to look after him. Beryl Fox, who came in all day every weekday, and her friend Maud Young, who took weekend duty, became part of the family. Maud was with them when my mother died, and she held Dad's hand when he died, as Beryl had just stepped out of the room. Beryl said to me that with her own parents gone, she felt towards Ken and Stella as she would to a second set of parents. So my father has been 'dear second Dad' to more than one person, and thus he found that the love he gave in his life, was returned.

If I were to wish for any quality to be handed down from Ken Belden to myself, and to my son, and to any further generations, and to all his friends, it is this: the capacity to love and to communicate that love to many people.

Not that he didn't have many other qualities. Elizabeth Williams, in a phone call this week, emphasized two of them. She worked as Dad's secretary, alongside Heather Fripp, when Dad was managing the Westminster Theatre. She said that for her, the two most memorable qualities were that he had a great capacity for fun, and a great ability to work.

So what was his work? He joined this new Christian movement called the Oxford Group, later Moral Re-Armament or MRA, when he was an undergraduate at Oxford, and he worked with it all his life. In a different movement he would have been called a lay evangelist, but the Oxford Group liked terms that sounded less religious, so they called themselves life changers. Dad's calling was always to be a life changer. But at first it was all he did, traveling round the South of England in the late thirties with his great friend and colleague, Peter Phelps, helping to generate the revival, the fellowship. He was called up and served as a fireman in the war, first driving fire engines, then as an aide in the fire HQ in Westminster. He wrote and edited a newsletter for thousands of MRA service people throughout the war. After the war, with my mother, he took on the MRA publications, and became an expert typographer and publisher. Once married, they helped to run the Caux conference center in Switzerland for four years from 1948. From 1962 he managed the Westminster Theatre for, I think, 18 years. He was responsible for conceiving, raising the money for and carrying out a large building program at the Theatre, which doubled its size, and for running MRA plays, six performances a week, with professional actors, for years. He retired, if that is the right word, to Knebworth, where he wrote books, carried on a huge correspondence with people all over the world, traveled, and took part in the life of the village. Although he did not have a dog collar, he was a lay pastor to a large flock around the world.

He did all this for no salary. My mother had a small private income but Dad did not. Certain people whom he helped to a new Christian life responded by sending him some money every month, and one dear friend of his gave them the house in Knebworth. That is how he brought in his share of the family finances, until the old age pension doubled his income.

He describes his life beautifully in his book *The Hour of the Helicopter*, and I hope that anyone who has not read it will do so. We have brought copies of that book and others of his writings, for you to take away, free, if you would like to, at the reception.

One very important thing you will get from that book is the understanding that Dad, for all his competence as a speaker and leader, started out very fearful and shy. The key to his whole life was his sense that when he gave his life to God, God became the strength, the unseen power that enabled him to change, to speak in public, to get beyond fear and ambition, and that directed him every day. The helicopter image refers to the sense he had of being lifted by God – for Rowan and Andrew, a better image now might be a James Bond rocket back pack: with God you can fly. In his view, this was not so much a belief, as an experience. It was not a one time experience, but a developing one. He had a bleak decade in the 1950s, and almost left his

calling, but felt that this lift returned to him when he gave up trying to second guess God. A Bible verse that spoke to him was: “Does the clay say to the Potter, What are you making out of me?” When he stopped wanting God to make him successful at his vocation, and just agreed to do whatever was needed, he became free again, and entered on a decade of great achievement.

I have to say that I am only half way through. Dad would have given a shorter speech than this. In the second half, I want to talk less of what he did, which you can read in his book, than of who he was, and what he gave to me and others like me.

Many letters and emails have mentioned his enjoyment of life. Penelope Thwaites, who will play for us in a few minutes, said this week of Dad that he had a “passionate, personal response to music.” This is quite an appreciation to come from a successful concert pianist. It was a sadness to us, that really from the time my mother got Alzheimer’s he seemed to stop listening to music, so if you knew him in these last years, you might never have seen him dancing subtly to Dvorak or Vaughan Williams.

He also loved color and form. He was a fine water colourist. He taught himself to become an exceptional typographer, or designer of words in print. He called himself an amateur. But professionals thought him one of the best. In Knebworth he turned much of that love of color and form into gardening. He loved a good meal, a good joke, and a good pint of beer. He gave up alcohol because he was convinced that one could not help alcoholics without doing so, but he once told me he fancied there was beer in heaven. Now he knows.

He was an unusual person in that he could have the big picture, the vision, in mind, and yet simultaneously attend to the smallest detail: keeping each in right balance to the other. Who could forget my parents at breakfast discussing the color combinations of the food that was going to be served for 50 or 100 guests that night: broccoli not cauliflower, because the fish sauce was white already, and green was needed, and why not some carrots too for a splash of orange.

