

From the Interesting to the Simple:
Eulogy delivered at the memorial service for Howard Hong
27 March 2010

“Thank you, Mary Hong Loe and Erik Hong, for entrusting me to speak here to your family and to friends and neighbors of St. Olaf College.

What does it mean to be, to become a Christian?

The movement of the religious, according to Søren Kierkegaard, is not "the movement from the simple to the interesting, but from the interesting to the simple—becoming a Christian" (Point of View, 94).

What Kierkegaard so compactly suggests is this: To become a Christian is to move toward the simple that is the eternal and away from the interesting that is the worldly. It's possible. More often than not, however, what halts such a movement is that the simple is difficult. But, then, nobody ever said becoming a Christian was going to be easy, which is why the simple aligns itself with the difficult. As Herman Melville writes in his famous whale book: "In this world it is not so easy to settle these plain things. I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all" (Moby-Dick, chap. 85). And what makes the simple knotty is that it is not very interesting because the only thing that moves a person toward the religious is what Kierkegaard humorously calls elsewhere "the boring categories of the good" (Point of View, 92).

Here's an example:

The essential simplicity of Howard Hong was that he never stopped with the interesting alone, for he knew that the interesting merely grabs your attention, and anything can do that. The interesting, in other words, is incidental and comes at you from the outside and from every imaginable direction every day in this confusing and contradictory and colorful world.

But Howard didn't just want to be grabbed, only to be grabbed again by the next "interesting" thing that crossed his path. He wanted his attention held, for he knew that the only crucial and viable thing that could hold the attention of any person until the end of time was not the incidentally interesting that wades in the shallows of our lives but...the essentially simple that descends into the depths of our very beings. And so he began to move, precisely because he had become moved by the simple—which is to say that he not only deliberately chose to become a Christian, he actually began to make the movement of the religious by deliberately choosing it again and again each and every day. He never stopped. It was, on occasion, maddening for some of us even to witness his movements. His tenacious repetition, however, was precisely the kind of movement that was necessary to find meaning in life—for even imagining a meaningless life was a living death to Howard. Repetition, then (and as Kierkegaard suggests), is the very signpost of eternity and thereby the way one moves from the interesting to the simple—becoming a Christian.

That said, Howard Hong is the most interesting person I have ever met. For what else do you call a man who chooses to live a simple life, while also deliberately marrying and committing to the marriage for nearly 70 years, during which time he also committed to learn Danish, raise eight children, manage a home and two north woods cabins, develop and curate a world-class research library, teach thousands of students over the course of more than forty years, and translate and painstakingly edit, footnote, read, or otherwise have a hand in developing 15,887 pages of a difficult Dane? And that is just the primary tier of his accomplishments. The secondary tier includes things like reforesting large tracts of the north woods, reading voraciously, sniffing out the best cheeses in the Midwest, collecting balls of twine...Will somebody please stop me?

It's not that he wasn't intimately acquainted with the interesting. In fact, I can't remember a single time when he wasn't responding to the interesting that was always and everywhere swirling around him: worms crawling out of their underground tombs and onto St. Olaf College campus sidewalks each spring ("Look!" he would say like Zorba the Greek, "It's a miracle!"); a choice passage near the end of Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster" ("Look!"); the dance of light on Lake Superior waters at 5:30 on a July morning ("Look!");

or—and this stands alone because of his eternally eye-popping and childlike expression whenever he saw her—that forever interesting, forever simple Edna ("Look!").

So what is the simple? It's passionate engagement. It's stoic. It's focused. It's saintly. It's plain. It's pure of heart. It's ethical and committed and purposeful and packed full of meaning. It's what Melville calls "mute calm" and "eternal mildness of joy" that exists even "amid the tornadoed Atlantic of [our] being" (*Moby-Dick*, chap 87).

How do I know all this? Less from thinking abstractly and more from witnessing concretely the plain and simple example that was Howard's life. Hearing Howard speak and observing him make the movements of the simply "boring categories of the good" was never boring. Why? Because he always sought meaning and he helped us to see that meaning is never boring. "What does it mean"—and then, arms folded, he'd look up and squeeze the questions out of himself—"What is it mean...to be a human being?" And: "What does this word and this word and that word really mean?...What are their radical meanings?...their root meanings?" He grabbed you with these apparently impossible questions in such a way that suggested that such questions were by no means impossible but instead simply questions that evoked the possible in us all. And not only that; Howard then held you and continued to hold you until you came to hold yourself.

The season of Howard's life that we look back upon and memorialize today always seemed to be the long, simple season of Lent, which ends this very day. Just as Socrates—whom Kierkegaard always called that "simple wise man"—...just as Socrates knew where his knowledge ended and his ignorance began, so, too, Howard knew where his understanding ended and where that which passeth all understanding begins.

Tomorrow is Palm Sunday. May we turn our heads away from the interesting here and now and see the simple, eternal carpenter's son make His way into our hearts and minds and souls forever and ever, Amen.”

- Jamie Lorentzen

Chairperson, Friends of The Hong Kierkegaard Library