

# **FAR FROM THE NORM**

**[ NORM MIDDAG'S LIFE IN MINISTRY ]**

**Bruce Coston**

*AdventSource*

Far From the Norm: Norm Middag's Life in Ministry

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This book is lovingly dedicated to Norm and Barb Middag whose lives of ministry, leadership, and devotion serve as a beacon to so many. Too few faithfully exemplify fruitful lives of Christian service. They did! Hundreds of young people were motivated to reach the potential that Norm and Barb saw in them. Thousands of hearts have been stirred to respond to God's whispers. Like the glowing embers of the campfire to which Norm so often directed attention, their lives have shined the light of heaven into this world's dark corners and through them Christ has been lifted up. Their most fervent desire was that because of their sweet influence, the same could be said of each of us.

To that end, may their dedication become ours as well.

Norman Owen Middag (*March 15, 1930 – June 23, 2021*)

Barbara Popp Middag (*July 4, 1930 – July 7, 2020*)



NORM AND BARB

# FOREWORD

It is an honor to write a foreword for Elder Norman Middag's biography. Deep into adulthood, people often reflect on the factors that have shaped and formed them. It's clear that, while we journey through life, influencers mold us and makes us who we are. When we are young, they help us form our worldview, adopt our core values, and define our vision of what a decent and noble life looks like. Parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, employers, church members, and coaches can all be influencers!

For me, Norm Middag was such an influencer. My earliest recollections of Elder Middag are from when I was ten years of age as a Pathfinder in the Florida Conference and a camper at Camp Kulaqua. As the conference youth director and camp director, he organized dynamic, faith-building programs that complemented the examples of my parents. These programs helped me develop my personal relationship with Jesus. For me, summer camp was the most amazing experience, and I am so grateful for the kind of program he ran! It was well-organized, noble, spiritual, and FUN! It was at camp that I made my personal decision to follow Christ.

The consistency that I saw then and still see in Norm has been incredible. The familiar sound of his "ten-hut" at line calls (which sounds identical even today), his radiant smile, encouraging words, and constant leadership have all been so remarkable! Just a few weeks ago, at ninety years of age, Norm called and said, "Rob, I have an assignment for you." So, from my junior and earliteen years, to becoming his employee while working as a ski



NORM AND ROB

instructor at Hickory Cove in Virginia, to transitioning in college from business to theology, to becoming a young pastor, then conference youth director, and now Union youth director, my life has been blessed by Norm Middag's rock-solid steady influence.

A pivotal moment for me came late in the summer of 1981, when Norm came down to visit us at Hickory Cove, the waterfront "satellite camp" of Camp Blue Ridge, which Norm directed. After our evening program, which I had been part of, Norm came over and put his hand on my shoulder. "Rob," he said, "have you ever considered going into full-time ministry?" I replied that I hadn't. "Well, I think you should. Pray about it!" That was the end of the conversation but not the end of the Spirit-led process. When I returned to Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University), I entered the gymnasium to register as a business major and exited registered for religion and theology classes! I had come under conviction for ministry and had seen in Norm's example that it was the most fulfilling future I could hope for. Though as a theology student I felt like a square peg in a round hole, Norm's brief conversation had been a very significant moment! I am confident that his tap on my shoulder and his years as an excellent role model, along with the influence of his dear wife Barbara, all combined to have a profound impact on the course of my life.

In a world where men of strong faith, integrity, humility, and leadership are increasingly hard to find, the clarion call of God through the inspired pen of Ellen White remains:

"The greatest want of the world is the want of men; men who will not be bought or sold; men who in their inmost souls are true and honest; men who do not fear to call sin by its right name; men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole; men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall."

I, along with a multitude of others, thank Norman Middag for so faithfully answering this call! Without question, Norm's investment in me and so many others has been part of God's great plan and will reap eternal results. As you read and celebrate this story of a life well-lived, may you be inspired to go and do likewise.

Rob Lang, North Pacific Union Youth Director

# INTRODUCTION

Abundant thanks to Mr. Webster, who defines “introduction” as “preparing the way for a book or speech.” What an appropriate way to introduce you to our dad, Norm Middag, who has dedicated his life to leading young people and teaching them how to “prepare the way” through Pathfinding, camping and other experiences.

Dad is a man of many facets. Most notably, he is a committed leader with an undying devotion to young people, mentoring them and showing them how Pathfinding builds character in a devoted Christian life.

More than once during our growing-up years, we three kids were asked, “Is your dad like this all the time?” Our collective response was always an unequivocal “Yes!”

