

Author's Note

The study of individuals, what their aspirations were, their struggles, and their difficulties, is a source of endless fascination. In a well-done biography, one can enter into the very soul of great individuals and expand one's own soul along with them. . . . The identification of one's self with the great men and women of history is the surest way of arousing the imagination to a sense of the possibilities of one's spiritual growth and to a . . . realization of one's own potentialities.

—MWG, 1953

Mason W. Gross, philosopher, educator, athlete, musician, and the president of Rutgers University during the turbulent 1960s, was my father. Writing his biography was never on my bucket list. I was content to let the story of his life drift slowly out of focus, just as had my memory of my life under his roof and just as will my own son's memory of me. However, circumstances conspired that I would be the one to tell his story.

As Mason's biographer but also as his son, and in the interests of full disclosure, I will admit to the reader that, putting it mildly, Mason Gross and I never really got along. We didn't argue; one did not argue with Mason Gross. Arguing with Mason Gross was like bringing a knife to a gunfight. Our conversations were sometimes cordial, often not, but we never spoke about anything of value. The reader will sense my emotional distance from my subject. But, as credible witness to many climactic events in Mason's life, in this biography I must appear at times as both author and source. As a result, the completely objective and scholarly viewpoint to which a biographer should aspire may be impossible to achieve. With this excuse I also ask the forgiveness of others who did know him and saw him through differently

colored lenses and who will counter me with statements such as “Oh, he wasn’t like that at all.”

A biography that is a mere chronology of a person’s life would be a huge bore.

Biography, well written, is less about one’s actions than it is a reflection on the motivation behind those actions. I have tried to build this biography using the best source that I have, namely Mason himself, whose own words I have emphasized throughout the book.

Admittedly, researching this biography has become an exploration of my own, a study of who I am in direct relation to who he was. It has been a voyage finally to meet the man I never knew, the man whom so many saw as a great mentor, colleague, and friend but who for me was both colossus and enigma. I’d say that I am not so much telling his story as I am also discovering it. But this is wholly his story and not mine. On those brief occasions when I appear in his biography, it is only to clarify his story, not to tell my own.

What can the life of a philosophy professor and university president from fifty years ago offer to us today? Not only is this a biography of a wonderful mind, but it has also evolved into a practical handbook for the twenty-first century. Mason’s life shows students how never to settle for less than their best effort every day; it shows teachers how, hands-on, to inspire excellence in their students and to “never allow them to be satisfied with inadequate or shoddy performance.”¹ His story shows us how music, theater, the visual arts, and the humanities are as important to our way of life as are engineering, clean water, and good plumbing. It shows us what excellence feels like. It reminds parents never to isolate themselves from the families who want only to love them, and it reminds children that their parents are only human. Mason’s experiences reveal how “government secrecy benefits nobody except the government”² and that democracy is ever fragile and quick to descend into the depths of autocracy. This biography shows how to take your beliefs and turn them, confidently, into action in service to your community. Mason’s story reminds us that the study of philosophy is not solely for the intellectuals in the ivory tower but instead is for everyone, for each, “to

attempt to re-examine the principles upon which you have based your entire life. Philosophy in all its history has never gone beyond Socrates' classic phrase, the motto of all philosophers, that 'the unexamined life is not worth living.'"³ Mason's story reminds us all that education, real education, is not something that you can pay an institution to do to you but instead is a personal and lifelong "habit of an individual pursuit of truth,"⁴ which each of us must perform for ourselves.

For all the reasons to read Mason's biography, one stands out above the rest, namely that all the things that he stood for, all the issues upon which he refused to compromise, still resonate and remain unresolved in the twenty-first century, almost fifty years after he retired. Some of them have become worse. This biography shows how Mason cherished the ideal of free speech, which is now being trampled nationwide, even on college campuses such as at my own alma mater, UC Berkeley, where the Free Speech Movement originated in 1964, and how he abhorred the pernicious racism that underlies so many aspects of our culture. The biography also shows how public respect and support for the value of higher education, once seen as the salvation of our way of life, has sunk to a new low as our citizens have become generally disdainful of facts, expertise, reason, and intellect.

I have explored the experiences that made Mason into the man he had become when it came time to draw a line in the sand and stand up, like Socrates himself, for those absolute principles against which there can be no compromise. Maybe that is the lesson for me and for us in our twenty-first century. This is my reason for writing this book and hopefully is a good enough reason for you to pick it up and read it.

Free Spirit



