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Dr. C. Mervyn Maxwell, My Father

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I will remember Dr. C. Mervyn Maxwell, my father, for many things, for he was truly a multifaceted individual.

I will remember him for his playfulness. At my request, my father designed our house so that I could run in a circle through the living room, the kitchen, and the dining room. When I was a boy, that circle was used for playing a little Friday night ritual called “Sambo and the Crocodile.” The neighbor youngsters, Diane and Steve Michaelis, and I would run around the circle, representing Sambo, a naughty little boy in one of my grandfather’s *Bedtime Stories*, who was, though advised otherwise, swimming in a river full of dangerous crocodiles.

Soon a crocodile (in the form of my father) would come chasing after us, catch us, and throw us into the crocodile’s lair (the living room couch), where we were wrapped for a future lunch. Sambo would lie in the lair until help (mother) arrived to rescue him from the mean old crocodile! It is a tradition I now play with my own daughter, Roxy, much to her delight.

I will remember my father for his imagination. He was quite a storyteller. One night, when I was about six, I asked him to tell me a story—not one of my grandfather’s *Bedtime Stories* or a selection from *The Bible Story*, which were often read to me, but his own story. Without hesitation, he accepted the challenge.

There on my bed, he instantaneously composed an allegory of the *Great Controversy* between Christ and Satan. The characters of the story were fish who lived in the sea around a glorious coral reef. There was Badfish, the barracuda, who came to the reef to eat any fish that swam beyond the safety of the coral, and Big Brother, the porcupine fish, who offered to give himself to Badfish so that the mean old barracuda would never have to (actually, be able to) eat fish again. Later Big Brother was indeed eaten by Badfish. Once inside the barracuda, Big Brother puffed up, and ate a hole in the belly of Badfish, killing him.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The triumphant Big Brother swam back to the reef, and all the fish were safe from the terrible barracuda! They lived happily ever after in the idyllic reef.

Later, in college, I researched the story in animal behavior texts. I discovered that porcupine fish have been known to eat their way out of the bellies of sharks! Even in telling a fairy tale, my father was scientifically accurate (and he didn't even know it—or did he?). After concluding my research, I wrote up the story as a book for a creative writing class.

I will also remember my father for the enthusiasm he put into Christmas. Santa visited every yuletide without fail, but what was most memorable was that Santa never arrived the same way twice. Sometimes he arrived in the front yard. Sometimes in the back yard. My favorite was the year he arrived on the roof unable to slide down the chimney! My father was full of tricks to convince me that the real Santa Claus visited our home. One year, when I had grown suspicious, because my father was never home at the time when Santa arrived, my father *was* home when Santa came up from the basement. But then I noticed that my mother had gone on “an errand” and had missed Santa's appearance.

Perhaps the most memorable Christmas was when my father dialed the North Pole, and we listened to Santa's answering machine (my father's secretary). She thanked us for calling the North Pole, and informed us that Santa was not there. The message was repeated so convincingly that I actually began to think perhaps Santa *was* real and that he *was* coming. I later learned that my father's secretary had had a difficult time maintaining that deadpan voice without laughing. When, at last, we hung up, the secretary had broken into hysteric laughter.

Though my father hated travelling (he was a stay-at-home-kind-of-guy who didn't even want to eat out), I will always remember him for the trips he took me on, or, as the case may be, sent me on. The first trip my father took me on that made an impression on me was the 1965 GeoScience Trip, sponsored by Andrews University, with Dr. Dick Ritland as our guide. The trip introduced me to my father's interest in the creation-science issue. I will never forget crawling into the fossil cast of a rhinoceros which “gored” F.D. Nichol—the injury from which (it was rumored) he later died. That GeoScience Trip increased my vocabulary to the point where, before I could even read or write, I understood such words as trilobite, gastrolith, cephalopod and paleontologist.

My father would later encourage me to tour the Galapagos Islands, where I stayed as long as Darwin, studying the famous life forms there to further examine the question of creation vs. evolution. The result of that journey was an article in *Signs of the Times*, entitled, “I Visited Darwin's Islands!”