Yes! Dad does not need to be in front of an audience, large or small, taking credit for his accomplishments.

Yes! He enjoys himself as much as anyone at the campground, drilling through a flag raising or teaching youth leadership skills.

Yes! He is always impatient with talent, minds, or a work ethic grown dormant.

Yes! He believes with all his heart that we can be much more than what we are.

And yes, one of his favorite words is YES! His attitude says, “Let’s lean forward together and break the mold of tradition by removing barriers and forging new bonds.” Dad has a way of embracing possibilities, offering new challenges to us all.



NORM AND BARB WITH GRANDCHILDREN 2001

Where does this desire for growth and change come from? What is the inspiration? It's simple. It comes from campers, staff, and young-adult leaders looking for someone to show them the way. And it comes from nature, the prime example of change and growth and beauty all around us.

So convinced is Dad of the glory of a life that embraces change that he is not afraid to move others out of their comfortable complacency. He reminds us by his actions to never stop learning and to always be willing to try something new.

He is very much a man, very much a human who stumbles and who, like the rest of us, comes face to face with life's complexities. He has occasional moments of doubt but never loses sight of the long-term goal—to live as a Christlike example—and tackles life head-on, trusting God's promises. He seems to glory in his hard-core devotion to making a difference, strengthening his desire for excellence and leading us all by example. In a word, perseverance has added much to his approach to life.

Behind every great man is a wonderful woman, and in Dad's case, that's our mom. She demonstrated untiring devotion not only as Dad's wife and our mom but also as Dad's constant support as each barrier was being broken.

The stories of Dad's life in this book speak for themselves and will "prepare the way." Get ready to embark on a lovely adventure as you rejoice with our dad in his quest to change lives in preparation for eternal life.

Loren Middag with David Middag and Renee Middag Brownlow



MIDDAG FAMILY





## CHAPTER 1

# A SERVANT OF GOD AND A FRIEND TO MAN

It was not a day to be out on the road that morning in November of 1930. The snow had fallen for days, and the radio had broadcast over and again the town's official pleas for Duluth, Minnesota residents to stay home and let the snowplows do their work. With any luck, they could clear enough of the mountains of snow from the roads by Monday morning to allow Duluth to come back to life after the blizzard that had shut the town down. The buses which Effie Middag normally rode to church were not running that day. Neither were the taxis, so she would have had no way to get to church even if the weather had not canceled the service. Effie was not accustomed to missing church. She would not have skipped church on any Sabbath, much less on the day she had planned to dedicate her eight-month-old son, Norman, to God's service. It was to have been an especially joyful occasion, officiated by the pastor of the Duluth Seventh-day Adventist Church, G. E. Hutches.

Still, not even a weather cancellation could prevent Effie from dedicating her youngest child to God. As the storm shrieked outside, she huddled around the vent which feebly blew what little heat could be coaxed from the overworked furnace and, accompanied only by her young son and a mother's hopeful heart, prayed this prayer: "Oh Lord, please let my son be a servant of God and a friend to man." Those words, wreathed by frost and whispered from the heart of a godly mother, set the course for Norm Middag's life.

It was, of course, a prayer of blessing on a son. But it was also the continuation of an ongoing conversation between a mother's sincere heart and the God she served. For Effie, prayer was not a noun; it was a verb, an active state of mind made all the more urgent by the birth of her seventh child. She had prayed that God would teach her to be gentle with his tender heart; that she would be patient with her son's questions; that she could learn the best way to teach her child. In her Bible, she carried a card quoting Psalm 51:10: "Create in me a clean heart." She daily committed herself to that, not just for herself but for this son whom she was now dedicating to the Lord. She took to heart the advice she read in Ellen White's book, *Child Guidance* (CG page 169) that the divine commission of parents is to sculpt characters in their children after the Divine pattern. She firmly believed that the work of developing character in her children was "the most important work ever entrusted to human beings".

Little did Effie know that the little boy nestled in her arms in a soft blanket would grow up to be a giant among Christian warriors; a revered and respected figure in the world of Seventh-day Adventist youth ministries; a pioneer committed to excellence in summer camp and Pathfinder ministry; a much-loved mentor to countless future leaders; and a man whose ripples of influence surged across an entire continent, impacted hundreds of thousands of lives, and continues to contribute to God's kingdom almost a century later. But wait—let's not get ahead of ourselves! That's the end of the story, but there's much to tell between that cold winter day and the legacy built over decades by that little boy.

