

## A EULOGY FOR TOM NEIDL

December 28, 2007

### **DAD**

So here's how lucky I am: I'm one of four people in the world who got to call Tom Neidl "Dad." A few years ago when I held my little girl, Annabelle, for the first time, I understood, in a very tangible way, what serious business parenting is. It seems obvious, but I realized how important it is to love your children with all your heart. Not just to provide the roof. Not just to provide the food. But to really love your children so hard that they know it. Well, my father loved his children like a maestro. Although my father was very good at many things, above all else, I think he was built to love his family.

One of Dad's great gifts as a father was his ability to comfort us in tough times. It didn't matter whether it was a small problem or a big problem. Dad had this way of gently looking you in the eye, and telling you, "It'll be okay." And you believed him. I remember so many nights as a young kid agonizing over my math homework, feeling frustrated and depressed because I just didn't seem to get it. But then Dad would pull a chair up next to me and everything would change. He'd work that magic: "It'll be okay." Next thing you knew, he and I were staggering through the math problems together – and rather incompetently I might add – and what had been a dark and lonely night would be a good time with my Dad that I wouldn't have missed for anything.

As we grew up, the problems my siblings and I would face grew more serious than math homework of course. Break-ups. An overwhelming first week of law school. But Dad's gift for taking us by the hand and lifting our hearts with that gentle gaze and calm voice never failed. I'll miss that magical ability of his to make things seem all right.

Dad never judged us, or expected us to conform to any preconceived standard of a "proper child." He didn't need straight A's from his children. He didn't need star athletes or homecoming queens either. He was proud of us for who we were, and understood that we had to follow our own paths. If there was anything he could do to help us, he would do it, and if we asked him for advice, he would give it, but he wouldn't push. He wanted his children to be happy. Period. He didn't want any of us making any decisions just to make him happy. He wanted us to find our own joy, and to do anything he could to help us get there.

Dad was also a fierce protector. Anyone who knew my father knows that he was normally a sweet and gentle guy. But if you threatened the happiness of one of his children, you would make the acquaintance of a much angrier, scarier Tom Neidl. One time, on Halloween, some punk kid knocked me down and stole my bag of candy while I was out trick-or-treating with a friend. I went home and told my father about it on our front porch, crying. By sheer coincidence, at that very moment, the kid who stole from me was walking across the street from our house. I told my father, "I think that's him," and before I could even finish my sentence, Dad bellowed at this kid in a terrifying roar of a voice I had never heard before. And suddenly Dad was racing across the street like an Olympic sprinter with fire in his eyes. Have you ever seen a thirteen year-old candy thief scream like a child and run for his life? I have. I learned two

things about my father that night: first, he was fearless in his commitment to his children; and second, he could run like a gazelle.

Most fundamentally, my father just loved to be with us, and wanted to be with us as much as possible. For him it was bittersweet watching us grow up. Dad once told my sister Jess, around the time that she was in college, that he wished he could build a giant castle, so that his four kids could grow up, marry and have kids of their own, but we could still all live together under the same roof with he and Mom forever.

We never built that castle of course, but we came pretty close. I married a wonderful woman and we were able to give my father two beautiful granddaughters during his life. And in the last few years, while we didn't live under Dad's roof, we lived only a mile away. It became clear immediately that Dad was every bit as suited to grandfatherhood as he was to fatherhood. He loved to play with my girl Annabelle. And she loves him. "Pop," she calls him. And Dad adored my new daughter Eloise, who is only 4 months old. He got to love her, and he did.

## **MOM AND DAD**

I want to talk for a minute about my mother and my father together. On the surface, Mom and Dad always appeared to be very different people. – a classic "Odd Couple." Mom is basically proper and dignified. Dad, on the other hand – we all know what he was. He cursed. He loved dirty jokes. Frankly, he loved to misbehave, but in a harmless sort of way.

All of these differences made it sort of a mystery to my brother and sisters and me how my parents ever got together in the first place. We never questioned that they loved each other, but how, despite all of their apparent dissimilarities, did they get close enough to fall in love? We knew the *legend* well enough. They met at Woolfert's Roost Country Club, where Dad worked as a waiter and a bartender, and where Mom's family were members. Somehow they got to know each other and went on a date to the movies. Mom once told me that the date was ordinary until the end. Dad took her hand so that they wouldn't lose each other in the crowd as they were trying to leave the theater. It was the first time they ever touched. Mom told me she knew at that moment that she was going to marry him.

For years I wondered about that. How *did* she know? Couldn't they see how different they were? Didn't it bother them? But as I got older, and a little bit wiser, the answer became more clear. While Mom and Dad were opposites in many ways on the surface, on another, deeper level, they were very much the same. Once you got past the kinds of jokes they liked and the kind of language they used, you had two common souls. They both loved peace, and quiet, and humor, and the company of those they adored. They shared the same sense of right and wrong, and the same code for how to treat other people. They possessed the same fundamental sincerity and integrity. Their mutual, ideal night was a night in together, reading their books side by side, or rubbing each other's feet as they watched old movies.

