I have many fond memories of my father-in-law. From his most recent birthday celebration this past September, his 65th year on this earth. To those early days during the summer of 1990, when he and I spent many hours in his backyard in Windsor, Connecticut. Boiling in the heat of the sun, we worked on getting an old mechanical lawnmower to run. It wasn’t a push mower; wasn’t a riding mower; it was something from another time—his time. Probably top-of-the-line when he was a young man, this machine was a huge, self-propelled grass-cutting monster. We disassembled its engine, piece by piece, cleaned and oiled every part, and—piece by piece—put it back together.

Every time, the machine would sputter and its gears would grind—and I remember we would sit and think about why the old machine would run for only a few minutes, and what each new noise might mean. A faraway look in his eyes, he would tell stories of farmers from his childhood days. Oh what tricks they had up their sleeves. And he remembered them all.

Though his efforts to get that machine running proved fruitless that day, he taught me there is always much to learn regardless of success or
failure. Nine years later, on our farm in Sprakers, he found success with a 1939 Ford 9N tractor. Only a year younger than this old tractor, my father-in-law worked on this machine every day in early fall, 1999, taking parts of the engine out, cleaning them up, replacing them piece by piece. He got that tractor running and plowed fifteen, maybe twenty acres of our backyard. I miss those times, and I think our land misses him and his care.

I remember his remarkable skills as a master linguist. Going back again to the summer of 1990, I had studied German throughout high school, and after we met, he decided to re-learn German, a language he hadn’t studied in over twenty years. Within weeks, even days, he had gone beyond my training and though I continued studying German for five semesters in college, he was by far a master.

Mark Twain, a legendary American Writer for whom my father-in-law had great respect, had this to say about German:

A person who has not studied German can form no idea of what a perplexing language it is. Surely there is not another language that is so slipshod and systemless, and so slippery and elusive to the grasp.

Nonetheless, my father-in-law navigated the German language—as all other languages—with ease and enjoyment.
In early August of this year, my father-in-law had another heart operation; a new lead was attached from his pacemaker to another part of his heart. I remember being at the hospital; partway through the operation, his doctor emerged; he said he had never in all his years of practice seen a heart so big. I smiled then—I needed no medical training to know how big my father-in-law’s heart was. He was a caring, generous, and loving husband, brother, cousin, friend, and father—a second father to me, so much more than any son-in-law could ever hope for.

Knowing the man that was Howard Van Deusen has been an honor and a blessing for me these past sixteen years. From one of his many treasured books, I found a poem by Longfellow titled Auf Wiedersehen (again, German) that I’d like to read an excerpt from:

**AUF WIEDERSEHEN**

Until we meet again! That is the meaning
Of the familiar words, that men repeat
At parting in the street.
Ah yes, till then! but when death intervening
Rends us asunder, with what ceaseless pain
We wait for the Again!
The friends who leave us do not feel the sorrow
Of parting, as we feel it, who must stay
    Lamenting day by day,
And knowing, when we wake upon the morrow,
We shall not find in its accustomed place
    The one beloved face.

In the days ahead without Howard, remember his teachings, and recall the gifts he gave to each of us—gifts of life, love, friendship, wisdom, language, history, music, happiness, and for many, safe passage from Guyana. Howard’s birthday, September 17, is actually Citizenship Day, a day on which we recognize all who, by coming of age or by naturalization, have become citizens of the United States.

Howard’s birthday also, not surprisingly, is the same day on which, in 1787, the Constitution of the United States was signed at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Quoting my wife, she said, “Even great men must one day die.” Like those who signed the Constitution in 1787, Howard is no longer with us.

In closing, I’d like to read the last two sentences from a short story I finished writing only three days before his passing, unaware that he would be leaving us so soon:

“The room went dark. He sighed a deep sigh and fell asleep, his dreams no longer haunted by the lone white house in the country.”