The story traces its origins across the sea, over the American continent, and to the little town of Grand Haven, Michigan, where Effie Myhre's and John Middag's paths first crossed. Effie's family had found its way to Grand Haven from Oslo, Norway, where, in 1837, the family had accepted the Seventh-day Adventist message during the first evangelistic meetings the Adventists conducted in that country. Her father, a watchmaker and clock repairman, decided to immigrate to the United States in the waning years of the nineteenth century, settling first in the Chicago area. There they were among the earliest members of the Adventist church which eventually became the West Central Seventh-day Adventist Church in Oak Park, Illinois. By the early 1900s, circumstances took the Myhre family around the southern tip of Lake Michigan to the small town of Grand Haven, Michigan, on its eastern shore. Effie's faith and her commitment to the Adventist church strengthened as she grew into a beautiful young woman who soon caught the eye of another young resident of Grand Haven.

John's family history mirrored that of the Myrhe's, also tracing its roots to Norway. Rumors of the Black Plague, which had decimated 60 percent of Norway's population in the mid-1300s, began to swirl again through rural Norway in the late 1800s. Distant memories of the ancient epidemic were kept alive in the terrifying stories that Norwegian families still told. So fearful were Norwegians of the plague that had begun in China and was sweeping across Europe that in the early 1880's, Jan Joost (John) Middag's family fled the new pandemic. Their flight took them to the Netherlands, where Jan Joost clambered aboard a ship headed for the New World, settling in Grand Haven where he worked as a fisherman on Lake Michigan and saved enough money to send for his wife, Gertrude, and their kids to join him. Shortly after leaving the port in the Netherlands, the ship caught fire and, though no one perished, the passengers spent a harrowing night aboard lifeboats before being rescued. In Grand Haven, Jan Joost, now known as John, and Gertrude farmed a plot of land and operated a greenhouse. It was on that farm that John Middag, Jr. was born in 1892.

The details of John's and Effie's courtship have faded into history, but about 1910, the couple was married in the town where they first met. Their oldest child, Evelyn, entered the scene shortly thereafter. John's passion for working with the soil and plants prompted him to seek a farm where he could strike out on his own, and no more fertile soil could be found than in Minnesota. By the time he rented a small farm in the northern Minnesota town of Eveleth, he and Effie had added Ronald, Gordon, Harold, and Ruth to the family. It was a monumental feat to move a family of seven the seven hundred miles from Grand Haven to Eveleth, dragging with them all their possessions. But what lay at the end of the journey kept John eager for his new vocation.

Farm life kept the whole family busy. Farming is hard work, and each child was expected to pitch in. Bad days followed good. Irene was born on the Eveleth farm but, sadly, lived only a few hours. John Jr. followed soon after. While farming agreed with John, renting did not. He yearned for his own farm, and when a 90-acre plot of peat-soil land on the top of a hill overlooking Duluth became available in 1928 or 1929, he jumped at the chance to purchase it. Once again, the family moved, but this time, even though the trip was only sixty miles, John had accumulated quite a collection of animals and farming implements, and they also made the journey.

It was in Duluth that Norm was born to Effie and John Middag in St. Luke's Hospital on March 15, 1930, as the town eagerly anticipated the end of another harsh Minnesota winter. Though seventeen years separated Norm from his oldest sister, what connected them was the Adventist church. Of the now nine members of the Middag family, only Effie, Evelyn, and Norm regularly attended the Adventist church. John, though he was a Christian and supported Effie's desire to remain an active member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was not a church-going man. It was in the church that Norm, Evelyn, and their mother found a community of Christian brothers and sisters. For them, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was their touchstone and foundation. That Norm's other siblings did not become members of the Adventist church was not Effie's primary concern. She desired first that their lives were built on a firm moral foundation and a liberating personal faith. As her children formed families of their own, she was pleased to see them also committed to strong Christian principles – even though they were not in the Adventist community.

Evelyn attended Maplewood Academy in Hutchinson, Minnesota, for her high school years. While there, she worked in the book bindery and print shop and learned the printing trade. After graduating from Maplewood, she answered an ad for a printer for a weekly paper in Three Oaks, Michigan. There she met and

married Don Smith, an Adventist man whose family had been close friends with Ellen White. Evelyn and Don remained faithful members of the Adventist church throughout their long marriage, and their daughter, Vivian, remains a member today.