It was my father who taught me how to sell. He loved to raise geraniums. When I was a little tyke, he set pots of his blooming geraniums onto my little red wagon and sent me down the street to sell them. He told me that when I knocked on the door, I wasn't to ask, “Would you like to buy a geranium?” or “You wouldn't want to buy a geranium, would you?” Those were yes-no ques-

MAXWELL: DR. C. MERVYN MAXWELL, MY FATHER

tions that could easily result in rejection. Instead, I should ask, “Which geranium would you like to buy?” or “How many geraniums would you like?” I followed his advice, and the geraniums disappeared in no time!

My father coached my speeches. From the time I was in kindergarten, I would go down to his office in the basement, and he would listen while I rehearsed for my show-n-tell presentation, book report, or speech contest. He would suggest how to make the speech more interesting and encourage me not to mutter under my beard, but to use my backrow voice. That backrow voice he would later regret, because it often kept him awake at night when he was in bed and I was studying at the other end of the house in the kitchen. I will never forget his sermons, stories and one man plays. Some of his stories I have memorized word for word. Now that he is gone, I wish I had paid closer attention to others.

When I was about ten, I aspired to travel around the world when I reached the age of twelve. Thanks to my father, the dream was almost fulfilled. When I was thirteen, my father was asked to teach a summer course in India, and the dean of the seminary, Dr. W.G.C. Murdoch, allowed my father to spend a month in the Middle East on the way, saying that all who taught in the seminary should visit the Holy Land because it would help them with their teaching. This meant the seminary would provide a round-the-world ticket for my father.

After careful consideration, my father decided that since this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, he would take his wife and son. He would later say that he could have bought a small boat with the money he spent on that trip, but he wouldn't trade the experience for the world. It broadened our horizons. We understood many things we had never before imagined.

As a result of that trip around the world, I became interested in anthropology and in peoples from other cultures. It would lead to over ten years of mission experience in Thailand, China, Hong Kong, and Macau. I'm deeply grateful that my father took me along on that trip. It was while living in the Orient that I found material for my first two books, *The Man Who Couldn't Be Killed* and *The Man Who Lived Twice*. The trip ultimately changed my life. For it was at the other end of the world that I would find my wife! She was made in Hong Kong.

Fortunately, my wife, Phemie Cheng Maxwell, fell in love with me before she ever met my father. She still loves me very much, mind you, but when she finally met my father, she liked him so much that sometimes I have wondered whether she liked my father more than she likes me. Occasionally, she encourages me to be more like him. Once in a while she wants me to try to develop his personality and character. For the rest of this article we will examine those attributes.

The strongest tribute to the man who was my father was the environment he created. He created a cheery atmosphere and a happy home. In the poem I wrote two years ago for my parent's 50th wedding anniversary, I said that the home

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

was happy because the marriage had three partners: my mom, my dad, and Jesus. That's why the home was happy.

Near the end, as his lymphoma and ankylosing spondylitis progressed, happiness didn't always come easy for him. My father once said to my wife, "I am in pain, but I don't want to be a pain." Statements like that show he practiced what he believed. He thought happiness was a choice—and he chose happiness. He was a cheerful man—even under difficult circumstances. To ensure that his family was happy, my father consulted with my mother and me about his major decisions. Once he told me he was trying to decide what would be the best use of his writing talents. He seemed concerned about his legacy. He had written *Tell It to the World*, a history of the development of Adventism, which was a best-seller, but he wasn't sure it was enough of a contribution to the church. Did I think he should continue writing articles for *Signs of the Times* and *Liberty*, or write a book? Should he attempt to reexamine Uriah Smith's *Daniel and Revelation*? I told him that if he wrote articles, they would soon be forgotten (unless he could turn them into books). But if he could replace Uriah Smith as the authority on Daniel and Revelation, he would be remembered. He took the advice of his son and completed the project, though it was literally almost the death of him. Researching the book in the damp basement weakened his immune system which (according to some estimates) was a contributing factor leading to a near fatal attack of pneumonia. The two-volume set of *God Cares* has proved to be his greatest accomplishment.

