

Memoir for My Dad

(Journal entry from my blog)

January 14, 2005 Friday

My father, Luke Buratovich, passed away two years ago today, on January 14, 2003.

Early this morning I made the 100 mile drive up to Sebastopol (that I have made many hundreds of times) to spend the day with my mom. We went to the cemetery to visit my dad's crypt, pay our respects, and say our prayers. My 83-year-old mom got down on her knees on the cold marble floor and thanked him for their more than 55 years together. I had to help her get back up on her feet. I affixed a laminated photo of dad to the facing of his crypt. I wanted people to be able to associate a face with the name of this man. It was the last photo ever taken of him and he was smiling broadly in it because the photo had been taken by his granddaughter, Nicole.



As I always do on these visits, I took my mom to various stores to do her shopping, as she doesn't drive. We went to the Pendleton store in Santa Rosa, and mom bought some slacks and tops for herself as well as a sweater for my birthday, which doesn't come until April.

Back at the house, mom and I had an opportunity to really talk for a few hours. First, we went over some of the poetry that she has written which I will be publishing in a booklet for her and also some of the short stories she has written about her life which we plan to put in a book sometime this year.

Mom and I talked about family things and a lot about dad. We talked about relationships and how she felt so lucky that she had had so many good years with dad. I talked about my wanting to have some of those good years of companionship in my own life. I talked about Catherine moving on and how it was hard and I talked about my good years with Cynthia and how it was so much harder when her emotional health and our relationship disintegrated.

Even though I am a very detailed diarist, I didn't do any writing about that day of my dad's death (until now.) The best I could do was to build a [web page in memory of his passing](#). There was my mom to look after in her grief, there were all the funeral arrangements, there was all of the personal and family business to be cleared up, going through dad's personal effects, taking care of all the legal, medical and insurance paperwork. And after the two weeks of that, when I got back to my home with Cynthia, we were going through our months of intermittent and heartbreakingly horrible disintegration.

Cynthia knew me and saw into me like no other woman, like no other person. Cynthia was my selfless and complete supporter on that very sad day two years ago, and in the emotional days that followed. I remember Cynthia and I were in the living room of her hundred-year-old Victorian home in downtown Campbell which she had so lovingly restored. We were opening up a delivery package, a gift she had ordered for me, a Victorian era replica lamp in the form of a 19th-century hot air balloon. Then the phone call came from mom's good friend, June, to

get up to the hospital right away, that dad had taken some serious turn for the worse.

Dad had had a very rough year in 2002. It was a rough year for all of us, dad was very ill. Early in the year he had a heart surgery and a pacemaker insertion to help stabilize his congestive heart failure which had become seriously worse. Dad had been in and out of the hospital many times that year, and in just March 2002 alone, mom had to call 911 to take him to emergency on three separate weekends. Of course, I would jump in my car, and make the maddening hundred-mile drive up to Sebastopol to give what support I could.

It was not uncommon for me to make that trip two or three times a week, under crisis conditions. What made the stress unbelievably worse was that my fiancée, Cynthia, was experiencing serious health problems of her own. A number of times I would have to make the hundred mile drive up to Sebastopol to take my dad to the hospital or the doctor's office and see if I could get the situation calmed down, and then immediately turn around and race back down to Campbell to take Cynthia to the doctor's office and see if I could get the situation calmed down.

Somehow that spring, neither my family nor my fiancé thought they were getting the full and complete attention from me that they deserved. It was without a question the most difficult and spirit breaking period of my life and I'm sad to say that I didn't handle it very gracefully. I became quite withdrawn and despondent. To make matters worse I was hardly able to put in any quality time on the real estate - Internet business that Cynthia and I were trying to launch together.

However, by this summer the situation had become more stable. Dad was back home, even though he was hooked up to an oxygen machine, and mom had become very proficient at administering his medical regimen. They had a hospital bed installed upstairs, which was the main living area of their home, (of course dad couldn't go up and down the stairs). Because the kitchen, etc. was upstairs, when we experimented with keeping dad in the bedroom (which were all

downstairs), mom would have to go up and down the stairs 50 or 60 times a day.

The situation with Cynthia and myself was improving too, she was taking some recuperation time to turn the back yard into a garden paradise with all the pathways and patios laid out in incredible mosaic work.