Ronald determined quickly that farming was not for him. In 1936, he left the Minnesota northland to join the Navy, becoming an electrician onboard the USS Lexington, which was stationed in Pearl Harbor in 1941. On December 7 of that year, Lady Lex, as she was known, was not in port. While she was out on a mission to ferry fighter planes to the island of Midway, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor hurtled America into World War II. The Lexington was quickly called back to Hawaii, the planes still aboard, but when they arrived back in port a week later, it was too late to assist with the defense of Pearl Harbor. The mission to deliver war planes to Midway was both a failure and a success. The planes were not delivered, but since aircraft carriers like the Lexington had been the primary targets of the Japanese raid, the Lexington may well have sunk, taking Ronald down with her.

Over the next few months, the Lexington saw action at Wake Island, the Coral Sea, the Marshall Islands, and New Guinea before ending up in the Battle of the Coral Sea in early May. During Japan's offensive, called Operation Mo, Lady Lex was dealt a mortal blow. After being crippled by Japanese planes, air and aviation fuel in the ship's refueling lines ignited a series of explosions and onboard fires which could not be extinguished. The surviving crew of the aircraft carrier was forced to abandon ship, and for four hours, Ronald treaded water before being picked up by rescue crews. Again, he had cheated death, barely surviving the attack that forced the Navy to scuttle Lady Lex on May 8, 1942, taking the sailors who had perished in the attack down with her to a watery grave. Decades later, in 1983, Ronald, then in his seventies, was honored to present a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in memory of those lost sailors.

But Ronald's naval career was not over. His next assignment was as Chief Warrant Officer aboard the USS Enterprise, another aircraft carrier in the Pacific Theater. When battle damage forced major repairs, the ship was sent to Bremerton, Washington. While the Enterprise was in dry dock, Ronald's job as CWO was to observe the repairs to the electrical systems over which he was responsible. One day, he watched as a huge electrical cable was brought on board to repair the bomb damage. When unused remnants of the cable were inadvertently left on board after the repairs were finished, Ronald squirreled several lengths into a hidden chamber under the decks, hoping that he would not be reported.

After repairs were completed, the Enterprise was sent back into the fray, seeing action in the Battle of Midway and numerous other battles in the South Pacific. In

May of 1945, a Japanese kamikaze pilot flew his Zero into the ship, penetrating to the sixth level below the flight deck and causing a massive explosion which blew the forward elevator 400 feet into the air. The kamikaze attack killed 14 and wounded 34 sailors and rendered the ship dead in the water. A picture of the moment of the explosion was captured by photographers aboard the USS Washington, which graphically captures the extent of the damage that the Zero pilot, Lt. J. G. Shunsuke Tomiyasu, inflicted on the carrier.

Commander Cato Glover summoned his Chief Warrant Officer and ordered him to assess the damage. Ronald found that the kamikaze attack had severed the main cable that provided electricity to the bridge. When he returned to the bridge, Commander Glover asked whether he could get the power back up or if they would have to abandon ship. Ronald remembered the extra cable he had hidden from the repair crew in Bremerton. "I can get us back up and running, sir!" And within a few hours, the Enterprise was once again under power and heading for major repairs back in Bremerton. It was the last action the Enterprise would see in WWII, but had it not been for Ronald Middag, the Enterprise would likely have been another casualty of the Battle of Leyte Gulf and sunk to the ocean floor.

Norm's other siblings led lives typical of America's greatest generation. Gordon, the serious brother, took great care of his younger siblings. It was he who got tickets for John Jr. and Norm to attend the Duluth Dukes baseball games, even though the Middags had little money for such trivialities. As caretaker for the local YMCA, where the visiting teams always stayed, Gordon was often handed tickets for the games. Gordon had wanted to follow in his brother Ronald's footsteps and join the military, but he had been unable to pass the physical. Instead, he served in the Civilian Conservation Corps and helped to construct the Blue Ridge Parkway through the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and Virginia. Eventually, Gordon became a CPA and practiced accounting in Duluth until retirement when he moved to Muskegon, Michigan. He and his wife, Genevieve, named their four children names beginning with the letter "G". Even the family dog was named Ginger. So, whenever Gordon's family was spoken of in the Middag family, they were referred to as the "G family."

Norm's brother, Harold, was the musician of the family. He formed a band which practiced in the Middag house and specialized in soft dance music. An electrician by trade, Harold spent most of his life in Duluth until he took a vacation to San Diego and was so enamored by the city that he simply stayed there. Lacking the proper gauges for his trade, he often tested power on a circuit the old-fashioned way: by licking his fingers and grabbing the bare wires.

Ruth graduated from Duluth High School and took a job at a Fanny Farmer candy store before moving to Minneapolis, where she married. She and her husband subsequently moved to Mankato, Minnesota, where Ruth was a homemaker and the mother of two children, Scott and Chris.