My father respected authority and went through proper channels. He considered authority to be similar to an umbrella of protection, and to step out from under it was to get soaked. Before tackling the writing of *God Cares*, he approached Andrews University President Joseph Smoot for advice. Smoot counseled him to go ahead. Gaining his approval made things easier later. It would take seven years for my father to write the second volume. Much of it he did while working only half time at the university. He would later say the rewards he derived from *God Cares* would make up for all his struggles and sacrifices. He was especially happy that he had obtained permission from Smoot before tackling the project, because it took so many years to complete.

Though he respected authority, he was sometimes heard muttering when he thought a leader was too weak to do the right thing. The heyday of Walter Rea and Desmond Ford was perhaps my father's darkest hour. A cloud seemed to hover over the household. It was almost as if forces were tearing at him as he fought to preserve Adventism from destruction. I think it was the only time he didn't enjoy his teaching career. The pressures around him were so strong that I decided that if I were to get any studying done, I should escape into the dorm, which I did.

About that time, a student sympathetic to Ford tried to convert my father to Fordism by presenting him with a paper that taught Ford's ideas. Before writing the paper he had asked my father if he could write his term paper on the subject

MAXWELL: DR. C. MERVYN MAXWELL, MY FATHER

of the sanctuary. My father rejected the request, telling him to research a different topic, but the student disobeyed. My father gave the student an F on the paper and a C for the class, saying he had told him not to write the paper, which in my father's opinion wasn't Adventist.

The student, not to be outdone, took the paper to some other Seminary professors and asked them what grade it was worth. They gave him A's. The student then took the paper to the administration, and they, without asking an explanation from my father, encouraged my father to change the grade. I can still hear him grumbling to himself about lack of support from superiors. Nonetheless, he respected their authority.

This same student, under the pseudonym of Michael Bradley, submitted an article for *The Student Movement* entitled "Cracks in the Foundation," in which, in allegorical form, he said the foundations of Adventism were cracked, and Frank (i.e., Desmond Ford) had discovered those cracks and pointed them out to the church. After reading the article, I couldn't sleep. I got out of bed and wrote "Sequel to the Cracks in the Foundation." At daylight, I took the manuscript to my father, who made a few corrections, but said that essentially I had understood the issues.

In essence, my parable stated that Merlyn (i.e., my father) and Sean (i.e., Dr. Bill Shea) had visited the foundations and found the cracks were indeed there, but they had been painted and signed by the artists, Benjamin (i.e., A. F. Ballenger), Brent, (i.e., Robert Brinsmead), Reid (i.e., Walter Rea) and Frank (i.e., Desmond Ford). When I took my article to *The Student Movement's* feature editor, Lori Pappajohn, she said, "Your father would love this!" and printed it. The sequel started quite a stir from coast to coast. My father was very proud of me.

My father thought about others. When I took him to the hospital the last time, he was more concerned about being able to provide support and care for me than about what was going to happen to himself. He spent most of the time assuring me that he was going to get well. He had plenty of evidence for that. He had gained weight. He seemed to be recovering from his bout with lymphoma, and the doctors had reduced the number of appointments he was to have for his chemotherapy. He was going to get well in a number of months and perhaps live another five years. During that time, he said, he was going to be a better provider for my mother.

My father encouraged others. When I was working on a European story for the Pacific Press, he provided support by saying, "Print off what you've written, and I'll edit it for you." So he spent his mornings editing my material. That got me on a schedule so that I was writing chapters for him to edit. I was going gang-busters until I got a letter from the agent of the man I was writing about, saying he didn't want the story published. The kind of encouragement my father gave wasn't just "Go do it!" He helped people get started by offering to give of his time and talent.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

My father had a great sense of humor. After going on chemo, he wanted to write a sermon to preach at Fairplain Seventh-day Adventist church entitled, “Things You Can Live Without—Like Sin, Temper, and Hair.” He wanted to preach it when he was completely bald from the chemo.

