

Dick Pieper Tribute

December 1, 2009

Milwaukee WI

I have never met anyone like Dick Pieper. And I feel blessed that our paths have crossed. Many years ago, I received a call from some unknown business dude saying he had heard about me, an ivory tower academic at Marquette, and wanted to meet. Fortunately, I took a chance and headed out to N. 35th Street. I had never met anyone like Dick Pieper, but he found me, and that alone is a gift for which I am indebted to him. I knew I liked him right away. He took me around Pieper Power's offices and asked assorted employees to tell me what they do. One looked at him, the CEO, and said he was too busy working to talk to us. And that was okay.

I have never met anyone like Dick Pieper, but I sure hope to find more of him running around the world. We would all be better off for it. A lot better off. And if he is successful in his life's project, there will be more Dick Piepers running around the world. Many more of them. And if you know Dick well, that is both a somewhat frightening and very tantalizing prospect.

I know he isn't particularly comfortable with the spotlight shining on him and for that reason he is probably barely tolerating these words. But that's okay. He'll live through it. However, to accommodate what I suspect would be Dick's wishes, I will refrain from chronicling his remarkable achievements. Instead I will do what I also suspect would be his wishes, to focus instead on what he is trying to achieve as he attempts to make this a better world for all of us.

As you will hear repeatedly tonight, two words that help define Dick are “servant” and “leader.” Servant leadership is really a matter of strange bedfellows. On one hand, servant often connotes humility, subservience, low status, and disempowerment. Leader typically connotes the opposite: strength, power, dominance, and high status. In that sense, servant leadership sounds quite like an oxymoron. But it isn’t.

When Robert Greenleaf popularized the concept, he understood what many have argued throughout much of human history. One cannot lead alone. One needs followers. And the performance of any social organization, whether a business, a family, a philanthropy, or a team, depends upon the contributions of all its members. A leader who understands that serving his or her employees, colleagues, customers, etc. is the best way to the organic health and effectiveness of the organization is truly wise. And effective.

Service of this sort is not just any service. It is not weak service. It is not blind service. It is not the service of a victim. Rather it is wise and compassionate service. It is purposeful service. Dick has engaged in such wise, purposeful, and compassionate service in how he built, ran, and ultimately sold Pieper Power. He has done so in his philanthropy, giving where he believes his service will heal the world. He has done so in how he has raised his family. In fact, *tikkun olam* might well be his mantra.

Dick understands servant leadership, and understands it more deeply than most people I have met. And because he is truly a man of principle, he lives his life according to what he understands as fundamental human purpose. For him, this comes from a blend of his spiritual beliefs and his understanding of leadership and organizational health. Dick is a deeply spiritual man, but not in a traditional sense. His is not dogmatic. He is not narrow-minded. He is not

parochial. He simply believes. And he lives his beliefs. He doesn't follow and he doesn't judge. He communes. And he cares for all, especially the needy and disempowered, and he lives the righteous life. He is truly a *mensch*.

Dick found me, but then (and I apology to his wife Sue for this) I seduced him. I saw that his passion for youth, for goodness, for serving the needy, and for healing the world were a perfect fit for what I do: helping schools and families serve the possibilities in children. Back then we called it moral education; now we call it character education. My colleague Bill Puka talks about developmental love; living the love for another by serving their optimal development. Our friend Cliff Taulbert describes one critical "habit of the heart" as seeing the possibilities in children and nurturing them. Character education, to which Dick has now hitched his wagon, is precisely that. The community serving the possibilities in children. In doing so we are not merely serving children, we are serving the future and serving the world. Dick aspires to do no less. It is an ambitious goal, and Dick is actually pulling it off. I nominated Dick for the Board of Directors of the national Character Education Partnership. Not only did he accept, but he took the ball and ran with it. He eventually took numerous leadership roles within the Character Education Partnership. And then he turned his focus to Wisconsin, where he has been the single champion to bring character education in a meaningful and impactful way to the entire state, in part by creating the Wisconsin Character Education Partnership. The WI CEP has promoted high quality professional development for educators in multiple ways. As we have done in Missouri, with Dick's servant leadership, this effort offers the possibility of transforming schools, then youth, and ultimately communities throughout the state of Wisconsin.

We are here tonight as a Jewish organization. And so much of what Dick Pieper is and has done is so readily captured in Jewish concepts. He is a *mensch* in all the best senses of the

word. And he is a *mensch* with *chutzpah*. He is undaunted by challenges and will forge ahead with aplomb when he sees a righteous path to follow. His level of charity, of *tzedakah*, is truly impressive and beyond the normal constraints of merely giving to those less fortunate. He is a prayerful and spiritual man who embodies the spirit of *tefillah*. And his life is dedicated to healing the world, to *tikkun olam*.

We are here tonight as a Jewish organization honoring a Christian man. I see nothing wrong with that. We are here tonight to honor a man who has dedicated his life to serving others while leading us all to a better place. I see everything right with that. Congratulations Dick. It is an honor to call you my friend.