

Learning from Fred

In 1933 President Franklin Roosevelt visited the home of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. who was 92 years old. The aging Supreme Court Justice was sitting in his library reading Plato. “May I ask you why you’re reading Plato, queried the President?” “Certainly, Mr. President. To improve my mind.” At the age of 92, Holmes was still learning and growing by reading philosophy.

Let’s transition to another 90 year old, named Fred. Fred Smith. Not the Fred Smith that founded Fed Ex, but Fred Smith the businessman from Dallas, Texas. Fred is a regular contributor to *Leadership Journal*, author of three books (the first he wrote when he was 70 years of age) and a fountain of wisdom to countless leaders around the country and around the world.

Fred Smith is the epitome of Psalm 92:14, “Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green.” (NLT) These days I think quite a bit about old age (in two months I will be 66). I want to end well and hit the finish line with a final passion-filled burst of speed with arms extended in victory and gratitude to Jesus. I want to hear, “Well done good and faithful servant.” Fred is a great encouragement to me in this regard. He is finishing well. This is especially noteworthy, because, as I have mentioned in prior writings, Bobby Clinton at Fuller Seminary has come to the conclusion that only 30% of leaders finish well.

Fred has the gift of writing what I’ve been thinking and feeling about a score of issues, but somehow haven’t found the words to express. I especially identify with what he has to offer because I, like him, have a strong desire and calling to impact leaders. A year ago Fred was hospitalized in a semi-conscious condition. He was not expected to live. They removed him from dialysis, thinking that his death would come within 3-5 days. But it didn’t! He is still writing, listening, loving and holding court in his home via Saturday morning conversational open houses. These are affectionately known as “Fred in the Bed,” But being confined has not slowed him down. He is still fulfilling his purpose statement, “To stretch others.” I certainly have been stretched by him through his writings. Fred’s wisdom can be found on his website www.breakfastwithfred.com. During the summer of 2005, *Leadership Journal* did a possible last interview with him. I have chosen two choice morsels to pass along and elaborate on a bit.

1. “Too many of my friends have grown old, not just older, by becoming grumpy old men. They discounted their contribution by writing a sloppy final chapter.”

“Writing a sloppy final chapter.” I’ve been thinking long and hard on this one. I want to end my race well and not do really stupid things in my “final chapter.” Paul stated in I

Corinthians 9:26: “I don’t know about you, but I am running hard for the finish line. I’m giving it everything I’ve got.” (The Message) I’m asking God to help me not be sloppy with my eyes (lust), my tongue (words), my money (greed or materialism) or my time (frittering it away on low-payback activities). My mentor Warren Myers died in 2001, at 78, and was a “Fred” until his final hours.

When I first met Warren, he was in his early 40s. He asked me to pray for him that he wouldn’t end up a bitter old man. I didn’t understand such an unusual prayer request then; but now, having met many hard-to-live-with older people, I know exactly what he meant. I don’t want to be one! By the way, the Lord answered Warren’s prayer. I wrote his wife Ruth after his passing, reminding her of Warren’s desire and of how God had done just that: enabling him, right to the end, to be a gracious and positive older warrior for Jesus.

2. *“I want to leave a legacy, not just an estate”*

Only people last forever. Everything else will rot, burn or rust. When my life is over, the Lord Jesus is not going to ask me about my bank account, my real estate holdings or my job title. He will ask me if I invested my god-given gifts in the lives of people for whom He died. It is too tempting and easy for me to measure my success in monetary terms rather than relational terms. Being a task-oriented person by nature, it has taken me quite a few years to understand (deep down in my core) the intrinsic value of people and the worthiness of investing my life and time in them.

Just this last week I had a conversation with a young and very successful businessman who has not yet turned 30 but has hit it big financially. I shared how important it was that he see his job as a platform for significant ministry to those he works with and meets in the context of his job, rather than seeing his job as simply (and only) a means to making lots of money. Just in case you are a younger leader and feel that all this talk about being older is not relevant to you, think again. Fred said: “I look at so many young men and women who are making junkyards of their old age by the foolish choices they’re making today. Many are in biblically based churches but living like pagans, There is a serious disconnect between what they know and how they live!

I couldn’t agree more.