John Jr. was only two years older than Norm. His love for cars and grease led him into a career as a master mechanic. He moved to Muskegon, Michigan, with his wife and their two boys, Bob and Roger, and was hired by Greyhound Bus Lines. He served as head mechanic and was charged with keeping the buses running. The bus depot's garage had a monstrous lift which allowed John Jr. to work on the undersides of the coaches. One day, while he was working under one of the heavy buses, the lift gave way and the bus fell, killing him instantly.

Each of Norm's siblings lived successful lives, due in no small part to Effie's constant prayers which attended them throughout their journeys. Each made significant contributions to their communities, had a strong Christian faith, close-knit families, and raised exceptional children. Ronald was a true war hero, having saved the Enterprise from certain ruin. But Norm's life was of a different sort entirely. He had been dedicated by his mother on a blustery winter morning in 1930. Norm



MIDDAG FAMILY IN 1938

BACK ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT) HAROLD, EVELYN, RONALD, RUTH, GORDON  
FRONT ROW (LEFT TO RIGHT) JOHN, JOHN MIDDAG (FATHER), EFFIE MIDDAG (MOTHER), NORMAN

was destined for service. He would indeed grow to be “a servant of God and a friend to man.” It is to that story that we now turn.

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## Norm’s Nuggets

These stories are told with a specific intent: to share Norm’s passion for ministry to young people and the factors in his life that shaped his perspective and informed his approach to ministry. It would be anathema to Norm as a lifelong mentor and teacher to simply relate the mundane occurrences of his life without plucking from them pearls of wisdom that he relied on throughout his career. He wishes his life to be an example and his experiences to be instructive in ways that will benefit future leaders as they step into the traces of youth ministry.

To that end, we will pull from each of these tales the nuggets of wisdom that Norm leaned on for direction in his life. Norm’s Nuggets will be shared in bullet-point format at the end of each chapter in the words of Norm himself. Ponder them as you read. Come back to them as the experiences in your ministry shape your approach to young people. Allow them to guide you around pitfalls that too easily encumber the unwary, the proud, or the faint of heart. Of what value is the telling of stories such as this if they fail to edify the faithful?

- **The prayers of faithful parents are heard and answered by God.** What occurred that snowy morning in Duluth, what was repeated daily by Effie over the years, shaped and molded Norm for a life of ministry.
- **Being a good parent requires that parents pray first that God will prepare them for successful parenting.** It is not good enough simply to pray for your child. You also must be willing to allow God to make you sensitive, patient, and kind in your dealings with your children.
- **Effective parents raise their children in alignment with the Divine pattern.** They create a close-knit family, establish a strong foundation of moral beliefs, nurture a liberating personal faith, and instill a spirit of caring for others.





## FORMATIVE YEARS

Growing up as the son of a Minnesota farmer and a mother committed to raising her children well did not make Norm's boyhood life one of ease. A happy childhood was not among Effie's parental goals. In her mind, striving for Norm's childhood happiness would serve only to make him self-centered and compromise her ultimate goal for him: a happy life of service. So, despite the cold winters, Norm was not excused from responsibility, even as a child of tender years.

Effie knew that preparing Norm for such a life required intentional parenting. She had read it in Proverbs 22:6: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." This was her purpose in life. She had profound lessons for Norm to learn and a strategy for teaching them. Her parenting philosophy was rooted in biblical principles. In Ephesians 6:1-3 and Colossians 3:20, she learned the importance of obedience: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother." Norm was expected to obey without question. This lesson began immediately. She would not countenance a rebellious spirit, and she slathered praise on him whenever he obeyed. Before he realized there were any other options, Norm had made obedience a habit.

Effie also wanted Norm to learn helpfulness. To that end, he was given age-appropriate tasks which he was expected to complete without quarrel or complaint. Norm's earliest memories include helping his older sister wash the dishes. At three and four years of age, though his hands were too small to handle the breakables, he learned to cheerfully dry the silverware and the pans. Norm was also expected to make his bed every morning before he left his room. Before he was enrolled in school, Norm's job was to churn the butter, turning the crank on the butter churn until the cream separated. It was quite a job for such small hands. He was also expected to help in his father's greenhouses, weeding the long rows of flowers and replanting them in small pots.

