

**A Witness to the Christian Gospel at the Death of Walt Roark**  
**Luke 5:1-11, Ephesians 2:8-10**  
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My load is lightened today by the heartfelt witness of Gatewood Smith, Nan's husband who enjoyed until just recently nearly daily visits to his mother and Walt at opposite ends of the same facility, two old warriors swapping flight stories and watching the history channel while sipping on an adult beverage smuggled into the old folks home with medical permission, the precise prescription being left to the two men!

Jesus once said, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," which I paraphrase as *love and loyalty go together*, and both loyalty and love were deep themes in the life of Walter Roark. With no preparation other than just showing up, suitcase in hand in the fall of '42, Walt introduced himself to the Registrar at Auburn University, "I'm here to enroll." And since they trained him well in both Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, quite a feat! he was loyal and managed to infect all his children save one with the virus of his Alma Mater. He and Joyce were high school sweethearts, married in the midst of his flight training, and kept their vows for sixty-five years till her death in 2010. They vowed "to love and to cherish till death us do part," and meant it. Love and loyalty go together. When I read Walt's obituary I saw a long litany of the places he served in this church. Love and loyalty go together, the key variable being that you must first learn to love the right and good and fine things for your loyalties and habits to be well placed.

But the problem with Walt, if it is a problem, is that he loved so many things and that is why he had so many loyalties. He loved Auburn and the Army Air Corps, his girlfriend Joyce and the Methodist Church, his children and their spouses and children; he loved his country and the American Legion, the Red Cross and his golfing buddies and knowing how to fix just about everything because of his engineering mind. He loved the disabled and worked for their good on community boards. And if there was an organization in Greenwood working for the good of people, whether it was the YMCA or the theater, then Walt felt it was his calling to join it and eventually lead it. He was a team member who often rose to the top.

On top of all this he was what once was called in South Carolina *A Textile Man*, and it was here at Greenwood Mills at the peak of his career that all his knowledge and skills came together and converged. He knew the names of the shop

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foreman and their workers. The power plant, the foundry, the pipe and electrical shops were his walking tour. Blueprints and diagrams and equations and systems were his forte. The humming of the looms and the clatter of shuttles was the music and rhythm of his work day, and what a sense of satisfaction was his to apply insights to each new problem. After Stan's death, his only request to Nan when she remarried was that the man had to be able *to fix stuff*, and I am told by his extended family that he not only had a plan for everything that crossed his path but was an excellent and teacher to any who had a mind to learn the right way to do things, meaning *the Walt way*. Problem was, he was so smart he was mostly right on most things!

Now when you run across such man with such a breadth of interests and such a command of skills, what you behold is something strange and wonderful with lasting impact on the imagination, as is clear from this family's stories. Perhaps the most quoted Bible verse remains John 3:16 which begins with a statement of divine love, "For God so loved the world," and then moves on to divine action, "that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." What did God love? The cosmos, the whole magnificent, interrelated system of creation, an engineering Disneyland and a grand human stage. Somewhere along the way Walt fell in love with the world God made, and within the space of one, long life took action after action to understand it and improve it and develop it and to repair it and to savor its deep sweetness. To love what God loves is a great good, and to love the God who stands behind it all a greater good still.

One of the privileges of being a pastor is to stand at the bedside of the dying, there to converse with a family keeping vigil, then to read Scripture over the dying and to put your hand on their brow in prayer and trace the cross on their forehead. It was a week ago today that I entered the Hospice Unit at Baptist Hospital, and at the end of my visit with Nan who was keeping watch over her father and his care I offered this prayer from our *Book of Worship*, a kind of Methodist last rites;

"Lord Jesus Christ,  
 deliver your child Walt from all evil  
 and set him free from every bond;  
 that he may rest with all your saints  
 in the joy of your eternal home, for ever and ever. Amen."

The doctors told the family it would not be long, maybe twenty-four hours. But he would not die on schedule and lived till Tuesday, so great was the love of life in him

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that he would not let it go till it was pried from his fingers.

