

Through Another's Eyes

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The Magnitude of Our Good Fortune and Responsibility

As our young men and women endanger their lives in order to try and bring justice for the world's most horrifying human act of all time, we all sit and wonder. I wonder about those young people. Many of them are just out of high school. I wonder what brought them to a place in life where they would be willing to give up their lives for my safety.

I wonder about their leaders. I wonder about all the leaders of our world, positive and negative, harmful and helpful. I wonder how they all got there.

When I wonder all these things I can't help but fly through to the sights and sounds in my memory from about two years ago when I sat surrounded by our nation's leaders both past and present. I was honored to be asked by the family to attend a funeral of a true hero and friend, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt (Bud), who was laid to rest on January 11, 2000. He was an insightful, honest, stalwart, and responsible individual whom presidents and kings respected, and his family loved. This was a rare and gifted man.

As I sat during that funeral service, many things went through my mind. One of them had to do with those who surrounded me. There were hundreds of our nation's most powerful people, our President and First Lady, as well as military and political leaders. For an elementary school teacher, this was awe inspiring, as well as tremendously poignant. I was there because I was one of the teachers of two of Bud's granddaughters. Over time, the two girls' mother and I had become good friends. It just so happened that those girls' grandpa was a five-star admiral. To me, he was a loving and doting grandpa. Most of the few years I knew him I only knew that he was their grandpa. The stars in his life were those granddaughters.

I looked around the pews. They were so full; everyone's elbows rubbed. At certain moments on this day, the frail humanness of these profoundly powerful giants showed through. There were little signs and larger ones. As the First Lady came down the aisle with the President, her heel caught in the rug a bit, and she toddled very slightly and bumped into my daughter who was sitting on the end of the pew. Later, as I waited in the receiving line to express my sympathy to Bud's wife, the man in front of me, who had on a military uniform with four gold stripes on the bottom of the sleeve, bent over to hug Mrs. Zumwalt. As he did, grief overcame him. He buckled and laid his head in her lap and sobbed.

Through the sights and sounds of this day, I was made acutely aware that these people were indeed human. Then it occurred to me that all of these present day giants, including Bud, were little children at one time. Little children go to school. Perhaps many of them attended military academies and major universities, but where did they go to elementary and secondary school? Who were little Ricky, Charley, Bobby, Jay, Phil, Hilary, Howey, Jimmy, and Billy's first-grade teachers? Who taught them social studies in high school? Who taught them to love problem solving, to take risks, and to strive? What taught them the things that made them great?

Good Fortune and Responsibility

In less than a split second, I developed enormous respect for every student in my class. Despite our best efforts, no one has a crystal ball. Despite our gifted education programs, awards, and honors, we do not know the future of any child. We act as if we do. We say things in faculty rooms like, “he’ll never amount to anything,” and “she drives me crazy,” or “he’s going to be a real leader some day.” High school guidance counselors devote a good portion of their lives to trying to match children to universities and careers in areas that those counselors believe are appropriate for those students. But the fact is that many of us do not become what our teachers and guidance counselors thought we would be.

We never know what a child will become. President Johnson created an award for the youth of our country that every year since 1964 has honored the most outstanding high school graduates in our country.

They are called the Presidential Scholars. In her work on a few hundred of “the Presidential Scholars,” Felice Kaufmann found that these “brightest and best” of our nation often go into professions we would not expect. They may start in a field or endeavor that are similar to the courses of their best grades in high school, but they don’t always stay there. They may go from a very promising career in politics to small-scale dairy farming, or from nuclear physics to nature conservation.

It is in these later professions that they find their fulfillment.

Something that stood out in the eulogies at Admiral Zumwalt’s funeral was a constant thread about his integrity. President Clinton referred to Bud’s insight, foresight, compassion, and willingness to go against the grain for what was right. Considering the source, the poignancy and irony of these remarks were lost on no one. The ambassador spoke about their friendship and Elmo’s thoughtfulness. The chief of naval operations spoke about Bud’s constant concern

they’re right? How about ones who defy authority or are annoying? Might that child be the future Chief of Naval Operations, or Commander and Chief of the Armed Services? We can never tell.

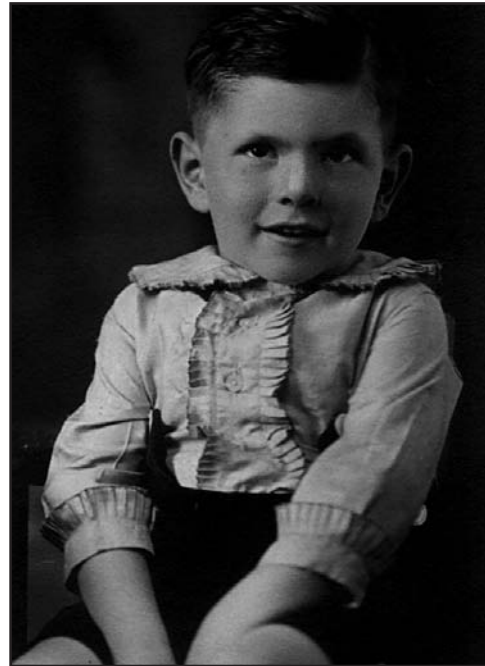
Since we don’t know the future, but we do know that there will be leaders of our world, we can only conclude that any one of those munchkins sitting at the tables and desks of our classrooms are in fact the future admirals, generals, ambassadors, and presidents. Because this must be true, might we ask ourselves if what we are teaching is what we want our leaders

to know? What *do* we want them to know? What do they *need* to know? Are we making that happen?

Let us look more carefully at our students and treat them as the future leaders of our nation and the world. Let us more seriously consider the magnitude of our good fortune and responsibility as teachers of those who will guard our nation’s safety,



Admiral Elmo Zumwalt



As a kindergarten student, age 5

for those in basic and fundamental jobs in the military. An interesting commonality ran through all of the comments. It was that to the authorities and the status quo, Bud could be an annoyance. On the cover of the bulletin it said, “reformer.” As a child, Bud was known for his strong will and determination. These were not qualities that endeared him to teachers. He rose to be much more than anyone ever expected not only in military power but also in personal dignity and grace.

Do you have students who go against your grain because they believe

grow our food supply, and save our planet. Let us consider very carefully what we teach and how we teach it. In addition to those that require basic skills, let us set standards that will bring the world health, wisdom, and peace. Let us educate and treat each of our students as if they may someday give their life to help make ours safe, and as if they will be the leaders of our nation. Every time we look into their faces we need to remember that, one day, they will. What can we do to prepare and appreciate them now? [GET](#)