Norm was also responsible for gathering the eggs from the family's free-roaming chickens. He enjoyed reaching into the nesting boxes and pulling the warm eggs from under the cackling hens, but it was a more difficult task to collect the eggs from the hens who laid them in the hay mound instead of the nesting boxes. They would burrow deeply into the hay, forming dark recesses in which it was too dark for Norm to see their eggs. One day he decided more light was needed. Not considering the

consequences, he struck a match and introduced it into the dark hay tunnel. This did light his search, but it also ignited the hay mound.

Before he knew it, flames were licking at the dry hay, engulfing the stack, and then threatening the barn. Terrified, Norm ran to the house and crawled under his parents' bed. Smoke alerted the family, and the fire department was summoned. But Norm missed the excitement. He refused to come out from his hiding place under the bed while the family manned a bucket brigade. He didn't come out when the fire truck arrived, sirens blaring and lights flashing. He wasn't around when the fire was finally doused and the hay mound was reduced to smoldering ashes. He didn't know until later that the barn had been saved. He didn't even come out when the firemen were gathered around the family's kitchen table and offered glasses of cold milk. Not until the firemen left did Norm finally venture from his hiding place, sure that he had burned down the farm. By that time, his parents felt he'd punished himself adequately, and they issued no other reprimands. Lesson learned. Norm learned to think about potential consequences before doing something he'd later regret.

In Norm's earliest years, Effie sought to develop his mind and nurture his love for God. What better way than teaching him his memory verses each week? As the children's Sabbath School superintendent in the little Duluth Seventh-day Adventist Church, Effie proudly watched as Norm stood before the congregation and recited his memory verses each thirteenth Sabbath. During evening worships, she sang with him the old favorites: "Jesus Loves Me," "The Old Rugged Cross," and other hymns that grounded him in his faith.

For Norm, the church was embodied by his pastor, G. E. Hutches, a man of God who towered in Norm's estimation. He idolized Pastor Hutches in every way, not least because of the shiny red convertible he drove. It was a car that attracted attention wherever it went, and Norm watched him drive it with something approaching awe. This did not escape Pastor Hutches, who invited him along on several hospital visitations. Norm sat proudly in the passenger's seat and watched with deep respect as his pastor shared words of encouragement and bowed in prayer with ill church members. It was Norm's first view into the role of a pastor, and he was deeply affected. Pastor Hutches' concentrated attention on Norm continued through his formative years and was something that Norm emulated in adulthood.

Effie also wanted Norm to learn respect, self-discipline, and reverence. So, instead of sitting in the rear pews each Sabbath where she could have easily slipped out with a fussing child, she strode proudly to the front row with Evelyn, Ruth, John Jr., and Norm in tow behind her. Norm could hardly be fussy with the elders on the platform staring down at him and in full view of the entire congregation.

Obedience, helpfulness, a good memory, respect for one's elders, self-discipline, and reverence were the inevitable outcomes of parenting strategies like Effie's. She knew that unless such lessons were learned in early childhood, the window of opportunity for learning them would close, so she didn't miss an opportunity to reinforce those lessons.

From his father, Norm learned the value and reward of work. John Sr. loved the fulfillment that accompanied hard work, work done with his hands. His farm was a testament to his industrious nature. It boasted eight greenhouses in which he grew vegetables and flowers. The vegetables he would deliver to local grocery stores. The flowers he would sell in the springtime. He had two cows which, with help from the older boys, he would milk twice every day to supply the needs of the family and to sell a few extra quarts to his customers. There were no tractors on the Middag farm. The fields were tilled with John's backbreaking labor and the grudging assistance of the two Belgian draft horses, Ann and Tony, who also helped him prepare the community ice-skating rink during the winter months.

The buildings on the farm were spare and utilitarian. There was a barn to shelter the horses, cows, and chickens. A shed was used for washing vegetables in preparation for sale to the grocery store, and its upstairs apartment housed one hired farm worker. The family home was small for such a large family with only two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, and one bathroom with running water, though it came bracingly cold from the spigot. Water had to be boiled for cooking, bathing, and washing clothes. Ronald and Gordon had already left home, and Evelyn was attending Maplewood Academy in Hutchinson, Minnesota, but that still left six people crunched into the tiny home. Norm shared a bedroom with Harold and John, and Ruth slept on the couch in the living room.

The home's basement was cement and served as dry storage for Effie's canning, the walls lined with row upon row of canned beans or corn or fruit. It was there that Norm and John played store, and though they were not supposed to disturb the canned goods, they occasionally broke a jar or disturbed one of the seals. These mishaps were always discovered when the food in the jar spoiled or supplies failed to last the winter.

