

Eulogy For My Father

I was privileged to preach the eulogy at my father's funeral on January 29, 2007. I needed to take some time before I could share this.

What can I say about my father, Leon Witt?

First, my father was a fighter.

They say that into every life a little rain must fall, and Dad certainly had his share of hard times. He was born in 1930, one year after the stock market crashed. His mother, his father, and his three brothers lived as migrant farmers in the Dust Bowl years of the Great Depression. I have heard him describe being in a tent with the wind blowing, and the dust so thick that during the middle of the day you needed a Coleman lantern to see to the other side of the tent. His father died of a heart attack by the side of the road next to the family Model A when my father was only ten. From then on, Dad's mother raised four boys by herself in New Mexico, and Dad became the family cook at ten years old. He was in the Navy during the Korean years, although he never saw combat. Later in life, he had to retire early because of what was thought to be arthritis. For many years, he walked with a cane, sometimes two canes. Several years ago, he and my mother lived through a fire in which they both were severely burned. And, as we all know, a year ago Thanksgiving, my father had a stroke that left him unable to speak, and unable to walk.

The amazing thing was that despite everything he had gone through, I never heard Dad complain that his life was hard. He responded to each one of these events other people would call tragedies by picking himself up and starting over. There's a story he used to tell about when he was a boy, when his family was so poor that he only owned two pair of pants, one of which was a striped pair other kids called his Uncle Sam pants. But

apparently only one kid ever made fun of Dad's Uncle Sam pants. After Dad gave him a good thrashing, the other kids kept quiet.

When the fire happened, Dad got out of the house only to discover that Mom was not with him. He ran back in the flames after her, and brought her out. In the process, both were severely burned, but Mom is here today.

The only time I ever saw Dad discouraged was right after his stroke, when he was in the nursing home. But after we brought him home, he showed his usual fighting spirit. He got a big kick out of Mom learning how to get him out of bed with a hoist. He would laugh and smile when Pastor Danny visited. And he was working hard with a physical therapist right up until the end, learning how to use his muscles all over again.

And, on the day he died, Dad fought to the end. He never gave up.

My father was also a worker.

Of course, before he retired Dad put in his time at the railroad, but he worked just as hard at home. He always had some project going on. He knew how to use a hammer, and he was always making improvements in every house he ever lived in. In fact, it was a safe bet that when Dad was finished remodeling, it was time to move to a new place. Of course, after he had to retire from the railroad, Dad lost his hammer grip. It was a good idea not to stand behind him when he cocked back his swinging arm or you might have to dodge a flying hammer. We were all happy when he found out about nail guns.

He also worked on all the family cars. He helped me rebuild the engine of an old Volvo, and I remember more than once standing outside with him in the freezing cold while we replaced an alternator, or worn out brake shoes. Since he did not have much of a behind, Dad had trouble keeping his pants up, and the neighbors learned to look the other way when Dad

was changing a tire or bending over an engine.

When I came to visit right after Dad's stroke last year I wasn't surprised at all to find that my father was still working on dozens of projects. There was an old Jeep he was repairing, a grape arbor he had just planted, a pile of gravel he was spreading.

Dad also loved animals, and raising animals was a lifelong hobby. Even when we lived in the city and the zoning laws didn't allow it, Dad was secretly raising rabbits or chickens in the backyard. When he moved to Bennett, he raised goats, horses, pigs, chickens, ducks, and a steer or two. When I came to visit in Arizona, I found out he was raising goats, and he had a mule on the way. The baby mule was born a week after we brought Dad home from the nursing home, and almost every day I would put Dad in his wheelchair and we would go watch the baby mule play, sometimes for an hour or more in the hot Arizona summer sun. That was my Dad.

If my father worked hard, he also loved to play hard.

Dad loved to have a good time. When we were children, we kids grew up with vacations to Yellowstone, Utah, California. Dad went through several ski boats, and fishing boats, and we three kids and our friends learned to water ski and snow ski. After the fire, Dad surprised all of us by buying a truck and a fifth wheel and spending his time on the road, spending the winter months in Mexico, and the warm months driving all over the United States. If we wanted to hear from him, we just had to wait until he could get to a telephone because a lot of times in Mexico, he couldn't even use a cell phone. He ended up buying a house in Hereford, Arizona because he wanted to be able to make a quick drive to Kino in Mexico, one of his favorite playgrounds. Dad knew how to have a good time.

