The measure of his days
How Milo Shantz lived his vocation

Marcus Shantz

Church and business are often viewed as separate worlds. Milo Shantz's vocation successfully bridged those worlds, partly because he was humble about what he could offer the church, and partly because the church was (generally) receptive to his unique gifts and unusual personality.

When my grandfather died some years ago, I wrote a tribute for his funeral. That wasn't hard, because my grandpa was a wonderfully uncomplicated man. A gentle and a patient man, he lived long enough to accept death as another part of life. He had done everything he wanted to do. He had no unfinished business.

This tribute for his son Milo (my father) is harder, partly because Milo was a wonderfully complicated man, a man who generated strong opinions. You might think you knew him, but you'd be surprised. He was a businessman but wanted to be remembered as a churchman. He was a churchman who sometimes preferred to skip church on Sundays. He was a lousy student, but he served on college boards and received an honorary doctorate. He was a successful man who wanted to talk about his failures—who sometimes felt like a failure himself. He was hard-nosed and soft-hearted. He acted like he had a thick skin, but he really didn't. He was interested in art. He took up painting once, and thought he might have a talent for it. He really didn't. The point is that he tried. Gentle and patient? Those aren't the first two words that come to mind. But he was capable of both gentleness and patience.

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His father lived to be ninety-four, and was retired for more than thirty years. Milo lived to be seventy-six, and never really retired. "LORD, let me know my end, and what is the measure of

my days; let me know how fleeting my life is" (Ps. 39:4; NRSV). Milo could have written that. He speculated about how long he would live. Was he trying to bargain with the Almighty about the measure of his days? I remember him saying, "I'm going to live until I'm eighty." Was he saying, "Look, I'm not asking to reach a hundred, or even ninety; just let me get to eighty years"? He wasn't morbid. He just loved life, and he knew he didn't have much time. There were so many things he wanted to do.

Milo grew up on the family farm in Wilmot, Ontario, and went to grade eight in a one-room schoolhouse. He disliked school, and it was there that he developed a prejudice against duly appointed authorities. Why didn't Milo like school? He might have had an undiagnosed learning disability. While he was naturally talented in mathematics, he struggled all his life with writing and reading. And there is also this story, from when he was thirteen or fourteen years old: One day, his hapless teacher called a much younger boy to the front of the class, to get the strap. Milo looked the teacher in the eye and said, "Put the strap down." And incredibly, the teacher obeyed him. When I asked Dad why he stood up for this child, he said, "The teacher had no business hitting that kid. He didn't deserve it. You should almost never hit a kid." *That was Milo. Nerves of steel in the service of a soft heart.*

He was a teenager during a creative time in the Mennonite church in Ontario, a time when institutions and agencies were taking shape. The church challenged its young people to consider their mission in life. It encouraged them to go to seminary and become pastors, to travel overseas to do relief or mission work, to work in the inner city. Milo watched his friends make those commitments. And Milo also found his calling. He would support these activities through business. All this church work would need help: organization, infrastructure, money. He could help provide those things.

When I asked my father how he wanted to be remembered, he talked about church and community work. The list of his volunteer activities is long. And he was attracted to tough jobs that required real work. When Rockway Mennonite Collegiate nearly went bankrupt forty years ago, he chaired the fundraising committee that rescued the school. He had an eye for unfairness in organizations. When he became treasurer of the Ontario Menno-

nite Conference, he was ashamed to learn that some retired church ministers couldn't live on their meagre allowances. He did his best to change that. *That was Milo: You should almost never hit a kid. And pastors should have a decent pension.*

But the project he was proudest of was Mennonite Economic Development Associates, a network of Mennonite entrepreneurs working on international development projects—a perfect match for his interests and abilities. He was asked to become involved on the MEDA board in the 1960s and was soon made chairman. Milo's mandate was to help move it to the next level: to make MEDA into a professional international development agency. He served as chairman for ten years, and he was intensely happy to see MEDA grow, and keep growing—long after he was directly involved. *And that was Milo: He could let things go, and he could take pleasure in the success of others.*

Why did he do all these things? I think his activities flowed from his sense of what the church ought to be. The idea of church as a private club of clean people held little interest for him. Milo thought church should be a network of people doing good things in a messy world. It should be as open, as generous, and as hospitable as possible. So he moved easily from his own denomination into a wider circle that included Habitat for Humanity and St. Mary's Hospital. It was all the same to him. He had friends from all walks of life, all over the world, from many backgrounds and beliefs. He wasn't concerned about boundaries.

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During Milo's lifetime, controversies kept arising about who is in the church and who is out. Could you wear wedding rings? Could you be in the church if you were divorced? Could a woman be a minister? Could you join the church if you were gay? His answer was the same, every time, in every decade. Yes. Yes. Yes. He said it publicly. But he spoke quietly, and he generally remained on good terms with those with whom he disagreed. *And that was Milo. Practice hospitality, and make room for all kinds of people.*

I suppose I should say a few things about his day job. He was a serial entrepreneur, a scattergun of business ideas—although many

of his ideas didn't work out. Milo often said that he had more business failures than successes. He did not have a magic touch; he had to work for everything. The 1990s were some of the most difficult years, and the heavy going wore on him. I believe he talked openly about his failures to set an example for other people, to show that failing is better than not trying.

I think Milo died with some regrets, mostly related to the business. He wished that more projects had worked out, wished he had seen more success. He probably could have been more successful in business. Part of his problem was that heart. That compassionate heart ordered him around and told him to do more: to work hard in the church and the wider world, to build up the common good among friends, family, community. *His heart was in charge, and it told him that hospitality can make the world a better place, that you can stand up to the powers that be, especially for the sake of others—and you should almost never hit a kid. That was Milo. That's the measure of his days.*

About the author

Marcus Shantz is a lawyer and business person in Kitchener, Ontario. This article is an excerpt of a tribute he delivered at his father's funeral on January 9, 2009.