Once, when he drove me in to the library, after he had lost much of his hair, he told me in a grave tone that when he had combed his hair that morning he had lost three hairs—and that was very serious because it represented three percent total hair loss! But then he tried to look on the bright side. He said that since taking chemo, he had become more like God. Now he could number the hairs on his head!

My father was always sure he was right, and I’ll have to admit he generally was. Certainly he never followed the trend. He seemed to *know* what was right. He thought he knew more than my English teachers about how to teach English. Sometimes he even thought he knew more about how to treat his illness than the doctors did. Some of the doctors have generously acknowledged to me that by keeping his own counsel, he lived five years longer than they had expected. Of course other factors to consider include the many folk who prayed for him, combined with my father’s tremendous will to live. My father was a fighter and a researcher. He studied and understood what he examined. But, as an independent thinker, he reasoned with the information and came up with his own conclusions.

My father had insight. He understood a situation. He penetrated to the point, and he wasn’t afraid to do what he thought right. Most of all, he was brave enough to speak up. He had high standards, but he loved people and freely gave them a second chance, as he did for me many times. His keen insight explained why many called on him for advice. They knew the counsel he would give would be honest.

He never tried to be politically correct. I never heard him say these exact words, but it’s likely that he would have said, “Why should I be politically correct when I can be right?” And, as I have said, he usually *was* right, and he was brave enough to say it. He didn’t care whether or not what he had to say offended the person to whom he was speaking. He said it. And sometimes it changed people. Other times it didn’t. But either result never altered how he related to the individual in question.

My father loved pomp and ceremony. This was reflected in the manner in which he laid his driveway. He put in a brick driveway using old road bricks dug up in the name of progress. Whenever important people came to visit, like *Voice of Prophecy*’s H.M.S. Richards, Jr., he offered them the opportunity to place a memorial brick in the driveway, and this placement was carried out with as much fanfare as if the guards were changing at Buckingham Palace. He led the celebrities to believe he would always remember which brick they had set in his new driveway. They in turn were honored to add another brick to the project.

MAXWELL: DR. C. MERVYN MAXWELL, MY FATHER

My father was the type of man who could rise to an emergency and come to the rescue. One day, when I was riding my little yellow scooter home from work at the refugee camp in Thailand, a dog leaped up and bit my ankle, causing it to bleed. I visited a doctor from a Catholic organization in the camp, and he told me I should wait until I came down with symptoms before taking rabies shots. Wanting a second opinion, I visited the doctors of a Protestant organization in another corner of the camp. Shocked at what the first doctor had said, they told me I should start rabies shots immediately, because rabies was 99.9% fatal. The only problem was that they had no serum. My father, at Andrews University, learned about the situation, obtained some serum, and contacted the American embassy in Thailand. The serum was flown to Bangkok, where my boss, Judy Aitken, transported it to the camp. Unfortunately, on the way from Bangkok to the camp, a two hour drive, it was not refrigerated, and arrived useless. Again my father came to the rescue. This time, Judy Aitken found a way to refrigerate the serum, and I was administered five shots for rabies. I never came down with any symptoms, and all the dogs in the area got vaccinated. I've often wondered how many fathers would have done such heroic deeds under similar circumstances.

My father was hopelessly romantic, for he loved my mother shamelessly. He loved to write her poetry for special occasions. Whenever she came home from a trip, he would plaster the house with cards full of welcome—all written in poetry. He was quite fond of telling her how much he loved her. He encouraged me to tell Phemie that I loved her, saying that it takes time for the ladies to express their true feelings, but they come around, if you give them a good example! My mother returned my father's love by fixing healthful meals, by keeping the house neat and clean, by having regular permanents, and by keeping her youthful figure so well that she could even wear her wedding dress on their 52nd anniversary. In his later years she would help him pull socks over his feet. Often, when my mother found time to tell my father she loved him, he would play deaf, basking in the moment as he forced her to repeat the phrase several times!

My daughter, Roxy, was a blessing for her grandfather. A few months before he passed away, he got lymphoma on his shoulder. When her mother told Roxy that her grandfather's shoulder was painful, Roxy volunteered to massage the shoulder. This impressed her grandfather very much. It delighted him. Most of the time Roxy cheered him up—except when she was crying! In general, she helped him a lot in his last months.