Dad was what some people would call a "character," and there are lots of great stories about him. Each one of us three

children has a great story about how Dad first met the person we married. My wife Jennie had met Dad earlier, but when we got involved I took her out to the family property in Bennett, Colorado. Dad tested her out by teaching her to milk a goat. When she milked the goat, she passed muster. My brother-in-law Don first met Dad when my sister JoAnn went bowling with some friends and Don offered to drive her home. At the front door, she found out she had forgotten her car keys, so she went around back and kicked the window to my sister LaDonn's bedroom, trying to wake her up. When LaDonn didn't get up, they went around to the front door, and there was Dad, in his underwear. Don jumped off the porch, and took off running. Dad met Stewart when Dad went over to Stewart's place where Stewart was changing a flat tire on my sister LaDonn's car in a snowy day in his bare feet. "Doesn't that boy own any shoes?," Dad asked LaDonn.

Another one of my favorite stories is about the time when Dad and Mom were at a party, and Mom was talking to Judy Leslie, one of their friends, about Judy's husband Bobby's new overcoat. The problem was that Bobby was not very tall, and Judy was worried that Bobby might not look right wearing a coat that was too long. At this moment there was a lull in the conversation, and Mom said loud enough for everyone to hear: "Leon's short, and he's got a long one." Everyone looked at Dad, and he just raised his eyebrows in that special way of his.

My father loved to take care of people.

He had what might be called a gift of hospitality. When my sisters and I were children, we didn't think twice about it, but we always seemed to be sharing our house with people who needed a place to stay. My uncle Leonard lived with us when I was a tyke. When I was a teenager, we took in a couple of sisters whose parents had kicked them out their own home until they could get jobs and their own apartment. My sisters and I had friends, some of whom came from families that only had one

parent, or who didn't have the greatest home life, and Dad always made them welcome. Some of them, like Robbie Allender, and Gene Wolf, and Phil Smith, keep in touch with my Mom and Dad more than they do with us.

Dad could strike up a conversation with just about anybody, anywhere. He would pull over to the side of the road and help push you out of a snow drift, or change a tire, or jump start your dead battery. When he was in Mexico, he adopted a local family and helped them build a house. When the husband admired Dad's electric screwdriver, Dad gave it to him.

Even in the nursing home, when Dad couldn't even speak, he became a favorite of the nurses and the nurse's aids. I'm not surprised when I look around that I see so many of the people who became Dad's friends in the few years he has been here in Arizona—Danny and Denise, Francisco and Natalie, Jack and Kate, Gary and Sandy—and many others here today. And one of the last things Dad did was to make it clear that he wanted to go with my mother to a Christmas party. So she and his new friend Levi loaded him into the car and went to the party, where I'm told he had a great time, and was a bit of a cut-up. My father knew how to make friends.

Finally, My father was a man of faith.

Pretty much all of his life, Dad went to church, and he drove our family with him on Sunday mornings. When he was in the Navy, his fellow soldiers gave him the nickname Deacon. Dad taught us to believe in God, and he taught us to have faith in Jesus Christ.

Dad's faith was also very much a masculine faith. There wasn't anything soft or weak about it. He didn't talk a lot about his faith, but I think it showed in lots of ways. I mentioned that he loved people, and he'd always give a hand whenever it was needed. He like to build churches—literally. When my parents lived in Bennett, Dad and Mom helped start a little church I

liked to call Donut Baptist because it met in a Donut Shop. When he visited Mexico, one of the things Dad did was to help some of the local people build their new church building. When they moved to Hereford, Mom and Dad were going to a local church in Sierra Vista. But then they met Pastor Danny, who was starting a new church that meets in a school building in Palominas. So Dad knew what he had to do, and Mom and Dad became some of Danny's first members.

But Dad also had a great sense of humor about his faith. Leon's granddaughter, and my niece, Courtney reminded me just yesterday that whenever Dad would say the blessing over dinner, he would always finish the prayer with the words "Amen. Dig in."

My father spoke the last words he spoke to me in a telephone call the weekend before he was going to have the surgery that was supposed to prevent his having a stroke. Unfortunately, the stroke happened anyway, and Dad never was able to speak again. But the last thing he said to me was that he wasn't worried. "Whatever happens," he said, "is in God's hands, and I trust God. I'm not worried."

I have to admit that there were times after Dad's stroke when I found it hard to trust God in this, but I don't think Dad ever did. In the time right after the stroke, when it wasn't clear that Dad was aware of what was going on, I noticed that Dad would always respond when Pastor Danny would pray for him by closing his eyes until Danny was finished. One of the things that has most impressed me over this last year were the number of people who were praying for my father, not only all over the country, but even in Mexico and Canada.

One of the last things Dad got to do was to go to church again a few Sundays ago, where he sat with my mother in his wheel chair. Of course, at one point as Danny's sermon went on, Dad reached over and looked at Mom's watch. "Did I go on too long?," Danny asked afterwards. Dad nodded "yes."

So, although I'm sad my father is no longer with us, I'm also happy for him. I have faith in God, and I believe that my father is in God's hands now. My mother said to me on the telephone the morning after he died. "We're sad, but he's probably up there riding a mule." He probably is, unless he's looking for a new project to start working on.