

THE SUNDAY PROFILE

The Son Also Rises

* The Rev. Robert A. Schuller isn't fazed by his father's success--or his role as designated successor. In fact, he can't recall a time when he didn't want to be a preacher, just like Dad.

By **JANET WISCOMBE**, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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From his desk in a radio broadcast booth at Rancho Capistrano's Spiritual Growth Center, the Rev. Robert A. Schuller chats pleasantly with a nutritionist about eating healthful food. He's talking, not about loaves and fishes, but about oats and grains.

The son of the world's most popular televangelist is expounding on his cholesterol count and about living life "full like a bright glowing candle." To be sick and arthritic or destined for a 20-year stint in a nursing home, he notes, "is the wrong way to go."

He entreats listeners to find their destiny, realize their full human potential, balance their bodies, minds and souls "and keep learning ways to get more out of food."

Then he declares expansively, "What I learned today is to soak my grains."

It is the hosanna of the heir apparent to the Rev. Robert H. Schuller, preacher to millions, founder of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, living proof of the staggering power of possibility thinking.

At 41, the younger Schuller is now about the same age as the sons of other famous old Christian warriors--including Oral Roberts and Billy Graham--coming to the fore.

William Franklin Graham III, 43, it was announced last fall, will one day take over his father's worldwide ministry.

Richard Roberts, 47, has already succeeded his father. He took over in 1993 as president of Oral Roberts University, the Tulsa school founded by its namesake in 1966.

In April, the elder Schuller, who is 69, formally announced that his son would succeed him. Two years earlier, administrators at the Crystal Cathedral and denominational leaders of the Reformed Church in America had approved the younger Schuller's succession, a changing of the guard that may not take place for a decade.

For a public that lavishes its "mega-ministers" with celebrity and riches, the evangelical heirs have been the subject of considerable interest.

The notion of measuring up to his father's legendary success doesn't seem to trouble the younger Schuller at all. "I'll have no trouble filling his shoes," he's fond of joking. "He wears an 11. I wear a 12. He's 6-2, I'm 6-3.

"I've really helped create the ministry we have. It's not about filling any shoes. It's about keeping going in the same direction."

On this spring day, Schuller has spent most of the morning taping three segments of his "Balanced for Life" radio show, which airs daily throughout the region.

He radiates health and fitness: His teeth are movie-star white, his hair dark and thick and styled. He's tall and lean and looks as if at any moment he could slip into his yellow Mercedes and cruise up to Malibu for a lunch of organic greens and a pot of Darjeeling.

Whether in his office or at the pulpit, he wears slacks and sporty shirts. Nothing stuffy or frumpy here. This is an upbeat, open-collar ministry, where friendliness is next to godliness, and the cleansing comes from this cheerful message: "Go to your destiny and do your calling and remember that God loves you and so do I!"

In church brochures, he is listed as Dr. Robert A. Schuller, vice president of the Crystal Cathedral Ministries and chief executive director/founding pastor of the Cathedral's Rancho Capistrano.

Southern Californians know the Rancho, located above Interstate 5 in San Juan Capistrano, as the site of a glittering Nativity scene that blossoms out of the parched brown hillside every Christmas. The 175-acre church campus is home to a 300-student preschool, elementary and middle school, a lake and extensive gardens, a retreat center and the Rancho Capistrano Community Church, with a congregation of 135 families. The younger Schuller founded the church in 1981, just one year after the Crystal Cathedral opened.

After graduating from Hope College in Michigan and receiving a master of divinity degree at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, he worked briefly for his father at the Crystal Cathedral as a minister of evangelism before striking out on his own. He says he didn't want to be perceived as coddled.

In "Getting Through the Going-Through Stage," one of his eight books, he tells about his humble professional start in a gym at Saddleback College, and of his miraculous move to the Rancho. Ninety-seven acres of the oasis was donated to the Crystal Cathedral by recreational vehicle mogul John Crean and his wife, Donna, who agreed to let the young Schuller convert an old storage building into a spacious sanctuary with garden views and stained-glass windows.

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Robert A. Schuller was born Oct. 7, 1954, shortly before his parents moved to Orange County from the cornfields of Iowa. As reported by R. H. Schuller's biographers, the young couple were so broke that they covered the windows of their first rental house with newspapers and sheets.

The couple had five children--four daughters and Robert, their second born.

In those days, the elder Schuller was a young pastor who preached from the top of the snack bar at the Orange Drive-In. It was decades before he started hobnobbing with presidents and hired architecture giant Philip Johnson to build the ministry's luminous 10,000-pane palace.

Schuller's monumental success might have been enough to have sent an only son into a prodigal rampage. But the younger Schuller says he can't remember a time when he didn't want to be a preacher like his father.