In his last days, much of my father's time was spent making up his pills. Before taking his medication, he had to pour the medicine into empty capsules. Once he miscalculated and discovered he was short one capsule. Two-year-old Roxy had been watching her grandfather and had noticed he needed one more capsule, so she ran out of the room. Nobody told her what to do. Soon she returned with a capsule. Nobody had told her where the capsules were. Somehow

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

she knew. She had known exactly what her grandfather needed and gone to get it without being asked. This impressed my father very much. Occurrences like that helped make his last days more enjoyable.

My father was a man of prayer. He had a long prayer list. He prayed for people and events and patiently awaited God's answers. He was happy when candidates on his prayer list altered their ways. Our neighbor boys, though raised Adventist, became hippies in the sixties. Often, when my father was hoeing in his garden, he would see one of the neighbor boys on the roof, drinking a bottle of champagne. Once, while the boys were on the roof, the eldest, Dave Shultz, broke one of the bottles, spilling the contents. My father looked up, cleared his throat, and said something like, "That wasn't exactly what I was praying for, but at least you won't be able to drink from that bottle!" Shultz, determined to have his alcohol, retorted, "There's plenty more where that came from." He climbed off the roof, retrieved another bottle, returned to the roof and drank it. Years later, when Shultz was an alcoholic at the end of his rope, he would remember that conversation. At around midnight, on December 31, 1989, bottle in hand, he rang our doorbell, and gave the bottle to my mother, saying he was going to quit drinking. He didn't want to get drunk on New Year's at the dawn of a new decade. He then requested that my father meet with him at ten the next morning. My father showed up promptly at the appointed time, grateful that his prayer was finally being answered. This January, at the beginning of the millennium, Shultz celebrated ten years of sobriety at a local Alcoholic's Anonymous. He gave my father much of the credit.

One of my father's regular prayers was that God would give him the opportunity to help others. That was a prayer God always answered with a yes. Sometimes my father would almost regret the prayer when he couldn't follow his schedule. Then he would remind himself about his prayer and reconsider, knowing God had arranged a different schedule for him. He would thank God for the opportunities he had sent him and for answering his prayer.

I know for a certainty of at least once when my father was grateful the Lord did *not* answer his prayer in the way he had intended. It was his prayer for Phemie. When my father learned I was dating a Hongkong girl, he prayed we would break up! However, after he flew to Hong Kong and met her, he changed his mind. He was certain I would never find a better wife—and he was right! My father and his twin brother Lawrence proudly conducted the wedding ceremony for us about three years later at Fairplain Seventh-day Adventist Church. Phemie remained his favorite (and only) daughter-in-law!

Now that my father is gone, I have to learn everything. While he was alive, I only had to concentrate on everything else—because *he* knew everything. I could ask him about anything and he knew the answer. Now he won't be around to ask. But many of his answers can be found in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen G. White, which he read, understood, and applied to everyday life.

MAXWELL: DR. C. MERVYN MAXWELL, MY FATHER

Others are written in his own books and communicated in his own tapes and videos.

My father loved to edit. It was in his bones. He would even edit my sentences as I spoke them. When I returned from Hong Kong, I rejoined my Mom and Dad at the dinner table. We used the dictionary often. Sometimes, when he thought I was wrong, he looked up the word in the dictionary and (to his frustration) discovered the dictionary was wrong! Now I won't have anyone to challenge me on grammar and pronunciation. If he were alive, he would have edited this piece. I'm sure this tribute might not be as good as he would have liked it, but, as he is no longer here to make it any better, it is the best I can do.

He will be missed by many for many reasons. He was a great man, a romantic husband, a good friend, and a wonderful father. Sleep well, dad. You prayed for healing, knowing God would heal you, if not in this life, in the next. When you wake up, you'll see your prayer was indeed answered. The lifetime warranty on your parts will then be honored, for you'll have all those parts made new. I will see you then—with a straight backbone and a full head of hair! Until then, sleep well, Dad, sleep well!

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