

Eulogy by Steven Nelson Jonnes

My Father had a wonderful willingness to embarrass himself. So in that fine family tradition ... I stand before you. And if it gets really bad and I break down or something, if someone could just gently escort me to a quiet corner and throw a sheet over me, that would be much appreciated.

I have been occasionally told that I am a pretty unusual person. The most recent example of this was a year or two ago when my secretary Ellen said to me one day, "You know, I've never met anyone like you. You are really different. They really broke the mold when they made you!" And before I even had a chance to think about a response, the words just popped out of my mouth, "Well, you oughta meet my Dad!"

Yes, my Father was one rare bird. The quintessential nonconformist. And it just strikes me now that in all my life I don't think I've ever met anyone who even remotely resembled my Father. Yeah, some family members show resemblances to Dad in certain ways but even within the family Dad was pretty unique. And outside of family, well, I just cannot recall ever coming across anyone who ever acted like Dad or talked like Dad or walked like Dad or especially gestured like Dad. He was just out there on the frontier, the one and only Nels Jonnes. My Father. I will miss him dearly.

My father was a true American original! An 11th generation American, his ancestry run so deep in American history that we have identified over 60 of his direct ancestors who came to the New World before 1650 and one, Francis Cooke, who arrived on the Mayflower in 1620. He was also the direct descendent of William Brown, one of the greatest heroes of the Revolutionary War and one of only three men known to have received the original Purple Heart from Gen. George Washington. (Oh, how Dad would have loved to hear that one at his service!) Although Dad was unique to our time, I do see echoes of who he was in his ancestry. In fact, I like to think of my Father as a throwback to earlier times, like one of those interesting and eccentric characters you read about in frontier America ... because he exhibited many of the traits of his pioneer Yankee forefathers: restless, inquisitive, adventurous, ambitious, inventive, idealistic, and most of all -- fiercely, fiercely independent.

I also discovered an echo to a more recent ancestor. During the course of my genealogical research, I found this little nugget. It is a short biographical description of Dr. Howard Jones, my Father's grandfather (and Doc's grandfather), written by a local historian in Circleville, Ohio. The text reads, and this is describing Howard, "*Like most men of genius, he was controversial, contradictory, and opinionated, but few of the people who knew him failed to be impressed by his knowledge and by his ability to put that knowledge to use.*" Boy, does that sound familiar or what?

"Impressed by his knowledge and by his ability to put that knowledge to use." What a great description of Dad as well as Howard. He was so driven to learn and to apply what he learned to make a difference in the world. We are here today to bear witness to his achievements: the establishment of American Polywater Corporation, his technical work and patents, as well as his service to the country of Ethiopia and to his many Ethiopian friends, some of whom are among us today. The list goes on and on. But my Father's achievements were not foreordained and few grasp how much he had to overcome. A child of divorce and the product of a difficult step-mother during his teenage years, my Father was not someone who was easily satisfied or patient with life's challenges. Disgruntled is the word that comes to mind. (Yes, Rick, he was disgruntled!) He was so driven to make something of himself.

Well, he did finally make something of himself, and the real miracle of Nelson Jonnes' life is that he recognized it himself ... because he actually died a happy and contented man. Who would have believed it? Although Dad wanted this service to be about him, I don't think he would mind too much if I pointed out at this juncture that the greatest stroke of good fortune in his life ... was meeting and marrying Beverly Jean Bonn. My Mother stood by his side stalwart and true for 60 years. We all know that without her he was lost and none of this would have been possible. She is testimony to the transforming power of love.

Yes, my Father accomplished a lot, but at least for me his greatest legacy was not so much his accomplishments or the practical things he left behind but rather his approach to life. This begins with his passion for learning and thirst for knowledge. The list of his intellectual pursuits is remarkable and I couldn't even begin to cite them here. It would be like trying to list all the books he's read in his life. Of course, he also loved to share his knowledge and it sometimes took the patience of Job to listen through his lectures! But he was a great teacher (and he had such a great voice!) and you always came away with something new and interesting, and more important than the content itself, you came away inspired with a greater enthusiasm for learning itself, a legacy you see in all his children and grandchildren.

Lastly, my Father's other great legacy is his sense of adventure and exploration. He always wanted to go somewhere new, learn something new, invent something new. For him it was all about the adventure of going somewhere unexplored. Some of my favorite memories of my Dad are going on cross-country hikes and long creek-wading expeditions in the area around East Aurora, New York when I was a boy. In an era where there really is no open country anymore, my Father was the rare person who would just start walking across other people's acreage. More than once, we went right over fences with "No Trespassing" signs posted. On one occasion when we lived on Mill Road (I was about 8), I remember being on a long hike with him and we encountered an electrified fence. You could even hear the hum of the electricity. I said, "We're going to have to go around, Dad." But Dad startled the hell out of me by saying, no, we could go through it! "This is just to keep the cows from wandering off," he said. "They never put much current in these things." I was still skeptical and really quite fearful as my Dad put his finger out to test the hypothesis. Sure enough the jolt was minimal. He then asked me to touch it! Once I survived and as he chuckled about my reaction, we bent down and slipped between the wires, crossed someone's cow pasture and moved on.

Dad was always moving on, a man in motion, testing new territories and crossing new boundaries. He had a capacity to be willing to look foolish in order to test his hypotheses and theories, and much of what he worked on did in fact look foolish to the ordinary man. As a young man and especially as a teenager, I was often, well, frankly disgusted by Dad's outlandish schemes and dreams. I would think – No, you're not going to solve the Vietnam War; No, you do not have a solution to the problem of cold fusion; No, you're not going to walk on water. But now ... of course I would have to come to this realization now! Now, I view my Dad as a great eccentric example of the American Dream, a true product of the New World where men are allowed to stretch their limits, think outside the box, apply their talents and imagination in fundamentally new ways, and to blaze new frontiers.

In military terms, Dad was always on point, he plowed ahead of others, he forged ahead with big ideas and big plans. In addition to being honest and true, he was brave. He dared us ... and he dares us now... to think big, to be bold, to be willing to embarrass ourselves, to take the big chance, and just head out for that new land you've been dreaming about, or start that new venture you've always been thinking about.

My nephew Jake Jonnes recently followed Nels' example and quit his job to explore a new career. Now I'm not suggesting that anyone go out in this economy and quit their jobs! But I will say that Jake's decision, much agonized over, was very Nels Jonnes-like and that Dad heartily approved when he heard about it.

Wherever my Father has gone, if he has gone anywhere, I hope that he now inhabits a place where there are no more "No Trespassing" signs or electrified fences.

Farewell, Old Warrior! You were a good man and my inspiration in many things.

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