

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Remembering three who departed this past year



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As we close the 2020 year, I remember three persons who, in various ways, have influenced me and have passed from our world and from my life this year.

SEYMOUR PADNOS

Seymour Padnos I knew the longest, going back nearly 40 years. In the 1980s, while serving as dean of science at Grand Valley State University, he showed interest in the new engineering program that we had established. He was CEO of the Louis Padnos Iron & Metal Company, a company focused on recycling. It was founded by his father, who had emigrated from Russia as a teenager. Seymour Padnos had come to me with a concern that most products are designed on the basis of cost, function and aesthetics, but with little thought on how the product would be recycled after its serviceable life. Together, we came up with the plan to sponsor a national competition to encourage engineering students to submit design plans that would enable efficient recycling. Seymour and I traveled together to a number of events when "Product Design for Recyclability Awards" were presented.

Padnos, along with his wife, Esther, had made significant contributions to Grand Valley toward the sciences and engineering. In the 1990s, the engineering school was named for them, and in 1996 the Seymour and Esther Hall of Science was dedicated. Former President Gerald R. Ford was a part of that event, and both Seymour and Esther Padnos were given honorary degrees.

Padnos was well known for his love of sailing, and after the CEO position was passed on to the next generation, I would often see him while visiting my father in Florida during the university's spring break. On several occasions, he would graciously have me join him for a bit of sailing in the Palm Beach area where he wintered. After his return to Michigan in late spring, I always looked forward to joining him in Holland for lunch and enjoyable conversation. I also got to know more about his Jewish faith and his early involvement with promoting interfaith understanding and acceptance. In 2018, the Kaufman Institute was pleased to honor him with our Interfaith Leadership Award.

His gentle spirit, inquiring mind and his commitment to living out his faith will always stay with me as I cherish this relationship that ended this past July, just a few months before his 100th birthday.

LUIS TOMATIS

Luis Tomatis was born, educated and received his medical training in Argentina. He came to Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit for further training in thoracic and cardiovascular surgery in 1956, and then to Grand Rapids in 1965, where he became a well-known and respected heart surgeon for 30 years. I got to know him personally following his retirement from medicine, when he became the founding president of the Van Andel Institute. In 1996, his first year as VAI president, he attended the Padnos Hall of Science dedication, and I took him and his young grandson on a tour of the new building. Over the years, we became friends and I had the privilege of serving on one of the Van Andel advisory boards. While I was dean of science, I was also able to sponsor him to receive an honorary Doctor of Science degree at one of the university convocations.

Later, after he became the director of medical affairs for the DeVos family, we continued our friendship and began meeting for lunch nearly every month as he continued to work until his death this past summer at age 92. We often talked about his medical work, science interests, and commitment to building an outstanding medical community in Grand Rapids. His impact on our community will be felt for



From left, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Dr. Luis Tomatis and Seymour Padnos

decades to come. In 2005, Luis founded the DeVos Medical Ethics Colloquy, which sponsors a major forum twice yearly bringing noted speakers and experts to Grand Rapids to explore significant issues in medical ethics.

As my own career moved to the arena of interfaith, I was pleased to work with him on the colloquy board on planning these ethics conferences. This coming February, the Kaufman Interfaith Institute will collaborate with the Colloquy on the topic of Religion and Health. In my discussions with Dr. Tomatis, I also became more appreciative of his deep Catholic faith as well as his interest and appreciation of all faith communities.

JONATHAN SACKS

Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, died in November this year at age 72 following a recent cancer diagnosis. His impact on me was primarily from his writings, videos and talks. On one of my appointments at Cambridge University, I did, however, get to meet him and hear him lecture. He was a wonderful speaker and his videos are very inspiring, but it is his books that have had the greatest impact on me and my thinking.

From my science interests and career, I found his book "The Great Partnership: God, Science, and the Search for Meaning" very insightful in my own decades of exploring the science and religion relationship. His earlier book, "The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations," published in 2003, became a powerful response to the alternative view following 9/11 that our global problem was primarily a religious worldview clash. Readers of this column will notice that I have quoted Sacks frequently.

In 2016, he received the Templeton Prize and, in his talk, noted that many of the problems we face are in fact global, and yet we have no effective functioning global organizations. He spoke of "a sense among many throughout the world that the world is changing almost too fast to bear, with no clear sense of direction, or purpose, or meaning," and asked that religions play an important role. The world's major religions are global and "are actually our most powerful extant global organizations, much more so than any nation state." He continued by suggesting that they "provide what contemporary Western societies do not provide, which is a sense of personal worth regardless of wealth." Furthermore, religions create and sustain a sense of identity while also promoting strong communities. Finally, he stated, "Religion is left at the end of the day as the single most compelling answer to those three eternal questions: who am I, why am I here, how then shall I live?"

Rabbi Sacks has been for me that clear voice reminding us that, in spite of our differences, we are all created in God's image, even though — or especially when — the other is "not in my image, even though his color, culture, class, and creed are different from mine."

As I reflect on this past year with all of the problems we have faced as a nation and in the whole world, I am thankful that these three individuals have given me solace and direction. Their personal presence will be missed, but their influence will continue in the coming years.

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