A Man of All Reason

Sharon E. Belden

My father never left the courtroom. Even though investigation into his crusading Oklahoma law practice—where he had defended blacks, reds, and pinkos—banned him from the Oregon bar decades ago, he has always stood with one foot before the bench.

No longer having a judge and jury in court, he endeavored to instill in his offspring the intricacies of logic, legalism, and leftism. Of his children he made only one demand: We were to save the world.

Thus at a tender age we were made aware of the inequities that we must eradicate, were drilled in the doctrines of democracy, were seduced by songs of social change, were tainted by the liberal tenets to which he so tenaciously clung.

That his convictions were minority views only proved him to be correct. So taken was I by this sense of martyrdom that when the tide turned against Joe McCarthy I thought him an underdog, a hero even.

I was alone in the house, and Drew Pearson droned from the radio, "All the boys on the Hill are wearing buttons, 'Joe Must Go.'"

Gee. Poor Joe! Even at eight I realized that Pearson referred to senators rather than small, malicious lads, but I allowed myself the fantasy of a large grassy knoll where men sat at a long, shiny table pointing fingers at poor cowering Joe.

It turned out, though, that this underdog was really a dog, and for once my father and public opinion were at one.

That happened seldom, and it was not easy back in the fifties to be a child of Radical Left parents in a small Oregon town that, while not a hotbed of conservatism, was a warm bath of pure all-American apathy.

At fourteen I rebelled by becoming a moderate. Not that I believed the quasi-conservative views I espoused; I only distrusted my father's conviction that anyone disagreeing with him was either ignorant or ignoble. Wasn't it possible for a person to be compassionate and concerned and yet conservative?

My father had a ready answer: "That person wouldn't know all the *facts*." If I persisted, he had another ready answer: "The problem with you is, you will never listen to *reason*."

How could I have known then that within a decade even Oregon would become somewhat enlightened? That my father would become a mentor, counseling draft resisters and delivering fiery speeches on socialism and Vietnam to shouts of "Right on!"? That I would proudly show to friends in San Francisco and Amsterdam news photographs of my father on a rally platform, his white beard blowing in a breeze?

When I was growing up my pride in him could not quite overpower my desire to be a part of the American dream of the fabulous fifties. Other fathers were successful businessmen, sported "I Like Ike" buttons, joined the American Legion, and went to church.

When I was eight my own father told me that he was an agnostic, neither believer nor atheist, because the latter two were illogical. For nights I lay awake filled with grief that one of my parents was to burn in hell. Even though belief in hell was illogical.

His rationalism penetrated the most ordinary facets of everyday life. As innocent an utterance as "Please pass the butter" became a topic of legal discourse.

"It isn't butter, it's margarine. In some states you can be imprisoned for calling margarine butter."

I was seven then and would have shaken in my shoes had I not been barefoot. I could see it vividly before my eyes: A Dick Tracy-type in trench coat, crouching outside a kitchen window, phoning in over his walkie-talkie radio, "You'd better send a car over to the corner of Fifth and Elm. I've just spotted a kid breaking the butter-margarine law."

