

Remembering My Dad... Ray Jennings
April 29, 2006
Celebration at Shell Ridge Community Church
Walnut Creek, California

By Ken Jennings

I don't know all of you here. However, I know that you would not be here if you didn't already know my Dad. If any of you are feeling a little like strangers though, that's alright because Dad liked strangers. He especially liked stragglers ... and anyone else that seemed to be in need of direction.

Dad might have been one of my lifelong caregivers, but he also became my friend. We are here today as a family of friends, and in that way we are all alike.

Ray didn't want a fancy memorial and, specifically, no glib comments made about him. He also knew that we wouldn't be able to completely respect that wish. He even made a few suggestions to Mom about how to direct this gathering. So here we are.

...*Once upon a time* there was a man named Ray Jennings. He had a mother and a father that both died when he was very young.

His mother was doing laundry one day, way back in 1931. It was winter. The old wringer washing machine was in the steamy basement of the family's East St. Louis home and the dryer was a cheap piece of rope strung between two poles in the snowy cold backyard. Ray's mom went up and down the stairs for a couple of hours that day. Pneumonia set in and she died four days later. Ray never forgot that day.

Ten Years later he came home from choir practice with his brother and his aunt only to find his father still in his bed. Ray's father had fallen off a street car when he was a young St. Louis newspaper boy. He cracked his skull. Even though Ray's Dad healed from his childhood wound, he continued to carry the scar. We can only guess what caused Ray's Dad's heart to stop. Was it the accident? Perhaps it was the loss of two wives and a previous child? Was it the pressure of being a single dad with two sons? We'll never really know.

Nevertheless, Ray and his younger brother carried on with the help of family and friends and strangers. Within three years, at the age of 20, Ray was an ordained Baptist minister.

He met my mother, Irene, at college and the two became partners in crime ... not like Bonnie and Clyde, but like Ray and Irene. For 62 years, Ray and Irene traveled the world and did whatever they thought would help to lift "the burden" of the many people whose lives they touched. Their "burden lifting" wasn't always perfect, their mission was never fully accomplished, but they tried their best. Irene goes back to work on Monday.

Gathered here today are all of Ray's children ... most of his grandchildren ... and all but one or two of his great grandchildren. Sometimes it's hard to keep count. One of his grandchildren is in Iraq and his newest great grandchild was just born within the last 48 hours. Some of us think that Dad held on as long as he did to greet the newest "stranger," but that wasn't to be. The rest of us are here though for the newest Jennings, "Cayman Elijah," as partners, and he'll get to know his great grandpa through our stories and memories.

As a young man Ray thought he was destined to be an artist, or a thespian, possibly even a writer. He was blessed, or "cursed," as some would say, with many talents.

Ray's youthful right leaning pastoral brain took a turn to the left after his church was tear-gassed during his welcome to Berkeley during the riots of 1968.

However, and regardless of his ever evolving religious and political thinking, he always liked the ideas of Oscar Wilde. As a 30-something year old pastor in the small town of Ottawa, Kansas, he joined the local community theater and starred in several plays including "Our Town" ... the "Importance of Being Ernest" ... and then in his most challenging role as Clarence Darrow in "Inherit the Wind." Ray could have played William Jennings Bryan in that play. But he chose, instead, the role of the losing lawyer who defended a poor Indiana school teacher found guilty and fined \$100 for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution in the local public school. That was typical of Dad ... to be the one defending freedom of thought and expression.

Oscar Wilde wrote that "The truth is rarely pure and never simple" ... I remember an argument with my Dad when I was a teen. I declared that life was simple. He said "yes it is" and then he added "but, it's also very complicated." That's one of those moments I'll never forget. That idea helped me to set my life's compass.

Ray didn't know that he was a direct descendant of the founders of the 16th century Separatist church until a couple of years before his death. If Dad had another 80 years in front of him he would be founding a new separatist movement. A 21st century version of what his 16th century great grandfather helped establish. I guess in a sense he has already done that through his work with the Pacific Coast Baptist Association... A free community gathering place, relatively devoid of social or political pressures. An all inclusive church which welcomes anyone and everyone.

Then again he might have just thrown his fate to the wind and taken the plunge into the world of art and theater.

Oscar Wilde also wrote "I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being." The church was Ray's theater and being a good human being was Ray's primary concern.

Ray Jennings was often a difficult man to deal with. He could get really cranky with you IF he trusted you. He challenged many minds and made a lot of people angry in moments. I don't think though that he ever left anyone feeling diminished. He gave everyone a way out of their existing conundrum. He made no judgment. He simply offered his opinions. He was always willing to alter his opinions. He was fun to argue with. You just had to have a convincing argument. And then, Even if you didn't, he was the first to begin work on the compromise.

Two nights before he died, and just after Mom and I helped him back into his bed, he held our hands tightly and demanded that we "take the picture now"... Mom and I were puzzled in the moment, but once we told him that the picture had been taken, he said that he was "ready to go." I imagine that that picture included all of us... and probably thousands of others. It must have been an amazing stage, an amazing painting, an amazing congregation.

Of all of Oscar Wilde's thought's there was one that Ray always did his best to re-write or include in his sermons.

"Keep love in your heart. A life without it is like a sunless garden when the flowers are dead."