By Fall, we were all falling into a routine, and mom had very wisely decided to host the entire extended family for Christmas week. This included my brother from Arizona and his two daughters (my dad's only grandchildren) Nicole and Jessica. Also, Cynthia and I, and my dad's sister, Bina, and her two daughters, Judy and Sue were there for the Christmas holiday. I think mom had the feeling that this might be dad's last Christmas.

Dad's granddaughters flew back home two days before New Year's 2003. I remember joking with dad, telling him not to end up in the hospital this New Year's Eve as he had done the previous New Year's Eve. Dad used to have a saying that whatever you did on New Year's Day you would do all year long. In 2002, dad spent New Year's Eve and New Year's Day in the hospital and many other days of that year.

On December 31, 2002, New Year's Eve Day, dad, who had taken to getting around for short distances without his walker, fell near the kitchen table and fractured his hip.

Once again, I made the drive up to Sebastopol and spent much of New Year's Day and evening at the Palm Drive Hospital where my 87-year-old dad underwent a grueling surgery to implant an artificial hip. It was horribly traumatic to dad's body and ultimately after two weeks of trying to recover, his tired body just couldn't make it.

For the whole year that dad was sick and the entire time he endured uncomfortable treatments and tests, he didn't complain or feel pity for himself. I remember when dad first came back from the hospital from his heart surgery. I wanted to talk with him, so I crawled into bed with him and lay there next to him and we had a conversation. I asked him if

he ever thought about dying and he said to me, "No Ned, I don't think about it," and we shared a short but very real conversation.

It may not seem like much, but it represented an incredible lot to me. You see, there was a 10-year period when my dad would not speak to me. Oh, if I asked him a direct question, like "What time is it?" He would tell me, but he otherwise would not speak to me. He wouldn't call me by my name, instead of using my name he called me "jackass." Of course, I would taunt him and give him ample reason to call me by that name. I was not turning out to be the son that he could be proud of. Instead to him I was just a crazy thinking, motorcycle riding, underemployed hippie who didn't ever want to grow up or settle down. My dad and I spent quite a long time being mutually and severely disappointed in each other.

It was almost legendary in my family how brusquely and harshly my dad regarded me. Eventually I gave up on trying to have my dad accept me and instead worked at accepting him. Then I went on a decade-long campaign to have my dad say the words to me, "I love you." I never would hear dad say those three words to me and eventually I gave up on trying to get him to do it. Instead, I just concentrated on loving him the way he was and telling him every time I saw him that I loved him. It was almost like teaching a pet a trick, but after a year or so of going up to hug him and having him stand there rigidly like a stick, he eventually began to put his arms out and give me a brief squeeze back.

Whenever I went up to hug him, I would always say, "I love you, Dad." And then one time, when I went up to hug him and say I love you dad, he said back to me, "Me too." You can't imagine how those two words filled my heart. It was more than the culmination of a 20-year campaign, it was the acknowledgment that I had craved my entire life.

I knew my dad could never be truly proud of me or understand me because of the unconventional choices I made in my life, but I also knew, that nevertheless he always did love me, he just had trouble expressing it.

He hated me riding a motorcycle, I think he was mostly just deathly worried for me, but he would lend me his tools to work on it. He couldn't understand why I would quit an engineering job to go do massage, but he helped me build my first massage table. When I had a big dance performance in San Francisco at the International Folk Festival, he wouldn't come to watch me, but he drove my mom to San Francisco so she could. That was just his way.

I inherited both his stubbornness and his vulnerability. Later in my life, if someone was hurting me, I would just stand there and be hurt, but I wouldn't change my ways to prevent it. If I was a little kid, and I was beaten with a belt or a whip until my butt or thighs had crimson welts, I wouldn't give in until my spirit broke. And what always broke my spirit was my inability to comprehend why someone would want to hurt me, just for me being me. But I wouldn't let it stop me from being me, because that hurt even worse.

That's not to say I couldn't make adjustments to consensus reality. When I finally traded in my motorcycles and hippie van for a BMW, settled down to a prestigious job at Apple Computer and bought my own home in Silicon Valley, my dad was beamingly proud of me and expressed that pride to everyone around him.

