

Pa's Eulogy

Wednesday, January 30, 2019

I wouldn't normally ever volunteer to speak in front of an audience like this, but when my grandmother asked me on Sunday to give the eulogy at her husband's funeral, there was no way that I could have ever said, "no." So, here I am.

I am here to speak about my grandfather, Julian, or "Jay" Senko, or "Pa" as I affectionately called him during the 28 and a half years that our lives overlapped.

I'm not sure I ever told him, but I have always loved his name, "Julian." No one really ever called him by it. Most people knew him as "Jay," or even "Sonny" as my mom told me his five older sisters called him. But I knew that his full name was Julian and I always really liked it. I find it classy, artistic, and in this day and age, a bit unique. I also find it to be a very strong and vibrant name. In fact, if you look it up, you will see that the name is derived from Julius, the family clan name of several Roman emperors and as a result, although it literally does mean "youthful," is occasionally associated with strength, power, and charisma--qualities of a leader. Now, I doubt that my grandpa, a devout Catholic, would at all like to be associated with a group of pagan emperors at his funeral, but as I reflected on why I like his name so much, it struck me that the meanings of it and the associations that the name has, both historically and to me personally--class, artistry, vibrancy, strength--are the same qualities that best describe my grandpa and the way he lived his 89 years of life.

Like many of the people in this room, my grandfather and I developed our first bond through sports. Pa liked all sports. Professionally, he supported the three main Pittsburgh teams: The Pirates, Penguins, and Steelers. But most of all he liked Penn State. He LOVED Penn State: Of course football, but men's and women's basketball, volleyball--You name it. He was the University's #1 fan. Now, when I look back at myself as a kid and a teenager, I sometimes worry that I was a jerk. Despite the fact that both sides of my family supported the Steelers, I decided that I would be a Chicago Bears fan. And despite the fact that nearly everyone on my mom's side of the family bled Penn State blue and white, I decided that I would support Northwestern, Penn State's Big-10 competitor. Regardless, my grandparents must have seen it as an opportunity. Going to Penn State-Northwestern football games became an annual tradition. Every year when the college football schedule was released, I would wait for my grandpa's phone call, reminding me of the date of the game and asking me if I wanted to go. Of course, I always said, "yes." And of course, Northwestern would usually lose. Yet, despite my temper tantrums, poor sportsmanship, and the one time in Evanston that I left the stadium by myself in the middle of the fourth quarter, year-after-year, my grandparents never let me or our tradition down. These were some of the best memories of my adolescence. I am so grateful to my grandpa for them.

Perhaps the second most prominent thing that my grandpa taught me during my formative years was to appreciate music. Pa's favorite genre of music was most certainly classical. For as long as I can remember, whether I was visiting him at the house on Hickory Blvd, at the condo, or over the past two years in his room at John XXIII, he was always listening to classical music. Pa had a unique ability to identify a classical music piece immediately upon hearing it. He must have had a phenomenal ear. To me, when I heard it, it was "classical music." But to him, no matter whether it was any one of Beethoven's nine symphonies, or a Rachmaninoff piano concerto, he always knew it. It was amazing to me. And, I'm not sure how many people know it, but he was a really good piano player, too. I always knew of his taste. He and Ma encouraged me to listen to classical music and often sent me CDs as gifts on holidays, but I remember the one time at the condo that he sat down and started playing the piano, I was stunned. I had no clue. He used no sheet music, nothing. He just sat down and played, and it was so good. I talked about how much my grandfather liked sports and

Penn State football. These are often seen as “masculine things.” But he had a whole nother, artistic side to him. He was a remarkably well-rounded individual.

By the time that I was towards the end of college or recently graduated, maybe around 21 or 22-years-old, I think was about the same time that Pa started to “slow down.” I started to notice that he was taking naps more frequently, or when playing cards every once-in-while he would make an error that he used to not make, et cetera, et cetera. But, I think that it was at this time, as I started to mature and develop more awareness of myself, other people, and the world around me and as Pa fought the adversities of old age, that his greatest qualities became known to me. My grandpa was a strong man. He was strong-willed, disciplined, vibrant, and relentless. These qualities manifested themselves in a number of ways. Of course, there are funny memories. My grandma always tells the story of when my Uncle John wore a baseball cap to the dinner table and Pa took it off him and threw it away in order to send a message about the etiquette of wearing hats indoors or at the dinner table. And, I think of the time when he spent 30 minutes outside my college house in the South Side before we drove to the New Jersey shore for our family’s vacation packing, packing, and re-packing the trunk, determined, even though there were only three of us and a ton of space in the back seat, that he would get everything to fit in the trunk. But this part of my eulogy not at all a joke. I sincerely saw in my grandpa perhaps the strongest faith in God that I have ever known. He lived a life rooted in the values of Jesus Christ. His devotion to prayer, to his Church, to his family, to his community, and to serving others was unwavering. And to be with him at Mass and hear him sing was remarkable. I feel like I rarely see men sing at church anymore. But when Pa sang, his voice filled the room. It was melodic and in-tune, but most of all, it boomed. His presence was distinct.

Two Sundays ago, I drove up to Hermitage. My mom had driven down from Connecticut, just as she never failed to do once each month throughout the two years that her dad was in John XXIII. Every time she came, she prepared dinner, and she, Ma, and I would have dinner together in the sun room of the nursing home. This last time was rough. I couldn’t eat. To see my grandpa, such an outgoing person with a shining personality, in such a dependent state was hard. But now that he has passed, I have faith, because he taught me, that he is in a better place now.

When I was in college and looking for a part-time job, my grandma told me that she might be able to help me out. Marty Maloney, the son of one of my grandpa’s best friends, Marty Sr., owned a bar in the South Side close to where I lived. Before long, I was waiting tables at the restaurant. One St. Patrick’s Day when the place was packed and I was running around like crazy, Marty came over, stopped me, and said, “Your grandpa is an amazing person.” I reacted bashfully and laughed, which was genuinely out of excitement and thankfulness to hear someone speak so highly of a person important to me. Marty said, “No I don’t think you understand. Your grandparents are two of the greatest people that I have ever known.” I’m not sure if he is here, but Marty, I do understand. I promise. Everyone here does. Over the past few days, as I’ve wanted to mope and whine and cry, upset that the world has lost such a wonderful person, I remind myself that as I look out at everyone who has made it here today and to the funeral home yesterday, and I think of the hundreds of people who may not be here physically, but knew my grandpa in their lives and are with us in spirit, I remind myself that, in fact, the world is a better, stronger place because we have all been touched by my grandfather.

I love you, Pa.

From, Will