"I've been actively involved in the Crystal Cathedral since I washed the toilets in the Tower of Hope," he says. "In high school I worked in the youth department. I organized activities and led the 'Hour of Power' [TV ministry]. I've been involved in the power structure.

"I think I exceeded my father's expectations. Because of my trouble in school, I don't think he had high expectations of me."

At the same time his father was reaping audiences globally, his only son was barely making the grade locally. Schuller says he never read a book at Santa Ana High and could barely read when he graduated.

By his own description, he was a flabby kid who was built like a pear. Until he took up wrestling in high school, no one wanted him on their team. He developed a severe case of cystic acne on his back and couldn't comfortably sit in a chair.

Although he says his dad was absent a great deal during his growing-up years, he has fond memories of them fishing, a passion he and his father still share. They've long since graduated from cane poles and worms to big-stakes game fishing.

Last year, the younger Schuller reeled in a cool \$40,000 in a prestigious marlin tournament.

Unlike many of his ministerial colleagues, Schuller is unquestionably a product of affluence, a skier and sportsman who travels the world extensively and vacations in Hawaii.

To keep it all in perspective, he likes to reminisce about earlier days--such as the time in high school he told his father he was going to the library and went out instead with his girlfriend.

When his father found out where he really was, there was a scene: "My father had a teacup in his hand. He threw it on the marble floor. It shattered in a million pieces. He said, 'My trust has been shattered like this cup because of this lie.' "

Schuller says he can remember painstakingly gluing the fine bone china cup back together.

He also remembers the spankings his mother, Arvella, gave him after church. He wasn't a serious troublemaker, but he could be a mischievous PK--preacher's kid.

In one of his books, he writes about discipline at the Schuller house, punishment, he says, that was softened with love. "I dreaded spankings.

My father has huge hands. They look so majestic when he raises them to pronounce a benediction . . . but when those hands are used to give a couple of slaps across the backside, you can take my word for it, they get the job done.

"My mother is thin and quite feminine, so she kept a wooden spoon handy so her spankings could make the impression they were supposed to make."

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When Schuller branched out on his own in the early '80s, he was a young minister with a wife he'd met at choir practice in high school and a couple of kids. But, at the same time he was moving into the Rancho, his marriage was crumbling. He was devastated personally and fearful that her decision to file for divorce would result in the loss of his ministry.

Pat Nye, his administrative assistant, recalls the Sunday morning, June 8, 1984, when he told his congregation his marriage was over. It was an extraordinarily difficult admission, she recalls:

"After he made the announcement, he sat down. People formed a line. They spoke to him and put their arms around him. They let him know it wasn't the end of his ministry. It was the beginning."

His father still expresses anguish about the divorce--lamenting that while he prepared his son for many things, he could not protect him from "a broken heart."

As patriarch of a multimillion-dollar dynasty, which keeps most of his five children and their spouses on the church payroll, R. H. Schuller is only too pleased to sing his children's praises. "The members of the family are all active in Christian ministries," he says proudly. "They all respect me. None rebelled."

He says he thinks Robert takes after his mother. "He doesn't have my flamboyancy or the weakness that flamboyancy produces. I am more emotional, more impulsive, spontaneous and quick to move ahead. My wife is more cognitive and logical.

"Robert's delivery is slower, more thoughtful. I am more ebullient and impertinent in my spontaneity. He gets the highest marks from some of my most powerful friends. Three are billionaires. Billionaires. With a B.

"You don't reach that league unless you are very smart, very careful and very wise."

Theologically, the younger Schuller says, he and his father both "have a strong appreciation for the sovereignty of God, the grace of God, and 'possibility thinking' plays an important role in our lives.

"I take it a step further in incorporating it into the 'Balance for Life,' " he says.

As a way of defining what he means by the phrase, young Schuller

offers this overview:

First came Freud, "who pitted religion against the psychological."

Next came the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, his father's mentor, "who made the mind and spirit connection."

His father "gave application to the mind and spirit with 'possibility thinking.' "

Then it was Robert Anthony Schuller's turn. "I added the body. The physical nature of man."

Although the Schullers' brand of religion has millions of followers, it does not set well with everyone. From his pulpit a few miles away at the United Church of Christ in Irvine, the Rev. Fred Plumer has had some contact over the years with Schuller and his son. He says he is concerned that they, like many ministers of "mega-churches," tend to speak of Christianity in "feel good" language and bumper-sticker slogans.

"Feel-good ministers in general don't deal with the prophetic language of the Judeo-Christian ethic," Plumer says. "The Christian message isn't just about positive attitudes and turning lemons into lemonade. That is shallow. Addressing the institutional and social oppression of the world is a central part of Jesus' teaching. You have to deal with pain and evil and darkness.

"It seems to me that the message coming from a lot of the big churches is 'If you do things my way, you personally are going to be a winner.' But one of the critical and unique aspects of the Christian path is asking, 'How do my actions affect the welfare of my neighbors?'

