

**Saskatchewan Prayer Breakfast 2013**  
Wednesday, April 17, 2013  
**Gordon Elhard, Guest Speaker**

Your Honour, Chief Justice, Your Worship, Distinguished Head Table Guests, and Ladies and Gentlemen:

**What My Faith Has Done for Me**

As a prominent speaker once said, “Before I speak, I would like to say something.”

Whenever I visit your wonderful province, it always strikes me that the values that made Canada the greatest country in which to live – faith, family, honesty, integrity, hard work, loyalty, and neighbourliness – are more evident in this province today than anywhere else in Canada. On behalf of all Canadians who embrace these values, I want to thank you for maintaining them so well.

I note that this morning’s gathering is billed as a “prayer breakfast.” One thing that virtually all faiths have in common is prayer.

My first serious encounter with prayer was in 1940. I was nine years old. Prior to that, my mother prayed with me at bedtime and we said grace at mealtime. These prayer times were routine; the one in 1940 was special. My parents immigrated to Canada from Eastern Europe in 1910. They settled on a homestead in this very province northwest of Maple Creek in the Hatton area. My father literally left his health in the soil of that homestead. It was backbreaking work. Broke and six children later, the family relocated to Alberta in 1926 where I was born – unplanned, I might add.

My father struggled with severe arthritic pain and his condition was considered terminal by his physicians in 1940. My father grew up as an orphan in the old country. His parents died when he and his sister were seven and six years of age respectively. That day in 1940 when he was taken to the hospital, possibly for the last time, he asked my mother and me to come to his little bedroom off the kitchen, where he was resting. He took me by the hand and asked God, very simply and in German, that he would be permitted to live until I was twenty-one. That was it – a very simple and humble prayer. He was taken to the hospital, and a couple of weeks later his pain left him for good. He was released from hospital, his body gnarled and crippled, but pain free.

Twelve years later, in 1952, I turned twenty-one in February. A short time later, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died a few months later. Needless to say, my mind went back to that little bedroom off the kitchen, and to that simple little German prayer in 1940. Sceptics may call it sheer coincidence, but I call it God’s answer to the desperate prayer of a father for his young son. He did not want me to be orphaned as he had been.

It was as a young man that I made my father’s deep faith my very own, and from then until now it has served me well and has enriched my life more than I will ever know.

Stemming from that experience, let me touch on three things my faith has done for me to enrich, empower and change the trajectory of my life.

First, my faith has given me a clearer understanding of love. The word love is a mysterious word. As the song says, "Love is a many splendored thing." These days love seems to mean whatever we want it to mean. We love chocolate, we love the Roughriders, we love all sorts of things. In Hollywood love has become synonymous with sex.

But what does love really mean? I'm sure that all faiths have their own understanding of love. In the Christian faith, the Bible declares that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). What, then, are its characteristics? St. Paul said that love is patient, kind, not proud, not rude, not greedy (1 Corinthians 13). It causes us to focus on others, not on ourselves. Furthermore, love gives; it does not take. As the poem by Oscar Hammerstein says:

A bell's not a bell 'til you ring it,  
A song's not a song 'til you sing it,  
And love in your heart wasn't put there to stay,  
Love isn't love 'til you give it away!

The real definition of love, I believe, is this: Love is the God-given ability and willingness to put the best interest of the other person ahead of your own. When that happens, selfishness and greed are diminished. Nobody loses; everyone wins. Selfishness and greed are at the root of most of society's problems. The Bible says that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Timothy 6:8).

Love, the Bible says, is the most important value. St. Paul wrote, "Now abide faith, hope, love...; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13, NKJV).

Love goes to the extreme. "Love your enemies," Jesus said in His famous Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:44). We are to love our enemies, do good to them, and pray for them. I hope you are doing better on this one than I am. I'm afraid that when someone cuts me off in traffic, my first inclination is not to pray for them. I need God's help.

My faith has given me a clearer understanding of love.

Second, my faith has given me a clearer sense of purpose. Life without purpose is meaningless.

When I began my teaching career in September 1957, I sensed a need for a higher purpose than simply transmitting information from my mind to my students' minds, from my lesson plan to their notebooks, or from their minds to my examination paper. For me, it was not enough simply to give my students my knowledge, my skills, and my time. I needed to find a way to give them my very self. I struggled to find a clear sense of mission long before mission statements were fashionable.

