

Remarks for Hoover Sutton
April 20, 2002
First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan
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Hoover Sutton was the consummate celebrator, and it is fitting that we gather here to celebrate him, consecrating his boundless love for his family, and how he extended that love to envelop all of us in his larger, limitless family.

Hoover taught us so much in his multiple roles as husband, father, brother, uncle, grandfather, teacher, colleague, adopted family member and godfather to countless children. We hailed him by a variety of personas, each one affirming these myriad, silly relationships: “Hoovie,” “Hoov,” “Mr. Hoover,” “Scoop,” “Boopie,” “Papa Sutton,” “Big Butt,” “Fred,” “Ver.” Most of his lessons involved food and creations. Hoover showed us how to rub Lowry’s salt on steaks before grilling to make them juicier. He carefully instructed us how to produce the perfect hot dog: first, ladle sweet relish in the bun, then mustard—Nance’s, preferably—followed by the hotdog—boiled, of course—topped with a little more mustard and maybe ketchup, and finally garnished on the side with lots of potato chips. He created the Hoover sandwich: one slice of bread loaded with peanut butter and jelly, folded over into a half sandwich. Hoover claimed that since it was only half a sandwich, it was the natural and necessary bridge between the main meal and dessert. There was the “Hoover hop,” the “Hoover clap,” and best of all, the “Hoover hug,” an embrace one former student remembered as having “the power to change so many feelings of loneliness into feelings of belonging” (Libby Moore SAS ’92).

Additionally, Hoover enlightened us about the redemptive and restorative qualities of ice cream. There was always ice cream with Hoover, nurtured from his Buffalo days and his father’s Sealtest business. Visiting Hoover, we noticed that ice cream was usually *all* that Hoover had in his refrigerator. For his students, ice cream was synonymous with Hoover. They would seek out Hoover amid an adolescent crisis, and he’d respond, “This is a time for ice cream!” Eating ice cream with Hoover was a grand production.

Remember how he'd clap then vigorously rub his hands together as he gleefully assembled the necessary ingredients: the warmed scooper, the chocolate sauce steaming hot, the various toppings, all the while fussing to find spoons, bowls, and the paper towels which invariably substituted for napkins—so by the time we'd finished consuming this gastronomical mountain, we'd forgotten whatever had ailed us. The same was true with Omar, the legendary name of his candy jar, which provided balm and joy for adults and students in Delaware and New Hampshire. In fact, Hoover told me last year that because so many students came to his office for Omar, he was almost fired!

But what Hoover ultimately celebrated and taught and created for us, was us—something of us we never knew we had or were. As a parent, coach, director, counselor, colleague, he helped us find ourselves, unearthing a passion or skill hidden until he came along to mentor us. He discovered us as we discovered ourselves, and we knew we'd uncovered some jewel within us because soon Hoover improvised a nickname for us, coined out of that moment or role or triumph. So how appropriate that his professional work as a secondary school counselor at NCCS, and as a college counselor at St. Andrew's, meshed not only with his ability to send us on to new places and adventures, but also with his unique talent to animate—animate with movies, animate the quiet and the shy, animate with song and dance and laughter. On Hoover's stage, everybody had a part. One of his actresses, Bonnie Hillman (St. Andrew's '84), wrote to Hoover on his retirement in 1993 with words that former students from any of his four schools could have declared about Hoover's impact on them through the theater:

I was painfully shy and I hated feeling self-conscious so I made myself face it in the dim hopes of getting over it. My goal was a part in the chorus of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, and I felt that was aiming high. When I got there, your own silliness and self-confidence inspired me to be a bit silly and confident, too. I somehow managed to do something that showed you a glimmer of what I never knew I had in me—an ability to act and to be a big ham. You asked me to be in the play, but not just in the chorus—a

leading part— Hedy LaRue! I was shocked. But you believed in me and said you would help me and I decided to trust you. Through your caring attention you coaxed out talent and a sense of fun and humor that I had buried deep inside me....To this day, whenever I have doubts about my ability to do something, I remember your belief in me in the face of my own complete lack of belief, and I know I already have inside of me everything I need to succeed.

Whether it was *The Wizard of Oz*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*, *Carnival*, *Oliver*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The Sound of Music*, *Applause*, *Anything Goes*, *Hello Dolly*, or *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*—Hoover's production of *Joseph* at NCCS was the American premier of that musical, which is another great Hoover story—and whether these spectacles were at the Country School or with Jack Sterling and The Town Players, or at Applewild, or Small Point, or St. Andrew's or in Hanover: what Hoover magically did was make us stars, guiding us out of our seclusion or uncertainty, and giving us the spot light, the opportunity, and then the curtain call. We were transformed by his touch.