"Positive thinking without regard to the welfare of others can lead to very self-centered and materialistic thinking. That is the great sickness in society today. That is the illness we have to cure."

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It is Father's Day at the Rancho Community Church, and about 250 well-dressed parishioners have shown up for services. Unlike the Sunday mornings he officiates at the Crystal Cathedral beside a 20-foot image of himself on a Sony Jumbotron TV video screen, the younger Schuller is accompanied, not by a choir and orchestra, but by a three-piece rock band. Wearing slacks and a short-sleeved print shirt, he cultivates an atmosphere of informality.

His wife, Donna--whom he met on the beach just after her divorce and when his own marriage was collapsing--makes the church announcements.

She and Robert, their two young children and Schuller's two teenage children from his previous marriage are together this day.

"They are the ideal family," effuses a member of the congregation who says she loves the Schullers but doesn't want to be quoted for fear of saying the wrong thing. "They are the beautiful people."

Much like his father, Schuller punctuates statements with broad, theatrical arm movements. But where his father is precise and passionate, he seems scattered and stiff, unsure of where his thoughts are headed.

Still, he looks fabulous, and the two people who sit in a booth in the rear of the church mixing sound electronically make certain he sounds fabulous. This is a place where words such as "self-sacrifice" and "suffering" have been replaced by more pleasant talk of lifelong fulfillment and dumping your hang-ups.

Schuller neither mentions his own father nor delves into the subject of fatherhood this day. He is however, delighted by the loving song his eldest daughter, Angie, sings and the piano accompaniment by her brother, Bobbie.

In the fall, Angie plans to attend Oral Roberts University.

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Schuller has had very little contact with the other heirs-apparent of his father's contemporaries.

Richard Roberts, university president now for three years, carries a much lower profile than his father--a man who built a reputation as a flamboyant fund-raiser but was beset with financial problems in later years. Oral Roberts stepped aside not long after suffering a heart attack and being hospitalized in Orange County late in 1992.

Schuller and Richard Roberts have had lunch together but didn't get much beyond that.

"He's divorced as well," Schuller says. "He's a little odd. Maybe he was just nervous or overwhelmed. But he's a nice guy, and he's apparently doing a good job." (Roberts did not respond to repeated requests for an interview for this story.) Schuller has had even less contact with Franklin Graham--speaking once with him by phone nearly 10 years ago.

The younger Graham was a rebel as a teen who avoided Christian commitment until he was 22. Billy Graham went on to be a spiritual advisor to presidents and other world leaders but continues with the crusades that first brought him to prominence back in 1949 in Los Angeles.

Schuller says his one contact with Franklin Graham left him "pretty disappointed." (Graham was unavailable for comment, according to his public relations representatives.) Schuller said he had visited a village in Mexico in 1987 that had been destroyed by Hurricane Gilbert. When he returned to the United States, he contacted Franklin Graham, head of Samaritan's Purse, a relief agency that provides aid in global crisis zones.

He asked for Graham's help but was turned down. "I had hoped it would be an opportunity for us to work together," Schuller says.

He helped raise \$32,000 to rebuild the town, but Schuller hasn't been back since.

Asked if he has any plans to return, he says "Nope. Been there. Done that."

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Schuller describes himself as a patient, goal-oriented man devoted to his family. "Family comes first," he says. "My immediate family. Not my extended family."

Recently he took what he calls a temperament analysis test. He'd taken the same test a decade ago, and had been labeled an extrovert. This time he came out an introvert.

He says he can't explain the change except to say, "Maybe it's partly maturity."

Looking ahead, he says he wants "to continue to fine-tune my communication skills in public speaking and in relationship to people on a personal level."

In an interview in 1988, his father reflected on what he might choose for an epitaph. With charismatic authority, he declared: "Christ lives, and so do I."

The younger Schuller is asked what he might like for his own. He is uncomfortable with the question. He asks how Dad had answered it.

Then he gives it his best shot: "Something about my mission statement. That I want to inspire people. And something about my family. My kids."

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Robert Anthony Schuller

Background: Age 41. Born in Blue Island, Ill., grew up in Garden Grove. Now makes his home in San Juan Capistrano with his wife, Donna, and is the father of four children, including two from a previous marriage.

Interests: His ministry, family, big-game fishing, skiing, working out and health food.

On realizing human potential: " 'I owe, I owe, so off to work I go' is a sad commentary. Take that off your bumper. Take it off your brain. Start to realize you're created for a purpose and a reason."

On his calling to the ministry: "My calling and my gift is to communicate the message. To be a distributor of information, breathe fire into it."

On leadership: "The measure of leadership is directly related to how many people follow you. Being able to sell the idea and the dream. Sell it and comprehend it."

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