There is just no way to describe the time I had late yesterday when a room full of the extended Roark clan descended on Main Street and regaled me with stories and laughter from the man they called *Deedaw*. Each child spoke- Nan and Walt No. 3, then Jeff and John- and all the grandkids chimed in. Nan was grateful that during *the hard years* of her husband's death and son Ben's leukemia that Walt and Joyce basically moved in to care for them and to sustain them till Gatewood appeared as a second Marine. Walt No.3 was so full of funny stories we had to limit his input! So widely was the Walt Roark name known in these parts that Walt No.4 lived always under a heavy cloud of expectation and had to find ways *to grow into his name*. Son Jeff remembers his father's drive to self-sufficiency as when he hand built their first little home. John remembers his father's kindness when he broke the sacred tradition and with fear and trembling mentioned he wanted to go to Furman to which his dad said something like *Then Furman it will be* with only a slight grimace when considering the cost of tuition.

When daughter-in-law Jackie received some of Walt senior's blood after surgery since she was the same type, the strangest thing soon happened. She began to take on some of his habits and characteristics. "Oh, no," she thought, "I'm becoming Walt! I don't want to start saying *Damn* and *Hell* all the time. It's not ladylike." Folks, even the man's corpuscles when separated from his body carried influence! Ben and his brothers remember endless visits to the Greenwood train yards, a habit to be explained by the fact that Walt's father was a railroad man, an engineer, so boilers and gears and smokestacks came natural to their beloved grandfather. Liz still has the doll bed he made for her in his legendary shop. A man who worked, a man who served, a man who never complained.

All the grans mentioned the beach trips to Hilton Head and the warm welcome Walt gave their future spouses, especially the mysterious Asian Dr. Yong. Sounds like a character from a James Bond movie! To be a part of this family by DNA or by adoption was to be welcomed into a circle of laughter and belonging in which there was always room for one more. Becky teared up when she rehearsed how after the death of her parents at a young age that Walt and Joyce filled the gap of belonging, even teaching her to play golf. To miss an Auburn/Alabama game on TV was a big sin! Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Love and loyalty go together, don't they? So be careful what you love; it will be with you for a long time.

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So why did I choose the lessons from Luke 5 and Ephesians 2? I'm glad you asked. Just how did Jesus tame a strong and impulsive man like Peter the fisherman? He filled his boat with fish and drove him to his knees in the midst of the blessing. It did not make Peter proud; it made him painfully aware of just who he was dealing with, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." And how did the Lord tame and direct the many strengths of Walt Roark? By humbling him time and again with undeserved blessings for which he was ever in debt to the Bestower. Who knows the prayers Walt prayed in private? To him much was given, and from him much was required. It is a good thing for gifted men to live with that keen sense of obligation and duty.

The text from Ephesians is added lest Walt's life and legacy be misunderstood. The right ordering of a right relationship with God is first God's initiative of grace, then our enabled response of trust and faith, and then- as a consequence- the lifelong working out of the good works which God has prepared for us to enter. An obituary is a complimentary catalog of achievements, a final chance for your family to brag on you if there's anything worth bragging about, and short of attaining high political office, Walt Roark's catalog is about as impressive as I've seen, and to sit with his family is to see that the greatest legacy of a long and fruitful marriage is the clan who called him *Deedaw*.

Yes, he was a good and great man who engaged life with zeal and zest, but the deep explanation is not within the man but in the God who called and enabled him with the grace of Jesus Christ which is found in the church, and when his vital human energies came to an end on Tuesday, there was one to welcome him, the one who accompanied him all his days. Walt's life is not lost; it's just been placed in a much larger setting as an example of God's work in our frail, human lives.

And if this brief reflection has stirred in you a precious memory or deep admiration, and if there's an idea that you too would like to live a deeply meaningful life of love and service, then Walt's counsel is to put your hand in the hand of Jesus who loves both you and all the world more passionately than you can imagine. He is the key to life, and everything that you loved about Walt came from his hand.

Thank God for the life and loves and loyalties of Walt Roark. And thanks to the one who made it all possible. Walk with Jesus so you can see him again, and who knows? At the end of your life there may be something good to say which gives evidence that your love and loyalties were right placed.

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