

*"Once you publish a poem, it doesn't belong to you anymore."*

## Letting Go

An author prepares for others to judge his work

BY DIKKON EBERHART

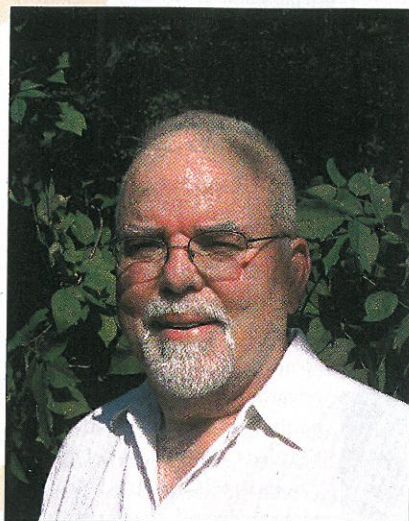
**M**y father sat at the back of the college classroom while the professor interpreted his poem "The Cancer Cells." Dad was a prominent poet during the middle 50 years of the 20th century. On that day, Dad was at this college to read his verse and to participate in class as an established poet.

The professor concluded his interpretation. "The Cancer Cells," he opined, is about the spread of communism across Eastern Europe. Then he called on Dad.

Dad stood. "Well," he said, "I wrote 'The Cancer Cells.' I have to say that it has nothing whatever to do with the spread of communism across Eastern Europe. What the poem has to do with is what it says in the poem. I saw vivid color photographs of cancer cells, in large scale in a magazine. The images were intensely beautiful. However, the images are also death. It's the contrast between their beauty and their power to cause death that moved me to write the poem."

The professor paused for a moment and then said to the class, "Well, notwithstanding what was just said, the poem is about the spread of communism across Eastern Europe, and now if you will please turn to p. 182...."

Dad was not called on to speak for the remainder of that class. "Dikkon," Dad said to me later while he mused on this event, "the truth is that once you pub-



lish a poem, it doesn't belong to you anymore."

I recall this conversation as I approach the publication of a memoir that explores my relationship with my poet father and how our relationship affected my allegiance to our ultimate father, God. As the book gets closer to being released, I am working in the background, and others are working in the foreground. My literary agent—formerly prominent in the foreground—has moved into the background, for now. My conceptual editor at the publishing house—she who acquired the book and who then worked diligently to shape it so that it is readable—has merged into the background, though her role still is to oversee. My cover has been designed by a genius, whose selection of colors and images captured the atmosphere of the memoir. My line editor—she who evaluates grammatical adventures of mine, checks my facts, and questions me closely when my sentences are obscure—is in the foreground as we finish our work together. Stepping more prominently into the foreground, now, are the publisher's marketing director and my publicist. Copy editors will come next and, I am sure, other professionals of whom I am not yet aware.

"Dikkon, once you publish a poem, it doesn't belong to you anymore." This is true not only of those of us who write stuff and want other people to read it. For example, my wife, Channa, and I have four grown children, ranging in age from 27 to 36. Over the years, we "published" them to the world, and now they do not belong to us anymore. Even our son Sam, who has Down syndrome and lives at home, at age 30, has been "published." As a "book," Sam rests on our bookshelves at home between his excursions into the world to interact with his employers and colleagues where he works, with his fellow painters at Spindleworks, an artists' collective, and with his fellow athletes in the Special Olympics.

My book today is immeasurably more mature than it was when I thought I had finished it. Before, when the book just had me in its life, my book was little, and, like my children once, it didn't question my judgment. I could enjoy cuddling it—I could enjoy that deep, trusting, boneless slumber of its warm little body on my chest. Now my book is all grown up and has other people whose judgment it has learned to trust. It needs to make a living on its own. It doesn't really need to listen to me anymore.

**D**ad didn't particularly like it when he discovered that others were reading "The Cancer Cells" as if it were about the spread of communism across Eastern Europe. But he needed to be content with that. Fortunately, my father was a parenting philosopher as well as a literary philosopher. I made decisions he didn't particularly like. But, regarding "The Cancer Cells" and his child, he would puff a few puffs on his pipe, smile, and say, "Well, I still love you anyway." ■

*Dikkon Eberhart is author of the memoir The Time Mom Met Hitler, Frost Came to Dinner, and I Heard the Greatest Story Ever Told, to be published by Tyndale House in June.*