



A brief Father's Day tribute

By **Jenny Price** | June 14, 2008

My father, Elmer Price, left frustratingly few personal papers behind—no letters, no records from his community work, no documentation of his awards as a lawyer—but had rather saved just a very few things. He'd saved birthday cards from my mother: we found those in his safe deposit box at the bank, where most people keep jewels and stock options. He'd kept copies of letters he'd sent in May 1961 to his political representatives to ask why they were on the sponsor list for the Greater St. Louis School of Anti-Communism, and whether they supported the School's ties to the John Birch Society. And he'd kept two sets of notes for talks he'd presented in the early 1960s: one on 1st Amendment rights; and one that refuted the assertions of a propaganda film about the House Un-American Activities Committee.

In the 1950s, when he defended people for the ACLU against charges of communism, the prosecution once presented its evidence in the form of a sealed envelope, whose contents the judge and defense were not allowed to see—and my father still won. In the 1960s, he was voted onto the School Board by a huge margin, and then he was voted off it by a huge margin in the next election after he proposed a desegregation plan—a plan not unlike the one the school district would adopt twenty years later.

He was by all accounts a witty, fearsome litigator in the courtroom—legendary, I'm told, actually—which I find quite easy to believe, having grown up in a heady political era around the dinner table with the gentler version, my three brothers, my mother, two labradors (whom my father lovingly dubbed Smartass and Bonehead), and noise levels that took freedom of speech to grand new heights. I didn't truly win an argument with him until I was around 25—the perfect 1st Amendment rights in our family notwithstanding. Sometimes I was right.

He believed that the practice of law should be a profession, not a business (and he felt the same way about baseball.) He believed that to believe in the spirit of the law was to believe in the letter of the law. He didn't cheat on his taxes, and he observed the speed limit: I know no one else who does both. He believed that honesty was essential especially in the most inconvenient situations.

Above all, he believed in his children.

He did not believe at all in Father's Day, however—nor has my mother believed in Mother's Day. We barely celebrated them, even when my brothers and I were kids. My parents rejected these days as crass, commercial, entirely pointless, and hardly any measure of their children's love, which they did not demand and felt no need to measure.

But Dad, on this one Father's Day—and this one only, I promise—let me say two things:

In these past two months, as the Supreme Court finally affirmed our constitutional principles on the detainees issue, and Barack Obama won the Democratic presidential nomination, still these momentous events, without you to share them, have felt a bit like we're sending triumphs of integrity and civil rights into the wind.

And in these last few weeks, as I've encountered the word "father" everywhere—plastered, crassly and commercially and pointlessly, in newspapers, on websites, on buses, and in store windows...Well, I have to

admit that on this one Father's Day—the first one without you—this relentless onslaught has conjured meaningfulness and immeasurable love as never before.