

Sunsets of Gratefulness  
Michael E. McCullough

The National Institute for Healthcare Research, where I worked with Dave for four years, was located at 6110 Executive Boulevard in Rockville, Maryland. The 6110 building is an ordinary looking, 10-story corporate office building--business parks all over the United States are teeming with them. Dave's ninth floor office, in the Northwest corner, had big, broad windows on its North and East walls.

Dave filled his days with activity. While the sun shone, he labored. So he and I typically found our time to talk in the evenings, when most everyone else had gone home. For those evening chats, Dave preferred to take a chair that allowed him to look through the Northern window of his office. From his Northern view, Dave could watch the sky grow darker as the sun fell below the horizon. As our conversations went on, and the sky grew mellow and beautiful, Dave would, from time to time, pause, sigh, and declare: "Isn't that is a beautiful sight!" He would relax, become contemplative. Dave loved to watch the sunset, as does everyone, but I think this daily cosmic phenomenon was especially important to Dave. He seemed changed by it, or it marked a daily change in him. It not only was a cue for noting the passage of calendar time, but also an evening call to give thanks. Each day, at the end of the day, Dave's characteristic vigor and zest for what he wanted to accomplish did not take a back seat to his humility and profound gratitude for what he had been given.

With the passage of a few years since the last of our evening conversations, I have come to realize that they were actually the pretext for a short thanksgiving celebration. As our talk of work--were we not supposedly discussing work?--progressed, the conversation became increasingly punctuated by Dave's testimonials of thankfulness for all he had. He had two wonderful children and a wife who brought love, beauty and meaning to his world. He had colleagues who energized and challenged him. He made a living doing what he enjoyed. Despite some persistent health problems, he was generally healthy. So with the sky nearly dark, the concerns of the day receded until all that was left was gratitude.

Even in the light of day, of course, Dave overflowed with thankfulness. He thanked everyone. He thanked his employees for merely showing up to work. He expressed gratitude to his collaborators for providing him with opportunities to make a difference. Indeed, many people can attest to the fact that it was difficult to end a conversation with Dave without being thanked for something. But with the setting sun, Dave's gratitude became more profound, more focused. At those times, I realized that Dave's gratitude was a serious and spiritual business.

Dave once told me that he felt as though he had been a beggar his entire career. This statement shocked me profoundly. Now, many sunsets later, I think I understand what he meant. Most of us take for granted the sun's own warmth until it leaves us at dusk, just as we take for granted the benevolence of friends, colleagues, employees, strangers, our families, and those who have come before us. Dave seemed determined not to take these things for granted. He could name a thousand people to whom he felt indebted. And unlike many of us, who waste our energy trying to liberate our self-images from the countless acts of love that have made us who we are--trying to signify to ourselves and the world that we are "self-made" men and women--Dave cherished his bonds of indebtedness because, collectively, they were a big part of his life story.

Neither did he view his life and work as an investment in the future, although it was. Rather, David Bruce Larson lived his life as a joyous, creative, lifelong exercise of acknowledging innumerable, inestimable debts that could not really be paid back anyway.