

Eulogy for my grandfather, Andrew D. Kelley, Jr.

September 11, 2009

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I became much closer to my grandpa about a year and a half ago when I stayed with him while my grandma was in the hospital. The time we spent together was a time of transition for him; he knew that Grandma's fall would change their lives, and that nothing would be the same. We talked about how he wished they had moved to assisted living sooner, as though that might have prevented Grandma's fall. We talked about the many years he spent caring for his father and his earnest wish not to burden his children at the end of his life. We talked about Parkinson's disease and its slow, cruel progress. At that time, he said the worst part was his inability to find the words to express what he wanted to say. We talked about my life in California and his time in the Navy. Grandpa served on the USS Squire in WWII, and saw action in the Mediterranean, Pacific, and North Atlantic. He told me he often spent his shore leave on Market Street in San Francisco, where he was once arrested by Navy police for having too much fun. I remember while we were watching the news together, Grandpa said he couldn't imagine fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan, where military goals and political contexts were so murky and difficult to understand. He was drafted into the Navy in 1943, the same year he graduated from high school. He lettered in wrestling, baseball, football, and swimming; later, he played softball, and won tournaments as a scratch bowler. He was one of the first people to hold season tickets for the Broncos, and he attended one of the first Bronco games at Mile High stadium in 1967. He and Grandma traveled to four superbowls together.

Grandpa had a sharp sense of humor, right up until the very last moments of his life. Everybody at his assisted living community knew him, even though he wasn't able to join them for meals. I think the most difficult part of the last year was that Grandpa couldn't eat; he loved food and eating. His creamery business instilled a love of ice cream in all of us, if not shrewd business acumen. He and grandma always claimed that they ate all the profits. Even if he did like to eat what he prepared, Grandpa worked hard. He ran Kelley's Bar and Grill for many years, which he opened at 6 in the morning, and closed at 2 the next morning. Perhaps working around good food and drink shaped Grandpa into the prolific and spontaneous snacker that he was. We all remember Grandpa saying he could go for some fudge, or spaghetti, or a milkshake. Grandpa loved spicy chile, enchiladas, any

kind of nuts, candy bars, spumoni, Christmas cookies, and all the many meals Grandma cooked for him. We knew Grandpa to be the type of eater who didn't praise food lightly; he was honest in his evaluations of both restaurants and home cooking, taking food seriously, with respect. I feel honored to have cooked some of the last meals he ate before he had to start using a feeding tube.

By recounting the details of my grandfather's life, I am participating in an ancient tradition of funeral oration. Plato describes the *epitaphios logos* in detail: "the speech required is one which will adequately eulogize the dead and give kindly exhortation to the living, appealing to their children and their brethren to copy the virtues of these heroes, and to their fathers and mothers and any still surviving ancestors offering consolation." Today, I have shared with you some of my grandfather's virtues, reminding you of what you already know, that my grandfather was a compassionate, genial, hard-working man, with as much candor as empathy, both modest and skillful. We would all do well to copy these qualities and carry them forward in our own lives. I would urge you to find heroic virtue in unlikely places, in the hard work of providing for one's family, in the pleasures of spicy food and creamy spumoni, and in the quiet jokes and quick, easy smiles of ordinarily subdued men.

Performance artist Linda Montano wrote a series of "Death Notes" after her mother died. She reminds us that people often leave behind unfinished business. Linda writes, "My mother said, 'I always wished I had written a book,' knowing I would hear her and do it for her. I have." The best consolation I can offer elaborates on this idea that every death leaves work behind for us, Grandpa's children and brethren, to complete. Imagine what that work might be, the work Grandpa would have done had he been given the time, and do it. It could be simple, like eating a spaghetti dinner at the Blue Parrot in Louisville. It could be more complicated, like joining Grandpa in his vow to make his passing as painless as possible for his own children, to not be a burden. In completing Grandpa's work, we both honor his life and prepare for our own deaths, readying ourselves for the moment when our work and our hearts must stop.

"Death Notes" is published in *Letters from Linda M. Montano* (New York: Routledge, 2005).