Hoover was such a humble director that he darted away when we called him to the stage to thank him for those moments and experiences and discoveries. That was his way of having us see that we—not he—had sung that song, found the confidence, scored the goal, earned the acceptance to high school or college. Through all these years, Hoover kept the focus on us—through his camera, his antics to buoy our spirits, his glittering eyes which welcomed and accepted us unconditionally. Indeed, Hoover was a one-man carnival, loading up legions of children in his VW van or Honda Prelude, shuttling them between school and home, down to Elm Street or the Winter Club, up to the Stoddards' and LeBlonds' camps, off to the movies or rehearsals. He took us out for pizza and donuts because, as Plummy Tucker (SAS '83) remembers, "Hoover understood that a trip to town for pizza went a long way toward keeping the average teenager sane." While being with Hoover sometimes meant being part of a raucous group, when we came to see him alone up on the second floor at the Country School, or down the main hallway at St. Andrew's,

Hoover instantly made us feel safe: we were the center of his world, and how easily and assuredly we spilled out our souls to him. Hoover fought passionately for us—nothing irked him more than when we were hurt or bullied. At St. Andrew’s, there are mythic accounts of how Hoover, in anger, crushed his office phone hanging up the receiver when a college didn’t accept one of his seniors. On another occasion, again furious at an admissions office, he slammed his fist down so hard on the half-inch glass tabletop of his desk, that he cracked it completely in two.

Hoover bestowed upon us one final lesson beginning last November, a lesson distinguished by courage, humility and generosity. When he realized the battle with cancer was going to be quick, he immediately resolved that he would confront death on his home field. Hoover’s invincible gift to us was that he let us say “Thank you, Hoover;” he let us write and call and email and visit to tell him how much we loved him, how much he had done for us. I never doubted that Hoover would receive a standing ovation from Leslie and Remmy and all the hosts upon his arrival in Heaven: but the triumph over death was to witness him experience and enjoy and deeply feel that thunderous applause as he gradually ascended those last three months. Whenever we visited him, he was constantly answering phone calls from friends and former students; when we called, there were hoards of people with him. His living room in West Lebanon resembled the Post Office at Christmas, pictures and cards and letters blanketing the floor around his slippered feet. He had always rooted for us; now he let us cheer for him. Hoover kept insisting to Gerry through the winter that he didn’t want a fuss made about him with a memorial service—how typically Hoover—because all our calls and letters and visits were his service. Until the very end, he shared his crowning glory with us.

I confess that the last two months have been sad, with fewer laughs, since Hoover died. But Hoover is surely looking down on us, with Leslie on his lap, and he’s piping mad at us for not guffawing and for not getting over to the reception, where the “good stuff” is. There are so many ways we can glorify and bear witness to Hoover’s ministry: like Hoover, we can eat breakfast at Izzy’s or Paggy’s or The Town or Pano’s or Pinsky’s Pancake House or Helen’s Famous Sausage House or Lou’s or Rosie’s; we can feast on

ice cream and taste true happiness; we can water plastic plants in our office, as Hoover did for years at St. Andrew's, amazed at how that green bush always appeared healthy yet never grew; we can travel to see old friends, as Hoover journeyed regularly, arriving on his motorcycle toting a week's supply of groceries as compensation for his one-night intrusion; we can imitate his abiding affection for dogs, for Remmy, Seal, Barney, Bloom and Farley; we can even transform our pain of Hoover's death, as Hoover did after Leslie's death, by pouring ourselves and our love for Hoover into the lives of others, and by elevating those lives, we can, as Hoover did, make our existence richer and connected. Hoover leaves us with countless pictures of us, the people and grins he inspired and developed. When we gaze at those photos he snapped of us, let us remember why we're radiating euphoria: it's because we're looking at Hoover, his ubiquitous camera focused on us, his own goofy expression liberating our joy and giggles. And we must laugh and romp, because Hoover did so as he faced death, never flinching from its inevitability. With that reassuring and slightly devilish sparkle in his eyes, he'd revive us out of our doldrums with one of his patented quips: "Besides *that*, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?"

So, Hoover, "Old Man," hover close to us in the days and years ahead. We love you, and we give abundant thanks to God—"Gawd," as you intoned with your Buffalo accent—for all your creations and blessings. Help us sense you and your love for each of us in children and dogs, in family gatherings and Kodak moments, in frolicking silliness and in meals which include only one or two food groups—and in your passion for the things that really matter, and in those big hugs which even now reach between this world and the world to come.