

**Book Review of**  
***My Rubber Knife Life* by William Watson Purkey, Ph.D.**

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In this book containing his memoirs, William Watson Purkey takes the reader on an exciting romp through his “Rubber Knife Life.” His granddaughter, Emily Norton, wrote the Introduction to the book. She reflects upon an upsetting time when family members were angry with her for dyeing her hair. She thought she was dyeing it auburn although it turned out purple. The situation was worsened because she was about to enter a new school that had “strict policies on hair color, skirt hem-lengths, and any other form of individual expression” (p. vii). Emily fondly recalls that Dr. Purkey responded to the situation by reminding her, “If they aren’t mad at you, then you aren’t doing enough” (p. vii). That response typified Dr. Purkey’s philosophy: People always seemed to be mad at him, especially in his early years, but the result has been an amazing life.

When Dr. Purkey was a little boy, he recalls always pushing the limits. During his youth he had a rubber knife with a red handle and a white blade, which would become the metaphor for the way he lived his life. Dr. Purkey compared himself to Walter Mitty, who lived an adventurous secret life. Through play with the help of his rubber knife, young William could become a pirate, Tonto, a soldier, a rescuer of damsels in distress, a soldier, an Indian, a diver, and many other characters. He pursued all these roles to the chagrin of his teachers. He knew no fear, and he had an unbridled imagination. According to Dr. Purkey, “One of my most vivid memories as a four-year-old child was to be awakened from a sound sleep by my grandmother Reynolds. I was told to take my rubber knife, come downstairs, and dance for the ladies of the Eastern Star” (p. 1). He summed up his approach to life in the following words: “(1) imagination can create reality, and (2) any attempt is a victory” (p. 237). John Novak once told him, “Will, you have failed more than anyone I’ve ever known” (p. 1). What we learn is why Dr. Purkey is proud of such a critique!

From being in continual trouble in a country school because of his “Rubber Knife Life,” Dr. Purkey was transported into being a Page Boy on the floor of the United States Senate. He was present when Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared war on Japan. Soon after that, he met Winston Churchill and got his autograph, only to have it stolen. In the book, he tells many stories about his adventures in the United States Capitol building.

This book also contains a variety of stories about topics such as chasing after girls, serving in the military, and working at a variety of jobs including a Gandy Dancer. Dr. Purkey saved money to pursue a baccalaureate degree. He then earned a Masters and finally a Ph.D.; mainly because he did not feel the previous jobs were a fit for him! Along the path of his choosing, Dr. Purkey won many honors for his teaching and research. He raised two successful children, lived in a variety of places, and participated in many activities throughout his life, including debate, boxing, and tennis, to name a few.

For the reader, Dr. Purkey traces his love story with his wife. Beginning from the time he fell in love with Imogene, through their wedding, their moves, their trips, the births of their children, and their many adventures together. His undying devotion and deep admiration for her come shining through.

By absorbing his memoirs, the reader learns how Dr. Purkey's life consistently reflected his inviting stance. For instance, when he was a student, William received good service from a tire company that retreaded his tires for a low price. He recognized the care, trust, and respect, afforded him and with intentionality and optimism wrote a letter to thank the company and its workers. Six years later, upon returning to that store to have more work done, the counter-person said, "'William Purkey?'" (p. 151), while pointing to the letter, which was proudly framed and hung on the wall. The counter-person said that in the 40 years the tire company had been in business, it had only received one letter of thanks. Through that recollection, it is easy to see the value of being intentional, caring, optimistic, respectful, and trusting (I-CORT).

Throughout his esteemed life, Dr. Purkey won numerous awards, beginning with "'Most Entertaining'" in high school (p. 83). As a professor, he was honored for being an outstanding teacher and researcher. With *My Rubber Knife Life*, Dr. Purkey invites the reader into his initial meetings with John Novak, Betty Siegel, John Schmidt, and others, who all contributed to building the International Alliance of Invitational Education.

Dr. Purkey teaches the reader about the ancient Greek word, *arete*, which means "a person's unique spirit" (p. 84). According to Dr. Purkey, "Like a single piece in a jigsaw puzzle, each individual has a unique place that, once found, fits perfectly" (p. 84). He suggests that people become more self-actualized as they are moving toward their *arete*. *My Rubber Knife Life* provides an example of how every event and decision in one's life leads to the next thing, which leads to the next thing, which leads to the next thing, which helps to create the person we are each destined to become. Truly, Dr. Purkey has found his *arete* and is still pursuing his "Rubber Knife Life."

Purkey, W. W. (2019). *My rubber knife life*. Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance.

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