

Robert Walker: A Friend and A Mentor

Some time during the last few years Bob Walker whizzed past me in a wheel chair at O'Hare airport in Chicago. He looked so frail, but he was sitting ramrod straight, and there was a big smile on his face.

He and Barbara probably were on their way back to Florida for the winter. I was coming out of the Red Carpet Club and, by the time I recognized them, they had moved down the concourse.

I had to catch a plane in the other direction. So I did not call and run after them. "Some other time," I thought, but that was the last time I saw him.

I had met Bob when I was on the copy desk of the *Chicago Tribune* and was pursuing studies at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. Wes Pippert, then a White Correspondent for UPI, had told me how wonderful it was to work with him. I was looking for a place to do an internship to complete requirements for a degree at Garrett, and I approached him about the possibility of being an intern in his offices.

Bob readily worked me in, and within days he was acting like the internship was my fulltime job. I did not realize it, but he had thoughts of my leaving the Tribune and going to work for Christian Life, Inc.

That is what I did, in June 1968.

The work was exhilarating. Bob taught me how to do a feature story. I had never really understood the form until I worked with him. He always could take a piece and make it better. The pieces I brought to him looked so much better after he edited them, and I made the same mistakes so often that I felt like I was not learning. However, the fact that I felt that way offered a modicum of evidence that I understood I was falling short of his standard of excellence, and I at least was assuming some of his standards.

I always was impressed by the quality of Bob's writing. His stories read like he was telling the story rather than writing it. I soon learned that it was because he dictated his stories into a dictating machine and then had them transcribed.

The work also was frustrating. Bob was so far ahead of his peers in many ways and he was independent, as any good journalist should be. Moreover, Bob did not tend to be sensitive to advice from friends. If he thought something was right, he was not going to moderate or soften his position just to please somebody. He also was a big

believer in print, and he did not see Christian Life as a media company. Some of us thought he ought to expand his enterprise into a multi-media communications center.

By June 1970, I knew I needed to leave. However, it was very traumatic. I had resigned several times, but Bob would not accept my attempts at resignation, and his personality overwhelmed me.

One afternoon I took an executive of Christian Life (who had some of the same frustrations I had) with me to talk with my father about my situation. During that conversation I eventually became so emotional that I sobbed hysterically. My father and the executive were worried about my health, and they offered me general advice but no specific plan of action.

I drove around for a bit that day, thinking about their comments. Then, after hours, I went back to the office, packed all my personal belongings, wrote a note of resignation to Bob, left it and the key to the building and walked out the door.

I had no job, and I was bitter.

I stayed away from anything that had to do with Christian Life but, over the years, my father and professional friends told me what nice things Bob Walker had said about me.

Those reports cut into my heart. Here was a man who could have said all sorts of negative things about me, but he was so gracious that all he said was positive.

He was like the forgiving father of the prodigal son.

When Steve Strang, chief executive officer and chairman of the board of Strang Communications, asked me to speak at Bob's 80th birthday party in Anderson Commons at Wheaton College, I explained what Bob meant to me. It was the first time I had seen him since I had left Christian life, more than 20 years earlier.

Clearly, he had a remarkable relationship with his Savior.

His conversion had been dramatic. Sitting in the St. Louis airport, waiting to meet Carl Henry, former editor of *Christianity Today*, for an interview during the summer of 1968, he had told me how ashamed he was of his years before he met Jesus. He related his conversion and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in his life.

Today he is praising God with hundreds of his friends from around the world. He no longer is frail and ill. He is the robust Robert Walker, the weight lifter, for whom I worked.

I can see his chest out, chin up, striding along the streets of heaven, heartily greeting friends and new acquaintances, and I can hear the click of his heels on the golden surface.

Because of his forgiveness, our relationship was restored, and we spent time together during the last two decades. He wanted to know so much about how we are teaching students at Nebraska. He asked me one question after another, and I felt uncomfortable. The master was asking the student.

Bob was my mentor. I am forever in his debt for the lessons he taught me in journalism but, more importantly, his example in forgiveness.

As I recall my glimpse of Barbara and him at O'Hare, I wish, oh how I wish, I had forgotten about catching a plane and had run after him to say, "Thank you."

For now, that conversation will have to wait.

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