

Dad

In memoriam: Martin E. Marty (1928-2025)

by [Peter W. Marty](#)

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The Marty family in 1967

My relentlessly cheerful father has died, exiting this life with the same confidence and joy with which he lived it. He was 97. His anticipated appointment with the Lord of eternity was something he embraced all his life. Despite, or perhaps because of, the historian in him, he leaned forward in faith. “Marty” to most people, “Dad” to my siblings and me, he approached every morning as if it were a fresh splash of grace, a

clean slate, an opportunity—granted through baptism—to breathe more life into the world. Guilt and resentment weren't in his vocabulary. Critique didn't seem to faze him. He considered conflict not worth the energy.

People often ask what my childhood was like, given this motion machine of a father whose love of people, endless curiosity, and instinct for saying a generous yes to nearly everybody left him so little time for sleep. Three or four nights a week our dinner table became the all-important hub for celebrating family and faith, in part because Dad was on the road so many weeks a year. Seventy years of meticulously kept red appointment books reveal that he delivered more than 3,500 lectures around the world, spoke at nearly 700 colleges and universities, and preached from who knows how many pulpits. An astounding degree of travel by any reckoning, all while holding down a full teaching load at the University of Chicago and assorted leadership assignments at other institutions.

My mother, Elsa, was the quiet support behind his ferocious pace in the early years. She nurtured our young family in ways that were centered in love. I think all of us in the family had a deep sense that Dad, with his towering intellect and irrepressible wit, his encyclopedic mind and pastoral heart, had a calling much larger than just our family. We understood that, accepted it, and—like so many others—felt connected to the breadth of it. Mother's untimely death from cancer after 29 years of marriage opened the door to another beautiful marriage, this time to Harriet for 43 more years.

Dad had a knack for translating complex ideas into graspable takeaways for diverse audiences. His shrewd analyses of the religio-cultural landscape in the United States prompted *Time* magazine to [label him](#) the “most influential living interpreter of religion in the U.S.” His unremitting schedule, passion for people, and prodigious output of more than 60 books caused colleague Scott Appleby to once remark: “Marty is not God; but he is a condition of the possibility for one. The workings of grace in him are powerfully transparent.”

Those workings of grace endure. He encouraged those he met to love God from the top of their head and the bottom of their heart. Grace gave him the conviction that nobody was beneath him, just as the music of Bach reminded him that angels hovered just above him. In between was his own confident place in the lap of God. Forever grounded in the life of the church and anchored in hope, he took the happy simplicity of his childhood on the Nebraska prairie as his road map for life.

On top of his other commitments, Dad served as an editor for this magazine for five decades, generating at all hours of the night countless reviews, editorials, essays, and his weekly M.E.M.O. column. Driving to the CENTURY offices one or two nights a week, he'd remind us kids that we could reach him there at HArrison 7-5380 if we needed him.

Friends who phoned Marty can remember the buoyant joy with which he concluded virtually every phone call of his adult life. After saying goodbye but before hanging up, callers could hear him whistling happily to himself. One hymn, "Come Thou Almighty King," was a favorite in recent years. As I now think of that hymn coming through as a whistle, I want to say: Dad, the Lord has indeed come. You can set down your appointment book for a final time. Thank you for your energy, kindness, and boundless love.