Owning his own farm and earning his own way in life had always been John Sr.'s ambition. He thrived in the role, providing for Norm a wonderful example of diligence, persistence, and self-sufficiency. Norm would watch a look of satisfaction cross his dad's face after a job well done and grew accustomed to his father's assessment of his own labor.

"That was pretty good!"

“Pretty good” in his father’s world was perfection in most others. It was what was expected of Norm and his siblings, and it became the standard by which Norm measured his every task. “Pretty good” was a compliment not easily earned from his dad. “Pretty good” meant that you had given your best, had brought dedication and commitment, had been successful. Getting a “pretty good” from his dad motivated Norm from early in his childhood.

Norm’s desires for a new toy or some spending money were always accommodated by his father, but not without Norm’s effort. His dad would always find a chore for Norm to complete before handing him the money he wanted. These were lessons in earning one’s keep, in delaying one’s gratification, in understanding that with diligence came reward. Norm learned that anything he desired was within his grasp if he could muster the industry and motivation to earn it. When he lacked the initiative to do a job, his father’s favorite saying echoed in his mind: “When you start a job, you’re already halfway through.”

He also learned from his father the necessity of rightly prioritizing his time. Once, when he asked his dad to play catch with him in the afternoon, his father knelt beside him and looked him in the eye.

“Norm, I’d love to do that with you now. But I’ve got eight greenhouses to tend, the farm work to do, the vegetables to deliver, and flowers to grow. Summer is my busy time. When winter comes, I’ll have more time to spend with you. I’ll take you ice fishing, and we can skate. But now there’s work to be done.”

Sure enough, during the winter months, when his father only had the community skating rink to maintain, he took Norm ice fishing on Lake Superior or the Saint Louis River which empties into it. Norm would bring along his skates and, after spending time in the ice shack, skate on the frozen water as his dad fished.

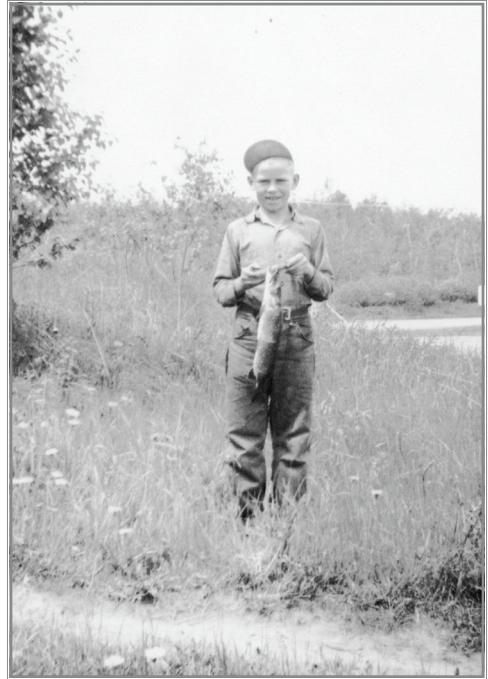
Norm’s family was a close one. His brothers Harold and Gordon would take Norm fishing during the summer months. They would strap their flat-bottomed john boat to the roof of their 1938 Chevy and drive to one of the many northern Minnesota lakes. Their favorite fishing hole—where they could catch pike and walleye and occasionally spot a moose—required them to drive on an old railroad bed from which the iron rails had been removed and cross an extremely narrow railway bridge spanning a deep ravine. The bridge was so narrow and the Chevy’s wheelbase so broad that Harold could not see well enough over the hood to keep the tires on the bridge. Gordon would have to get out and walk backward over the bridge, carefully directing Harold to the right or the left. This so frightened Norm that he would curl up on the floor of the back seat, convinced they were going to plunge into the ravine. Not until they were safely across the bridge would Norm again take his

place on the seat. Once they arrived at their fishing hole, they would attach an old outboard motor to the boat and launch it into the lake.

Harold and Gordon taught Norm how to cast with an old rod and reel. One hot summer day, while his brothers were trying to get the cantankerous motor started, Norm was practicing his casting and unexpectedly hooked a huge Northern Pike, which nearly capsized the boat and threatened to pull Norm overboard. Just before he tumbled over the gunwale, he felt Harold's strong hand grab his belt and pull him back into the boat.

