



The significance of the life of Sir Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop in respect of community service

by Steve Fahey

“He knew that he was blessed with exceptional strength of mind and body and felt compelled to use these talents for the benefit of others”.

Robert D Marshall, Melbourne surgeon, from an obituary for Weary in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Surgery (Geddes, 1996; 265)

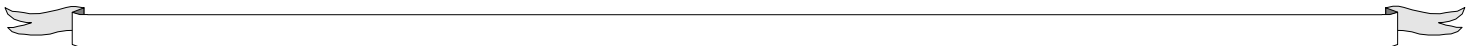
The fact that over 10,000 people attended his state funeral is testament that Weary Dunlop was an extraordinary human being. The diverse feelings that he evoked from those who knew him, including inspiration, humility, and exasperation demonstrates that he was also an ordinary human being – a man who experienced “everyday” vulnerabilities and insecurities. I believe that it is his ordinariness as much as his extraordinariness which enables him to still touch the lives of so many, and which serves as inspiration to all of us to serve the community in whatever manner we are able and willing.


Weary had an enormous capacity and willingness to serve others. His work as a surgeon on the infamous Burma Railway, made him an Australian and international humanitarian hero. Typically his role was multi-faceted - in addition to his medical duties, he was a leader, advocate and motivator for the troops and led by example. After the Second World War, in addition to maintaining his surgical practice, he continued to be a strong advocate and leader of ex-Prisoners of War, in both official and unofficial capacities.

Weary also served a plethora of other community organizations as a patron, chairman, member and supporter. He found it very difficult, if not impossible, to say no to a request for help, and this led him to at one stage being involved in as many as 43 different organizations. His community service incorporated a broad gamut of interests, from Australian health organizations such as the Anti-Cancer Council to cross-border medical development organizations, such as the Colombo Plan, to local community organizations such as the Junior Strings of Melbourne. Not only was he involved, but “everything Weary did he was passionate about”. (Rajah Kannan, past president of the Overseas Students’ Association, Geddes; 306).

I believe that the particular qualities which enabled Weary to touch the lives of so many, were his generosity, his ability to connect with people and his ability and willingness to take people as they were. Many personal testimonies in Margaret Geddes’ book come from his patients, whom he regarded as friends. His capacity to forgive his Japanese captors is an inspiring example of his ability to “...overcome and rise above the petty prejudices of individuals”. (Dino De Marchi, Vietnam veteran, solicitor and advocate for veterans’ rights, Geddes; 302). Weary stated his simple philosophy regarding reconciliation after the war “You are better to offer friendship and understanding”, (Geddes; 284) a philosophy he lived through his extensive involvement in the Asia region.

As well as recalling his strengths, many of those who knew Weary also described how infuriating and frustrating he could be, keeping colleagues and patients waiting for hours, having a fiery temper, and resenting authority. These reminiscences highlight that, despite being described as “Christ of the Burma Railway”, (Geddes; 263) he was, like all of us, a mere mortal who had his foibles and frailties. Indeed, Weary experienced great loneliness and depression, and openly wept in public for the suffering of prisoners of war.





Weary's pain makes him more accessible to us as a role model of humanity. His suffering reminds us that he was an ordinary human being, rather than a quasi-deity on a pedestal. He is a role model, not only for what Prime Minister John Howard described as "...his uncomplicated generosity and decency..." (www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/cpp/transcripts/howard.html) but as a complex and rounded public figure – a combination of light and darkness, who was able to achieve much and help many.

Few have Weary's capacity and willingness to serve others – his nickname was ironic in the extreme. However, we do all have our own abilities and capacities to serve others. Our challenge is what we choose to do with them. In making these choices, we can be encouraged and inspired by Weary's life.

References:

Ebury, Sue (1994). *Weary: The Life of Sir Edward Dunlop*. Australia: Penguin Books

Geddes, Margaret (1996). *Remembering Weary, Sir Edward Dunlop as recalled by those whose lives he touched*. Australia: Penguin Books

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