For Dad, the life of someone dedicated to God was not a narrow life of piety, but a life wide open to beauty, to history, to appreciation of what science tells us about evolution and the stars, to creative invention, as well as to managerial efficiency, and professional excellence. In fact, these were all connected, and all were a seamless part of creating the community, whether you call it the Kingdom of God, the fellowship, remaking the world, or whatever.

The last major quality of my Dad’s I want to mention is loyalty. Loyalty to individuals and loyalty to calling. Dad could be quite sharp when in managerial work mode and not putting up with inefficiency, but the only times I was aware of him getting seriously angry with people was when he felt they had betrayed their calling.

My own inability to continue with MRA was one of his life’s serious disappointments. I first committed myself to God and to work with MRA at around age 17, and then found my questions and experiences took me away, around age 22. A crucial moment in this path was when, at 17, I went to work with MRA in India for six months before starting at college, and while there wrote my parents that I was so in love with India and the work that I intended to stay, and not go to Oxford. A number of MRA youngsters were choosing to give up college at that time. It didn’t seem too important by comparison with remaking the world.

My father wrote back that I would indeed go to Oxford. So I did. He believed in education. I often wondered, but never asked, whether he regretted forcing me to go. Because the university did indeed teach me to question and to think, as it is supposed to do, and my new thoughts took me away from his thoughts.

During my undergraduate years, I strove mightily to relive my father’s experience of Oxford. Dad was recruited during a great religious revival – the Oxford Group was the largest revival in the western world between the wars. There is a stunning book, which still, better than anything else, captures the romance and wonder of the early Oxford Group: it’s called *For Sinners Only*. It tells stories of people whose lives were changed. My father read it at college, and it was the first thing that attracted him to the movement. By my

time, the revival was over, the momentum lagging – I thought we could revive it. I went up to Dad's old college, and joined other sons and daughters of his old Oxford Group friends in forming the new student team. At first we were quite successful, and new people joined us. But the zeitgeist was moving in other directions: it was 1968, and the left and the sexual revolution were ascendant. Our recruits fell away, and then half our core team fell away. I fell into despair.

The one person who helped me then, was my father. He introduced me to a book by an old friend of his, Charlie Andrews. The book was about love, and about a personal friendship with Jesus. Dad and the book helped me to an epiphany: what we were doing was not about success; it was a struggle, yes, and a lifelong struggle at that, but it was all made possible by the fact that we were loved. In fact, life in general is about love: that is, giving and receiving love. It is not about winning. This was my second conversion, my first having been at 17 when I did what I thought was the classic MRA thing of measuring my life by absolute moral standards and giving my life to God. But it had been a rather dictatorial and impersonal God I had given myself to. With this second conversion, my heart felt lightened. This was my father's gift to me. It will seem curious and disappointing to the Christians in the room, as it did to my father, that later I had a third conversion, when I found that intellectually I could not continue to believe. To this day I am an agnostic, though it was a cause of great amusement to my Dad when three years ago I became president of a church, a Unitarian Church, which is about the only one an agnostic can be president of. But I have never lost the sense of being cosmically loved in some inexplicable way. This is not to describe, still less to justify my adult path to you, only to say that my father gave me a double gift – his lifelong love and the right word and book at the right time, which have fed me ever since, however mysteriously I may have interpreted them. And he did this for many, many people.

I was not the only one he kept on loving, after I had left the fold and received an angry letter from him. It was a sadness to me that he and I could never again communicate on an intellectual level: I felt he did not want to consider my questions seriously, or really get to know my adult self. But he loved me hugely, that was never in doubt. He very sweetly did his best to rehabilitate me and think well of my oddball life. Dad praised Debi and me for doing 'a great work' in the United States. He always saw the positive. I was complaining to a friend last week that it was odd to be loved, but not understood; and this friend said, your father understood – at the heart level, not the intellectual level. This is one of several things I have learned since he died.

When I first read *The Hour of the Helicopter* I was annoyed by it. I felt that it talked all about the positive, and refused to look in the shadows. Even saints cast shadows, and I felt my father denied them. This week I read the book again and I saw it quite differently. I saw how much light he shone, and how he did subtly refer to some of those shadows.

Maybe fifteen years ago I told my father that I had often thought of myself and him as versions of the same person, who had just had different life experiences. He, more realistic than I, thought this notion was ridiculous, hilarious. In his last week, as he lay in his hospital bed and we gave each other all the love in our hearts, he said, 'You look just like me' and 'I see myself in you.' He talked about crossing the stream, and fighting battles, and told me that he did not have much time left, but I was to carry on the fight, as I will.

If there is any saying of his that sums up his life to me, it is one he often used to quote in a cockney accent, after the person who had first said it to him, and I apologize for my poor accent. It is this: 'If yer stand wiv yer face to the sunshine, the shadders will fall be'ind.' While my mother died on what in America is Mother's Day, Dad died the day before Thanksgiving. Nothing could be more appropriate for him: all his life he gave thanks. He was entrusting the future to God right up to his final days. Dad stood with his face to the sunshine, and we could do worse than to stand there with him.

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