His counseling was not idle pedantry—he is indeed

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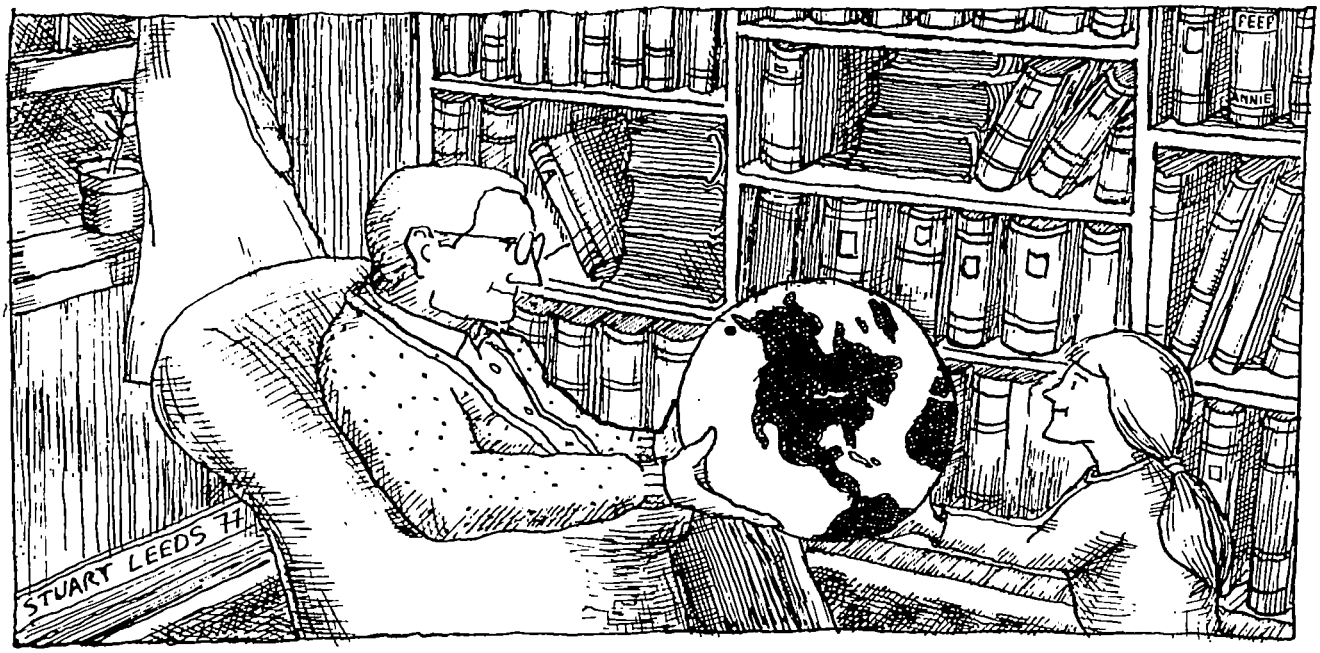

very loving and quite human. It was aimed at preparing us for the future battle with sound minds. My mind was hopeless.

More than once when we walked down the street together my thoughts, slithering joyfully among the cherry blossoms above, were jolted. "What color tie was that man wearing?" asked my father, the skilled cross-examiner.

"Tie? Man? I was just looking at the trees."

"Just imagine. What if a policeman came by and asked you to describe the man who just passed; *then* what could you say?"

"I'd just say I hadn't noticed," I replied, irritated, for I found cherry blossoms infinitely more important than ties—even if the bearer was a possible fugitive from justice.

"That's your problem. You're too dreamy. You never pay any attention to what is going on around you!"

This criticism, persisting throughout my childhood, was epitomized when I was nineteen. Outraged at a surgeon's bill, my father asked me, "Just how long did that doctor spend working on you?"

"How should I know? I was alseep."

"But you must have some idea. What time was it when he started?"

It had been early morning, I knew, but being heavily drugged when rolled into the operating room I had completely forgotten to ask the shadowy, masked, and robed figures above me for the time.

"That's always been your problem! You never have paid any attention to what was going on around you!"

And to think of the hopes he had had for me! Perhaps beginning to despair of siring a son to follow in his footsteps to martrydom, my father bestowed on me, his second daughter, a name he thought befitting a law shingle. Whatever confidence, whatever connotations of relentless crusading might be inspired by the name "Sharon Eileen Belden" I have no idea. But neither name nor child was destined for the law court.

With the fourth try, however, my father had a son to groom for the halls of justice. My brother was learning opposites before he learned sentences, logic before he could read. He quit the university to become a roving, raving coordinator for Students for a Democratic Society. At nineteen he left America as a draft resister and angry young poet, only to disgrace the family tradition by becoming a successful business executive in Copenhagen.

Yet, to do my father justice, I must add that he is not a totally logical, rational being. His gardens, envy of all who see them, defy scientific principles, go beyond knowledge of fertilizers and soils. I discovered his secret a few years ago when what he had been doing all along had become respectable. My father, the rational logician, visits his garden to send tender, loving vibrations to his plants and to talk them into growing.