

# Reflections about our Dad

Eulogy for Charles Nelke, January 10, 2018

First, I ask for your understanding. I ask the organist hold up there on the "hurry up" music, like at the Academy Awards. This is 90 years, a lot of kids, but a most profound story, I will do my best to tell. Like Mom, Dad too was an important influence in our lives. Of course, we may not have totally "taken that in" until now. We each remember Dad differently and in many ways, the same.

## **We Remember How Talented He Was.**

Even though he too often said he wasn't as smart as others. Dad was a self-made man.

He built whole rooms and built-ins in both our homes, applying his floor and counter covering skills. He taught himself how to wire and plumb and was a very good carpenter. I remember his stacks of *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Electronics* and his reading them in his spare time. His creations amazed us all.

Doug remembers working side by side with Dad, sometimes helping him with flooring jobs and other projects around the home. He reflects how he was always amazed how he could look at complicated projects and appear to make the solution simple. On one of Mom and Dad's many trips to Arizona in the 1990's to visit them and Denise, Dad helped build a huge wood deck and fencing for their back patio. That deck was enjoyed by all for many, many years.

He lived by the axiom. "If something was broken, no need to replace it. We can fix it."

Sean remembers his Grandpa building him the golf ball toss game for him to play with when he was little.

Denise remembers how he gave her, her first sketch book when she was 10 years old. That she said was the inspiration that led to her studies and then a career with one of the most reputable architectural design firms in the Southwest.

Dad even taught a few of us how to whistle. He had a great whistler if you caught him in a tune out in the yard.

### **We Remember Our Beautiful Yard**

The vegetable garden was Dad's pride and joy. Even with his health failing he tried to keep that up – for Mom. But with everyone living elsewhere now, the produce went on the sharing table at St Joseph's.

That big yard—took lots of upkeep when we were kids. Someone was always, weeding something, mowing the huge yard and in the fall—it was raking time. Jodie remembers jumping in the piles was the best part even if it meant having to rake it all over again!

Mom and Dad created for us an incredible oak grove – better than many public parks -- at one time with a tree house for the boys. One summer, the kids helped Dad build a running water fountain, stomping down the soil to prepare it for the concrete. With those very old majestic oak trees and Mom's flowering ground cover and Clematis, it was the most beautiful and calming place to enjoy throughout the years. There were a lot of picnics in that grove and because we lived next to a golf range which later became a 9-hole course, we learned to live with the flying golf balls.

Along with Mom as his inspiration, he helped form some pretty amazing gardens for all to enjoy. It was our "Home and Gardens.

Later on it was the blackberries and those still at home working hard to make it a profitable season.

Even the grandkids helped in the yard. Sean, Grace and Jack remember that one of their favorite things to do whenever they visited in the summer -- Grandpa would let them climb up on the roof of the barn to clear the moss.

### **We All Remember Our Commutes to School**

When he worked with Capitol Floor Covering Dad would drop us off on his way to work in his big green panel truck. It wasn't like today's SUV's with all their comforts. There were no seats except for the driver, only large buckets holding contact bond. We each hoped we'd get the full bucket, so we wouldn't end up flying off into the back of the truck as Dad took those corners.

One of Jan's favorite memories on those commutes was Dad asking her to sing the songs on the radio on their way to her school drop off. As a result, she said she knew every country western song that was out at the time.

### **Dad had a particular interest in the JOY of smaller children & our pet doggies.**

He perfected the game of "catch" in the yard with CJ and Cuddles. And Dad found joy in holding us as babes and then our kids in his arms, on his lap or on the arms of his lazy boy rocker one at a time or 3 or 4 at a time, rocking them back and forth and standing them up and looking them in the eye until they giggled back.

### **We Remember his Love of the Outdoors**

Dad worked very hard during the week but on occasion, he totally enjoyed trips away from the chores around home, to the "great outdoors" and on many camping trips -- which helped us to gain an appreciation too. The older of us remember the work and the younger -- who enjoyed the comforts of the RV's -- remember the fun.