And so Mom and Dad were not really the Odd Couple. Deep down they were the same. Their hearts were so similar where it counted that they called to each other all those years ago across the boundary between kitchen and dining room at a country club, and through all the

surface level differences of their personalities, to forge a great and beautiful bond that was the nucleus of our family. I think that's what Mom could feel happening that night at the movies all those years ago when Dad took her hand. *That's* how she knew. He loved her, and she loves him, always.

## **WHY WE LOVED HIM**

Finally, I want to say a few words about some of the general qualities that we all loved about my father – the qualities that made him great.

First, Dad was genuine. There wasn't a phony bone in his body. And if you wanted to win Dad's respect, you would have to do it on merit. Titles and social status meant nothing to him. Furthermore, if you were going to try to impress my father with remarks about the things you owned, or the people you knew, you had better prepare yourself for the roast of a lifetime, because he had no tolerance for pretension, and a talent for dismantling it.

Dad was humble. He knew that he was good at his job, and that he had the respect of his peers, but he never took that for granted. He kept his head down and he worked hard. He didn't want anything he hadn't earned with his own hard work. I think every gift Dad ever got from my siblings and me, he accepted under protest. He didn't want anyone going to trouble for him.

Dad was a deeply caring and compassionate person. This was a gift and a curse. Other people's pain was Dad's pain. You could see the concern register on his face whenever he heard a sad story, even about somebody he had never even met. You could see it weigh on his heart.

And of course, we loved my father for his humor. What can you possibly say to capture my father's unmatched powers in this department? I have simply never known anyone wittier, anyone as irreverent, anyone as fearless, and anyone as just plain funny as my father, and I think I never will. Anyone who knew Tom Neidl well, knew that the best seat in the house, at any function, was the seat next to him. No matter how unpleasant, depressing, disturbing or boring the business of the hour might be, if you were near my father, he was going to make you laugh.

The things he would say or do would make your jaw drop. He could say the un-sayable and somehow get away with it. He could get laughs by saying something that, from anyone else's lips, would draw horrified groans. The very first time you'd meet my father, he might break the ice by telling you the filthiest word he could think of that rhymed with your name – and you'd fall in love with him for it.

And, finally, I think what I appreciate and love most about my father is his courage and his strength.

Dad's favorite stories were underdog stories. He felt like the little guy, and in his work he was passionate about fighting for the little guy. One of his all time favorite movies was the original "Rocky." I remember one time, when I was just a young boy, Dad came to me and asked me if I wanted to go to my uncle Stephen's house to watch "Rocky" on Stephen's VCR. In those days we didn't have our own VCR yet. Stephen did. It was a school night, so this was a

little weird. This wasn't the kind of thing we usually did on school nights. But in a heartbeat I said yes.

When we got to my uncle's, no one was home. The house was dark. I assume we had permission to be there, because we went inside anyway and Dad put the movie on. Oddly, he skipped right to the big fight scene at the end. He wanted to watch that part first. This was the big fight between the classic underdog, Rocky Balboa, and the overwhelming champion, Apollo Creed. If you know that scene, you know how stirring it is. At its climax, Rocky, bloody, bruised, and nearly beaten, is knocked down by a hard punch. He is laying there, practically half-dead. He *should* give up. His own trainer is *telling* him to give up. But he *can't* give up. Rocky lifts himself to his feet, and marches back into the fight. Somehow Rocky – half-dead Rocky – musters the strength and the courage to throw hard punches to the body. Against all odds, he breaks the Champ's ribs, proving that he, Rocky, is somebody. Win, lose or draw, he can go the distance.

We never actually watched the rest of the movie that night. Dad just kept rewinding the scene where Rocky gets up, goes forward, and breaks the Champ's ribs. He must have replayed that scene two dozen times, explaining to me all along that this was one of the greatest scenes in any movie ever. And then we left. That was it. I had no idea what the heck had just happened. But now I understand why that scene was so powerful to Dad.

It was about not giving up. It was about fighting on, no matter how difficult, despairing and bleak things may get. Just about every morning of his life, Dad woke up with great temptation to stay down on the canvass. The cruelty and darkness out there in the world haunted him. He couldn't take it in stride the way you might be able to take it in stride, or I might be able to take it in stride. The inhumanity out there truly *haunted* him. And deep down inside, he wrestled always with the feeling that maybe – despite everything he'd achieved – maybe he was just a chubby little kid from Second Street. Maybe he wasn't good enough. Make no mistake: my father had a full life, a happy life, and loving friends and family. He had demons, though. Powerful ones. But Dad never gave up. Every day, he picked himself up and fought on. Every day, he went back into the fight and broke the Champ's ribs. Every day, he proved to himself that he was somebody, he was something. And in the process, he became a great father, a great husband, a great advocate for his clients, and a great source of light and laughter for so many friends who simply fell in love with him with such ease. Every day he overcame so much to brighten the lives of so many. For that, among so many other reasons, we will always love him. We love you, Dad.

--By his son, Ben