Of course, when I was a child, before I became a rebellious teenager, my dad was also very proud of me and my brother. There was nothing that gave me more satisfaction than doing activities with my dad. I liked best of all when he would play with me, but I was just as happy when we would do chores or projects around the house together. I just liked being with my dad.

It wasn't until I got past my 30s that I really considered what it might have been like for him to be in middle age, to have worries and insecurities, to have fears and disappointments. Of course, dad would never talk about that, he was not able to talk about his feelings. He was so totally different from me in that way. For years I resented him, thinking he just didn't have feelings, but later I realized he had never felt safe to express them. He kept everything inside, except for brief

outbursts of anger that he quickly swallowed back as he shut himself down again. But sometimes, he would laugh at something funny, or even just smile and you could feel the little boy in him. I loved to hear dad laugh or see him smile.

My dad was fairly healthy for all of his life until the congestive heart failure which had probably silently been building up for years began to take its toll. Dad would not go see a doctor for more than 40 years, he just toughed things out. I think he feared doctors and understandably so. When he was a child of about eight or nine years old, he and a friend were sitting down on a curb when a car coming around the corner went out of control on the freshly oiled street and skidded straight for them. My dad reflexively pushed his friend out of harm's way and probably saved his friend's life. However, that put my dad into the path of the oncoming car and it crushed his body against the light pole.

My dad spent the better part of the year in painful traction with a shattered pelvis. I think that's why he always walked a little funny after that, with one of his legs always turned inward a little bit. I also think that's why was very fearful of taking risks for the rest of his life. I judged my dad pretty harshly for being wimpy and not wanting to go for things. Only much later did I make the connection that he had paid a very high price for having once acted like a hero. Paradoxically, whenever I thought of that story, I always felt proud that my dad was a hero.

In the last year of his life, when my dad was very frail and weak, I realized I had the opportunity to repay part of an enormous debt. Now instead of my dad driving me to school, I was driving him to the doctors or to church. I would help him with his walker or his four-point cane and support him firmly under his arm pit with my arm.

I remember when he lost his driver's license what a huge blow that was to him. When he got strong enough to leave the house again, I took him to various DMVs around Sonoma County, hoping to find a place where he could pass the driver's test. Dad had always been a completely safe and excellent driver, but now with his weakened condition and hearing

aid and glasses, he would fail the test every time. I could just feel how frustrated and dejected he would get.

I knew that I was becoming the daddy now and we were trading places. During his periods of convalescence, I would walk him to the bathroom, keep him steady, and wipe his butt, just as he had so many times wiped mine. I would shave him, clip his fingernails and toenails, and take care of other details. Thank God that mom was there to take out, wash, and put back in his dentures. For some reason that was a little too much for me.

Mom and Dad grew to be tremendously close during his last year of life. There were nurses and physical therapists who came by every week, but mom was attentive to dad 24/7. She cooked for him and cleaned his clothes and did all the other things she had always done. But in addition, she administered his many medications and eye drops. She gave him his thrice daily breathing treatments with the nebulizer. She made sure that as oxygen machine was working properly. I remember how overwhelmed mom was when dad first came home with all this life-support machinery. He probably would not have made it as long as he did without her undying attention and love.

But she couldn't watch him every single minute, and of course dad wanted to be independent too, and that New Year's Eve Day, right after he had such a wonderful Christmas holiday with his family, while mom was in the kitchen working, dad was trying to walk and he fell and broke his hip.

Dad would remain in the hospital for two weeks. During the time was in surgery and a few days while he was in ICU, I was also at the hospital. Dad was moved to another room and they were trying to rehab him for walking, but the assault on his body made that impractical. Dad would get better and he would get worse. Mom would go to the hospital and be by his side for many hours every day. I would be at the hospital for a few days, then go home for a few days, then drive back up to Sebastopol.

I was up there for the weekend two days before he passed away. I visited with him and mom and sometimes we would talk and sometimes

we would just be there. Dad was having a lot of trouble eating and lots of trouble breathing but he wasn't complaining. Sometimes he could talk and sometimes he couldn't. When I last left him that Sunday, we had been able to talk some, small talk mostly. Now, for the life of me, I can't remember what his last words to me were, maybe something like, OK, goodbye, be good.