Jan remembers the fishing on the Santiam at Fisherman's Bend and on the Metolious River by Camp Sherman. She remembers one time in particular when the pin holding together the Zepco fishing pole she was using came out and was lost on the dried pine needle path. But Dad helped her find that pin and within a half hour she caught her fish. She loves fishing to this day.

Terry especially thanks dad for 50 years of comradery of camping and hunting and appreciating and enjoying the great outdoors. He still remembers hunting trips from 30 to 40 years ago -- they made that much of an impression.

Denise's fondest memories are of the camping trips --so many over the years from the beach and Cape Lookout and Cape Kiwanda to Central Oregon and Sisters, Three Creeks Lake, Jack Creek and the Metolious river and Camp Sherman -- sometimes with the neighbors. Often going to the evening 'ranger' programs at the campgrounds to be eaten alive with mosquitoes, but she says, we always learned something new about the area!

## **We Remember our Sundays & Breakfasts Out**

Our Sunday ritual for many years as we grew up was to go to Mass, always sitting in the same pew, spreading out the full length of the row, then over for coffee and rolls, home to change, then out to the farm to visit with our cousins, for escapades in the hayloft, some of us playing the player piano or upstairs to read the comic books and run the electric train with our Uncle David. Dad with his Dad and the Uncles would be off discussing the world situation. Grandma always busy cooking and baking up a storm. Our collective memory is there were always piles of food on her kitchen counter -- hams, roasts, with lots of trimmings. We had a ton of cousins -- enough for 2 football teams on those Sundays -- which we played in their big front yard. Then about dusk, Dad would honk the horn and we'd come running from wherever we were and back home to prepare for the coming week.

Later on some of us moved away raising families others still not there yet -- Sundays was the same pew, filling out the row a little less, but always after -- breakfast at their favorite restaurant. No matter the wallet, Dad always wanted to take the family out for breakfast.

In retirement, Dad loved to meet up with many over the years at his favorite coffee shop to catch up on the various news of the day. Jan remembers that the one thing Dad always needed there was -- his coffee HOT and re-filled.

## **Rosary Time**

Jodie remembers 'rosary time'. Dad had a way of saying the prayers so fast that it almost sounded like a foreign language. She said Doug and her would look at each other --and you guessed it--the giggles would start. All these years later, she says that whenever she says those prayers--she remembers Dad's way!

## **We Remember How He & Mom enjoyed Square Dancing with the Neighbors. & We Remember Their Many Travels to Visit Us**

After camping and as the family married and moved away, Dad and Mom would travel south every Christmas to visit Doug & Bridget, Denise, Jan & Matthew and their growing families and sometimes Elaine & Joe in the Bay area of California -- first in their big RV and then by plane. Matthew & the kids remember how important those 20 years of Christmases were together

in their home in San Diego with Grandma and Grandpa. And then every summer, those same would visit here at their home in Oregon. That continued after Mom died, Dad on a plane first class this time, so he was close to the facilities and where he had plenty of folks watching out for him. And the summer visits continued.

### **We Remember Our Conversations & Encounters**

Bridget remembers him at age sixteen asking her why she showed up at the house at 8:00 one night on the wrong front porch. You see the front door had become not the front door. But that is another long story most of us know. Despite that rather gruff introduction, Bridget still married Doug and grew to love and appreciate that side of Dad. They bought the "Nelke" sign that sits today on the wrong front door.

Terry was the only one of us who didn't move away and so he would visit every Sunday and for a few hours he and Dad would chat about their mutual interests, the world situation, and what tractor or tiller needed fixing. He had a pile of tillers for parts all lined up, never replacing the original. The one thing he replaced, the tractor, he hated all the fancy safety gadgets and said he should have just fixed the old one.

My husband, Joe, looked forward to his conversations with Chuck discussing religion and politics, their common experiences in the US Navy, and the miracles of the universe. He says: "I only knew Chuck for thirty years. During that time I grew to respect him as a hardworking guy, proud of his craft doing the best he could for who he was. He became my Dad too. I will miss him."

Grandson, Sean, remembers Grandpa's "quiet nature" as he sat at the head of the table.

