

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 49

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Tubbs fire in Santa Rosa, California

I loved being in the classroom and had never seriously considered retiring. Chaperoning retreats, praying at liturgies, counseling young men and women, speaking with parents, mentoring service projects, organizing and attending the prom, teaching meditation, coaching swimming and water polo, watching my students at sporting events, socializing with my colleagues, and even enduring interminably long faculty meetings, all served to enrich my experience teaching the literature that spoke to my heart.

Some of my colleagues felt the need to refresh their curriculum in order to maintain their own interest in the subject matter. I was just the opposite. I might add an article or a relevant excerpt, but I could teach Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Eliot forever. My core curriculum energized me. More accurately, engaging my students as we worked these texts line by line, gave me life as they experienced the transformative and awakening power of great literature. "Cor ad cor loquitur" became our lived experience and True Father's spirit animated me. Many long hours spent on the hard concrete floor of the Belvedere garage, listening to the Messiah, experiencing rebirth through True Parents' words and song, had set a standard of heart for me that I tried to reach, a tradition of sincerity I tried to replicate with my students. Though imperfectly conveyed in my classroom, at least the direction and energy of our give and take brought joy.

Thus, my sense of peace with my decision to stop teaching surprised me. I hadn't agonized over my decision, I hadn't even mulled it over, suddenly, the conviction I should retire settled in my heart and took root there. It may have been precipitated by the suggestion that I surrender my sophomores, that may have been a proximate cause, but something deeper was moving in my heart, otherwise I would not have had such a sense of certainty.

When I broached the subject with my close friend and colleague Dr. Berry, she strongly objected, even

going so far as to accuse me of selfishness. Since I myself didn't really understand the process that brought me to my conclusion, I could say very little in response. I just knew I should retire, so I set the process in motion. Maryanne forgave me.

At the end of the Spring Semester, the faculty selected two of us, Dennis Bruno, a chemistry teacher, and myself, as "Teachers of the Year." At the awards ceremony closing 2016-17, we brought the house down with cheering and chanting as we accepted our awards. The moment was very gratifying, though it felt a bit surreal to be bowing out.

I packed up my books and gave many of my papers and notes to a colleague, Eleanor Trent, who would be picking up my sophomores. I am an inveterate bibliophile, while my wife Cindy embraces the austere simplicity of Marie Kondo. Thus, a negotiation proved necessary for me to add another bookcase in our downstairs, to hold the additional volumes from my Newman classroom. Finally, I prevailed and my precious, heavily annotated books found a resting place on new shelves. Among these volumes was the leather bound RSV Bible given to us by True Father in June 1974 after the World Day Fundraising Competition.

And this proved fortunate, at least for my books. On October 8, 2017, just at the conclusion of the first school quarter, the Tubbs Fire broke out in the hills of Napa and Sonoma Counties. Swept along by high winds from peak to peak and exploding in canyons, more than 7,000 structures were destroyed and over 40 lives lost as uncontrolled wild fires raged for more than a week. Cardinal Newman High School burned on the first night. We were awakened by a phone call from a good friend, Stephanie Huang, an ENT surgeon and Zimbabwe colleague. She had just run from her house with her family, so urgently, her boys hadn't even a moment to grab shoes. Very soon after, their house caught fire. A Santa Rosa police officer had gone door to door waking her neighborhood, at great risk to himself. We looked from our windows and saw the fire sweeping over our neighboring ridge line. Exploding propane tanks sounded like an artillery barrage. We needed to get out. Stephanie graciously invited us to stay with them in their recently renovated home in downtown Santa Rosa. We happily accepted. They had intended to keep the home as a rental property but it would soon welcome a small community of fire refugees.

We had houseguests. Cindy's colleague from medical residency, Michael Weil, his wife Emily Kim, and their two young children were sleeping downstairs. Cindy went to our guest room to wake them. Leaning over the bed, she softly said, "Michael, Michael...". Of course, he kept snoring, oblivious, and Emily woke up, wondering, "Why is Cindy down here calling my husband's name???" Emily came upstairs just in time to see the flames move down the mountain, into our valley, consuming everything in its path. Emily is a Korean-Vietnamese Tiger Mom, and Silicon Valley entrepreneur. As Michael packed up their family, she organized Cindy and me, helping us decide what to save and what to leave behind. Her poise and cool, clear headed guidance were invaluable. Michael and family drove away first, and called us from the road, which already was backed up with traffic. A real danger existed that the fire would sweep over the highway, trapping the cars in a hurricane of flame. We finished packing and left.

We lived with the Huangs, and another family, the Lees, downtown for the 10 days we were evacuated. Fortunately, for the Lees and ourselves, the wind changed direction and the fire department held the line about a quarter of a mile from our homes. We didn't know this for several days until our vigilant brother, Greg Dishman, drove through the neighborhood and reported back to us. Stephanie and her family, on the other hand, lost everything.

Steeped in Buddhist philosophy, Stephanie's husband Henry, meditated on the principle of "liberation through loss." His equanimity and steady spirit calmed his family and helped us all navigate the tragedy and uncertainty of those days. As with many communities formed by necessity under conditions of hardship, ours grew very close. We shared cooking and cleaning responsibilities and supported each other. We drew together in heart and continue to share a deep bond. When the evacuation order was lifted and the day came for us to move back into our home, Stephanie prevailed upon us to stay an extra weekend. We did. It was hard to part.