

## **Werner Vosskaemper**

Thoughts Shared at His Memorial Service

May 23, 2017

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Dan Seeger. I am the older of Betty Vosskaemper's two brothers. On behalf of Betty, and of Werner's daughter, Monica Vaughn, I would like to thank you for joining us as we mourn the loss of Werner Vosskaemper, and as we reflect together on the many blessings and gifts his life with us has brought.

Betty has asked me to speak briefly about this. My thoughts will be incomplete, at best, and I hope some of you will also feel free to share with this gathering your own insights and memories before we disperse.

I got to know Werner once he and Betty were married, which was twenty-two years ago. Werner, being already middle-aged, came into our family as a well-formed personality. He had been born in Germany, so his background aligned with that of our family, although Werner came with a continental grace and sophistication that contrasted with the more hurly-burly style of the Seeger family's peasant background. But my most insistent early recollection is of Werner's immense kindness to Betty's and my aged parents. It seemed that whenever I went to visit my parents there was some evidence of Werner's caring – most especially on their patio, where my father loved to sit and read and do crossword puzzles. There would be new outdoor carpeting, or new plantings, or new furnishings kindly and thoughtfully provided and installed by Werner.

Perhaps it was his experience growing up in Germany amid the chaos of World War II which inspired in Werner a close attentiveness to contemporary political and social developments. He was extraordinarily well-read in the fields of economics, politics, and social philosophy. And he applied the insights and the principles he derived from his knowledge in service to his local community. He was a vigorous activist, always advocating for prudence, good order, and justice. He organized and ran a cooperative transportation service to and from his township to the state capitol in Trenton. Werner was forward-thinking in his political and philosophical thought, which blended nicely with the sentiments in our family. There were never any of those tension-laced Thanksgiving dinners which so many families experience.

It was a beautiful thing to watch Werner and Betty's marriage unfold. Werner used his diverse practical skills lovingly to improve the homes they shared. Werner and Betty both had a love of adventure, of healthy living and eating, and of the outdoors. They traveled in Europe, renewing family ties. For many years they traveled around the United States in a recreational vehicle they owned. On one of their trips, while

hiking in a remote section of the mountains of Nova Scotia, Betty fell and broke both her arms. Werner faced the painful and perplexing dilemma of either leaving Betty alone in the woods with her injuries to go and seek help, or remaining by her side in the hope that happenstance would bring along someone else who could summon assistance. He made the best decision he could, stuck with Betty, and, happily, help did materialize. Betty, in her distress, was not deprived of Werner's support and protection, a support and protection he so lovingly provided in all aspects of their life together.

Somewhere along the way all of us were invited to see Werner's and Betty's Christmas tree, a real pine tree featuring real candles. Whoa, I thought to myself, having been well-schooled in the dangers and risks of Christmas tree fires. I went to the first of these events with some trepidation. But I learned that Werner, with his characteristic thoroughness and care, had picked out the tree in the forest while it was still growing, and, having carefully selected it, also carefully pruned it once it was harvested, so that the candle flames and the tree branches were safely separated. My anxieties alleviated, I came deeply to value these annual tree lightings. Amid the false hubub of the season with all its blinking electric lights, the meditative space provided by the peaceful candlelight is an amazing and very welcome contrast. Werner's other special Christmastime practice was the distribution of chocolate candies from Germany filled with brandy or liqueur. I took to this custom somewhat more readily than to the candle flames on the fir tree.

When I was a youngster my father, who liked to listen to the opera, sent his four children, of whom I was the oldest, to Saturday afternoon movie matinees. He did this so that he could listen in peace to Milton Cross and the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts. I don't remember anything about the films we children saw at these matinees, but I do remember the newsreels about World War II, which was raging at the time. As a pre-teenager I was horrified to see planes dropping bombs on cities, to see children fleeing from collapsing and burning buildings, to see battlefields strewn with corpses. These newsreel films made a deep and lasting impression on me. Werner is one year older than I am, and what I was seeing on film, he was actually living through in Germany.

All of us are aware of the most obvious costs of war: the sacrificed lives of the men and women of the armed services, the maiming and deaths of civilian men, women and children. But the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq have at last alerted us also to the hidden, long-enduring costs of war in terms of the after-effects left on the people who survive. A section of my own family is Cambodian, so I have witnessed this from that quarter as well. Like so many others who have endured what human beings were never meant to suffer, Werner carried the scars of his war experience with him through life, especially in an intolerance for noise and commotion. It is a good thing that so many of us have been able to enjoy a peaceful life; but we who have been so blessed must acknowledge that it is certainly brave and noble when a person and those who love him can bear the wounds of war with patience and fortitude.

Scientists tell us that the universe began with a Big Bang more than 13 billion years ago. In the cooling which followed, the creative, ordering principle of nature caused a dust of carbon and of all the other elements we know about, to coalesce into stars and planets and into the earth, where the miracle of life became possible – life which includes sentient beings like ourselves, capable of a superb degree of knowledge and, hopefully, of moral and spiritual wisdom as well. So we borrow these billion year old carbon particles for a time as they are assembled into our creatureliness, blessing us with sublime experiences and awareness, after which we return these particles to the earth to enable future wonders. This is an inexhaustible, gracious, flowing and generous process, the beautiful mystery of our existence. It is natural for us to mourn when the journey comes to an end for one of us, as it has for Werner, but it is important, as well, to give abundant thanks that this journey has occurred at all.

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