

A Word from Mack

Mack McCarter

Gather sticks, kindle a fire, leave it burning

The great pastor/preacher/practical theologian of a bygone era, Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, titled the last chapter in his autobiography, “Ideas that Have Used Me.” And he then wrote on to spell out the powerful truths which during his lifetime ignited the candle of his soul into blazing action for the good of millions. Fosdick fully realized that he was not the generator of those truths and great ideas, none of us are. Love and goodness and perseverance are already present when we come aboard this ship of life.

But he also realized that the living of a truly great life means that we must choose to appropriate ideas that are farther reaching than our own “poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.” We cannot generate the power of ideas. But we can appropriate their power for our lives and let them use us. When we do this, we grow as we ride. A person’s life depends upon the choices we make in dedicating ourselves to serve the ideas and realities around us each day. That is a fundamental truth. And it is followed by another. Our lives are also shaped by those we choose to be with. Being around better people makes us better. And every now and then, a compelling personality touches our lives and invites us to saddle up with them and ride a while. Only then do we discover that we are riding on the tail of a comet!

Millard Fuller was a human comet who came from the far reaches of infinite space and swung into low orbit around planet earth dusting tens of thousands of us heavily with his capacity for expansive thinking translated into the swing of a hammer hitting a nail. And because he lived we are better. Within an hour of Millard’s passing on Feb. 3, a picture of another friend filled my mind. I was once again at the annual Yokefellow Conference at Earlham College in Richmond, Ind. It was the kickoff banquet in the great hall.

D. Elton Trueblood, Yokefellow founder, stood before the huge fireplace that dominated the whole south wall. The mantle was at least a story tall and was made of rough cut hardwood a foot thick. On that mantle were carved and golden-dyed these words: “They gathered sticks...Kindled a fire...And left it burning.” Dr. Trueblood, year in and year out, would follow our guest speaker by standing at the podium calling our attention to those words. He gave the same speech every time. It became so rote that it was a signal to us who had heard it over and over that the evening was concluded and bedtime was soon approaching. It was always the same.

He first read the words. Then he said, “Those words...were written by the captain of the ship that brought the first group of Quakers to America from England. I have held that log in my hands and read those very words! The ship had sailed a bit and in a small storm had put ashore along the coast of England. The captain marveled as he wrote in his log that night about his

passengers going ashore. He observed their behavior: ‘They gathered sticks, kindled a fire, and left it burning.’ And that my friends is what we must do!”

With that, Dr. Trueblood bid us goodnight. Every year it was the same thing. Every year we had a different speaker, but we always heard those same closing remarks. Only now do I realize that those words were carved on the mantle of our minds.

Now I know. We are not here to get rich and then pass on. We are not here to get famous and then expire. We are not here to gain power only to die. “*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his soul?*” No, we are here to use our efforts in the cause of a lasting truth so that every child in the world can grow up safe and loved.

My friends, together we are gathering the sticks of renewal and building a might fire of friendship and we will leave it burning for future generations to add logs to until the whole world is filled with loving kindness and we need never be afraid again. Thank you, Elton. Thank you, Millard. And I thank each of you. God bless you all.