Somehow the word HOPE kept crossing my mind. I wondered, could there be a meaningful acronym there? Sure enough. The word HOPE could be extended to mean: Helping Other People

Excel. To help each of my students excel as a student, a person, a citizen. To help them become the most of what they already are. When they excelled, I excelled. When they failed, I failed.

When I became a principal, I needed to help each of my teachers excel so they could help each of their students excel. When they excelled, I excelled; when they failed, I failed.

When I became a superintendant, I needed to help each principal excel so that they could help each teacher excel so that they could help each student excel. That multiplier effect had a potent impact on student learning, growth, and development.

When I retired, I realized that while you may retire from going to the workplace, you must never retire from your purpose in life. I still pursue my life purpose. I have discovered the truth in St. Francis' famous prayer: "For it is in giving that we receive."

My faith has given me a clearer sense of purpose as well as a clearer understanding of love.

Thirdly and finally, my faith has given me a place to go when family, friends and possessions are no longer enough.

President Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had no place else to go." Every American president since has, no doubt, quoted this line at one time or another. Ironically, sooner or later we will all arrive at that place. I came to that place on April 13, 1992. My gastroenterologist told me that I had a severe case of colon cancer and I needed surgery and I needed it now. My first thought was, is this it? Am I coming to the end of my life? I was 61 years old.

I went home that day and read the story of King Hezekiah in the Old Testament. God told the prophet Isaiah to tell the king, "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live" (Isaiah 38:1). King Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall and prayed and wept bitterly. God responded by adding fifteen years to the king's life.

On the day of my diagnosis, I would gladly have settled for fifteen more years of life, especially since my surgeon told me after my surgery that I probably had five years to live. I prayed even as King Hezekiah did, and God extended my life. In fact, when I reached the fifteen year mark on April 13, 2007, I negotiated an extension, and last Saturday I celebrated twenty-one years cancer free since my diagnosis.

Let me interject here, lest I leave the impression that God always answers my prayers my way. He does not. In fact, more often than not, God has not answered my prayers according to my request, because He always answers our prayers according to His will, not ours. In retrospect, I'm grateful for the blessing of some of my unanswered prayers.

Throughout all of my coming to grips with my cancer diagnosis, a poem I hadn't thought about, read or heard read in decades kept coming to mind. It is the poem by Robert Frost entitled, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The last verse goes like this:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

I wondered, might this apply to me, and if so, how many miles? And promises to whom? I wondered further, could it mean promises to do for others what so many in my life had done for me? Oh, there are ever so many.

I think of Dr Jack Collett, who had been a United Church minister, but in 1950 he was academic dean of Mount Royal College in downtown Calgary. It was a hot July day in 1950 and I was out for a walk on my lunch hour from my work at the City of Calgary. I stopped by the college and went in the front door simply to breathe some college air. The place was quiet, so I examined the grad pictures on the walls, perchance I might spot someone I knew. To my surprise, someone stepped up beside me and asked whether I needed help. I remember saying no, no one could help me.

He invited me into his office and we talked. He asked me two questions that eventually changed my life forever. The first question was “What are you going to do with your life?” I hadn’t a clue. The second question was “Have you ever thought about going to university?” No, I hadn’t. Higher education wasn’t in my background. In fact, I was the first in my family ever to graduate from high school, let alone from university. Before I left his office, he had me enrolled at Mount Royal College for the fall, and from that I went on to over six years of university and to a career in education that, in retrospect, I wouldn’t have missed for anything, doing for others what Jack Collett did for me.

I sincerely believe that the thing that keeps me alive is my mission to give my self, little though it may be, to others – to invest myself in others as so many others have invested themselves in me.

Let me close with a wonderful little poem that R. L. Sharpe wrote entitled “Stumbling Block or Stepping Stone.” It goes like this:

Isn't it strange that princes and kings  
And clowns that caper in sawdust rings  
And common people like you and me  
Are builders for eternity?

Each is given a bag of tools,  
A shapeless mass, and a book of rules;  
And each must make 'ere life has flown  
A stumbling block or a stepping stone.

I ask myself every day: “Am I using my bag of tools, such as it is, to build stepping stones into a more promising future for those who come behind me?”

My question to you this morning is “Are you?”

God bless you, and God bless this great province.