Norm developed an especially close bond with his older sister, Ruth, who took him under her wing. One day, she took Norm for a trail ride on her favorite of the two farm horses. Ann was usually a staid and completely trustworthy old mare, given to plodding along with drooping eyes. A saddle was a luxury the Middag family could ill afford, so Ruth hoisted Norm in front of her onto Ann's bare back. All was going well until Ann uncharacteristically jumped a ditch instead of plodding, unfazed, through the water. Ruth and Norm were thrown from her back, landing unceremoniously on the rocks which bordered the ditch. Trying to protect her little brother, Ruth took the brunt of the fall. Norm was unharmed, but Ruth broke her arm badly enough that surgery was necessary to set the bone. For decades afterwards, whenever she thought Norm was getting too cheeky, Ruth would point to the scar and remind Norm of the extent to which she would go to protect him.

Not everything on the farm was about work. There was a lot of fun to be had as well. One of Norm's favorite activities was sledding on the hill behind his house. John Jr. had a sled that Norm envied and on which he could reach breakneck speeds. Norm wanted a sled of his own, so when Christmas came, he asked for—and received—a new sled. He could hardly wait for Monday, which was laundry day. Laundry days meant that Norm, with John's help, could lug the wash basin to the top of the hill



NORM'S CATCH OF THE DAY

and send the wastewater cascading down the 150-foot slope. The surface would freeze in no time at all and become a veritable raceway for Norm's sled. In the frigid Minnesota winter, the ice would remain on the hill all week, only to be resurfaced with ice the next Monday.

Norm's father shaved each morning with a straight razor, a process that fascinated Norm as a young boy. He wondered how his father could shave his face silky smooth without ever once nicking his cheeks. The secret was keeping his blade dangerously sharp with the razor strap. The rhythmic swiping of his straight razor back and forth across the strap in a dance-like motion was a morning ritual that Norm loved to watch. If that strap of leather could sharpen his dad's razor to such a fine point, what could it do to the fanny of a disobedient boy? Norm found it both a terrifying and mesmerizing thought.

The threat of the razor strap was not unknown in Norm's house, though the threat alone usually sufficed. Effie and John, like most parents of that era, believed in the counsel of Proverbs 13:24: "Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them." Once, when his mother was applying this principle to the south pole of his older brother, John Jr., Norm watched from the next room. That John was dancing around trying in vain to dodge the strap his mother wielded struck Norm as funny, and he began to giggle. When, during one of her hearty swings, the handle of the razor strap broke off, he could take it no longer and burst into uncontrollable laughter. His mom failed to see the humor in the situation. Turning from her task, she spoke sharply to Norm.

"Norm!" she said. "There is nothing funny about this. Discipline is no joke. I'm not doing this to entertain you. You'll see how serious I am about this. You get to feel the burn of the strap next." Sure enough, Norm's fascination with the razor strap took a more personal turn, and he learned how committed his mom was to discipline. It was a lesson that needed few repetitions.

Norm's formative preschool years were filled with important lessons and real expectations from his loving parents. The lessons were not harsh, but they were consistently applied. His was a world of family, work, play, and faith; of deep family bonds and strong convictions. Such structure was vital in Norm's development and supplied him with the values that propelled him in his later life to remarkable accomplishment.

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## Norm's Nuggets

- **Seeking only to make a child happy should not be a parent's primary objective.** Making children happy may turn them toward self-centered living, which will eventually result in unhappiness.
- **Teaching a child discipline and self-control begins early.** Expectations should be clear, and specific tasks need to be a component of the daily routine.
- **Discipline should be based on biblical principles.** Effie took her cues from her daily Bible reading.
- **Specific age-appropriate strategies should be used to teach specific lessons.** Effie wanted Norm to learn responsibility, so she gave him specific tasks with their attendant consequences.
- **The offense should dictate the punishment.** Mistakes often carry with them a punishment that can be harsher than any a parent can inflict.
- **Tailor your disciplinary approach to the temperament of your child.** A self-inflicted punishment may be more effective than one you can devise. An approach that is effective for one child may not be appropriate for another.
- **Set the stage for your child's success.** Place your child in the environment where the easiest path is also the best one. Effie purposely sat on the front row in church, which helped to create the environment for her children's success.
- **Always connect effort and reward.** Norm's father provided him the opportunity to earn money to purchase what he desired. This validated both the desire and the work necessary to achieve it.
- **You get from kids what you expect of them.** If you expect them to be successful, they will be. Expecting them to be rebellious can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, too.
- **A parent's expectations follow children throughout their lives.** The expectations of Norm's parents guided his decision-making throughout his long life.
- **To a young person, the church IS the pastor.** The repeated intersection of a caring pastor across the trajectory of a young person's life can have a huge impact on the development of that young person.
- **Discipline is serious business.** Parents would do well to spend as much time contemplating their approach to discipline as implementing it.