I drove back home to Campbell dreading another long and difficult convalescence, expecting dad would have to learn how to walk all over again. Mom said that after I left, dad began to get worse. By the next day he was not lucid and was hallucinating and his body was spasming and jerking. The doctor said it didn't look good. Dad couldn't eat and mom, according to their wishes, declined to have nutrition administered intravenously.

I was getting ready to drive back up to Sebastopol when on Tuesday morning I got the call from mom's friend, Erma, that dad had somehow recovered miraculously and was chipper and was having conversations. Then about four hours later I got the call that Dad was failing seriously. This completely surprised me considering the cheery morning call. I didn't know what to think, so I immediately called dad's family doctor, Dr. Canova and he told me that all dad's systems were failing and that he didn't have much time left, a day or two at most.

Cynthia and I ran all around the house packing up our clothes and other items for a multi-day stay, sending our temp workers home, and shutting down our home and home business. Cynthia drove me up to Sebastopol in her Subaru wagon and we arrived at Palm Drive Hospital about seven or eight at night, having driven for hours through rush-hour traffic.

Dad was unconscious when we got there, as he had been for a number of hours. Mom had been by his side for long hours every day, and on this day, she had already been there for 12 or 13 hours without eating or drinking anything and was feeling very weak herself. We arranged for mom to go back home, which was about a mile from the hospital, to get

some food and rest and that I would stay up at dad's side through the night.

It was heartbreakingly difficult to watch dad laying there, obviously in distress, laboring for every single breath. He was struggling and his body would shudder from time to time. His lungs had filled up with fluid and with every breath it sounded like he was gargling, like he was pushing and pulling air through a big tube filled with water. Cynthia and I stood at opposite sides of the bed. Dad's lips were so parched, and Cynthia had the good sense to go get a moist cloth to clean up his mouth a little bit. I put my hands on his shoulder or his forearm, all black and blue from all the IVs and needles, and I would stroke his forehead from time to time.

Cynthia sensed him shudder and indicated to me that she thought he had passed, because his breathing had stopped, and she ran to go get a nurse. But then he took a few more breaths and I could sense how he was struggling. I held his shoulder and his hand and told him out loud what a good dad he was and how much I loved him. I thanked him out loud for being my dad, and I held his hand. He had stopped breathing now. I could see that he was trying to, but his chest just wasn't working. His mouth was moving like he was trying to gasp for air, but no air would go in or out, and finally he stopped moving altogether.

I'm not sure at what moment exactly he died, but I know that he died with someone who loved him very much holding his hand. All I can hope is that when I die, someone who loves me very much will be there holding my hand, so I won't be scared.

I am so blessed that I made peace with my dad long before he died. I am so grateful to not have the regret that I never told my dad how much I loved him. I was at peace that we had worked out our forgiveness with each other.

The nurse came in and checked dad's vital signs with a stethoscope. He had no pulse; his heart had stopped beating. The nurse slowly started shutting off all the machines that surrounded my dad's bed. Meanwhile,

Cynthia had dashed up to mom and dad's house to drive her back to the hospital.

My mom came into the hospital and was running down the corridor when the nurse came up to her and said simply, "He's gone." My mom started screaming and ran into dad's room, just wailing at the top of her lungs: Oh my dear Luke, moj dragi Luka, moj dragi Luka, oh my sweet man, why did you go? Why didn't you wait for me? Oh my dear, dear Luke, moj dragi Luka. Over and over again. Mom was stroking his face and kissing his face and cupping his face in her hands and telling them over and over again how much she loved him.

Mom was sobbing and wailing so loud that her cries echoed through the whole wing of the hospital. The nurses had to close not only the door to my dad's room, but the doors to all the other rooms on that corridor. My mom wailed by my dad's face for an hour. I was crying too, and I felt my mom's grief echo through the room and through my heart.

Cynthia later said that my dad had waited for my mom to leave, because he wouldn't want her to suffer the grief of watching him pass. She said that dad's waiting for me to come to his side and be with him when he died was his way of finally being able to tell me that he loved me.

My dad expressed his love for me by doing the things he could, by taking me places, and building me things, and so many other ways. I don't have his talent for making things out of wood, so I use the talent that I have for making things out of words, writing out my feelings and thereby expressing my love.

God bless you, Daddy, may you rest in peace, and know how much I always loved you.