### ***And we remember so much more . . .***

I bet you didn't know he really liked Elvis - his music and his way. Dad did have that same occasional boyish grin and twinkle in his eye -- no coincidence that it seemed to be when Mom was around.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Dad was born and grew up during the Depression and the Second World War. His family pulled together to help each other through those very difficult times. Those experiences formed him as a son, brother, and then husband and father. And I think it is important to remember.

He was our Dad and in so many ways bigger than life sometimes more than we could handle. His strong work ethic and sense of responsibility made it seem like he was sometimes too tough and unyielding when we were younger, not all that different than most of our friends growing up actually and their relationship with their parents. In age, we spread out over 2 decades and we often said he was tougher on the older ones, mellowing for the younger. But as we grew up, we learned to respect what we learned – each in our own way -- by his example and by what he demanded of us.

He wasn't a person who showered you with praise, if at all. He didn't try to "please." He didn't try to be something he wasn't. I believe his goal as witnessed by his example was to make sure we were provided for, that we lived in a safe comfortable home, and that Mom had all she needed. Mom calmed the waters where needed otherwise. But there were albeit rare moments when he tenderly expressed his *best* to us in our lives.

What we realize more now than ever was that Dad was *so totally in love with Mom* and how hard it was on him when she left so sudden. His heart was broken and so went his vitality. His mantra these past few years we all can quote -- "Why am I still here?" Maybe without Mom to be his voice, the world became a more confusing place.

He soldiered on despite his failing health these past many years. He kept up a daily routine, breakfast with his friends at the "donut shop" -- on Wednesdays preceded by Mass – then to his rounds and rounds of doctor's appointments, back to prune or rake the yard, cutting the grass on his John Deere, or tending to his vegetable garden. He made sure Mom would have been proud of his keeping everything up. Sometimes he ventured up the rickety ladder to grab the pears or apples or pull off dead limbs. We all shuddered when we heard he was doing that and so he agreed to wear Lifeline around his neck – FOR US – in case. He told me once that he didn't actually go back up that ladder after we warned him, just propped it alongside the tree for everyone to "see and worry."

Every day after his chores he would turn on his billion recorded Western programs, without the sound and he would nap. The sound was usually off even when he was awake. He said he knew how they ended anyhow. Then in the evening after dinner, he'd time his dip in the hot tub so that he was ready for his daily call from Jan on her way home from work and on weekends from Denise and Jodie.

These past 3 years, we pulled together to help him but often he would say to me that he hoped he was helping us cope with our own loss and that maybe that was why he was still here. And that this was purgatory and he wasn't quite ready for heaven. But he still was so lonely.

Just before Christmas, when he fell ill -- all packed and ready to head south for his holiday visit -- he soldiered further, not giving up, wanting just to be back home, enduring the rollercoaster up and down at the hospital to get better so that he could.

The infection kept him isolated in ICU so he couldn't have many visitors. For a few days he was hallucinating, seeing things in the room. He didn't want to watch TV and asked me to turn it off. He became focused on the watercolor on the wall ahead of his bed. It was of a beautiful pasture with a big oak tree. He said, don't you see there, the wolf and the man lying down and the little people dancing? I thought it was the delirium. But sure enough, if you looked at that picture I too could see that there were other pictures in that picture. There was a form of a wolf in the foliage of the tree, the little people in the fencing around that tree, and a full form of a man lying down in the grass just below. He said, "Maybe the artist really intended that, do you think?"

Just as he seemed to be getting better his kidneys failed. He was able to say good-bye to his brother Ray and sisters, Deanna and Betty, while they held his hand, and then slipped into a deep sleep as we tried to make him comfortable. We were with him when he very peacefully and gently looked toward heaven and re-joined the "love of his life." -- Mom no doubt has a bunch of chores all lined up for him, tending to their new garden in heaven. Hopefully there won't be any leaves to rake.

All of us wish to extend our sincere thanks to the ICU staff at the Salem General Hospital, to the staff at Virgil Golden's, to the staff here at St. Joseph and to Monsignor Huneger.

And to all Dad's friends and neighbors and extended family who have loved and cared for him, especially these past few years.

You do know -- he loved you all too.