



KATHE KOLLWITZ (1919)

ELEGY FOR NORBERT HENRY BUELT

BY LE ROY N. BUELT

Good morning. Thank you all for coming. I know that dad, Norbert, would have been proud of such a gathering for him.

Today is a bad day. Yet within this warm, overcast day I hope to find a sliver of happiness. I believe this sliver of happiness I am searching for exists within me, exists within each of us. It exists in our individual memories of Norbert Henry Buel. These memories, moments, happy and sad, within each of our experiences with Norbert, are today transferred to all of us as a collective by the fact that we have taken the time out of our regimented days to gather together and say goodbye to a man we love. This is a powerful human moment.

Norbert Henry — dad, was for many of us a man of many moods, a man of many free-flowing ideas and creations, and a man with a strong, creative love for life just to have endured his medical difficulties. For the last thirty-five years, even more so the last fifteen to twenty years, he lived with the daily anguish that death, the end of his rich, creative life, might be around the next corner, within reach of the next heartbeat; which was in fact the way he died. One moment he was trimming roses, the next clutching his chest, calling to mom, "Help me! Help me!"

For as long as I can remember, Norbert's life was a steady diet of a fistful of pills in the morning and evening. He also lived with the omnipotent possibility and reality of stinging needles, tubes of all shapes and sizes entering and exiting his body, nurses and doctors poking and probing him, weird-looking machines hovering over him, emitting beeps and solid tones and whistles, sudden codes of emergency summoning cardiac experts, and on and on. Yet he lived with it. He loved life. "Give me one more year," he would say at Christmastime, "and I'd be a happy man."

Two months ago in Elgin, Nebraska, we sat together on the front yard of my aunt's house and he spoke about his children. "My family is my life," he said earnestly. "I love all of my children equally, and I'm proud of each and every one of them." As I was talking to Paulette, my sister, two days ago while we looked at dad's body at the mortuary, she commented that each of us kids — Janet, Gary, Paulette, Shirley, Linda, Kenny, Doris, Debbie, myself, and Douglas (who died at birth) — had our own special relationship with him. And it is so true: he was an individual with each of us. We each had our moments, pleasant and unpleasant. For us kids, who knows how many car loan applications he signed. Who knows how many difficult situations he helped us with. He did a lot, along with mom.

For his wife — my mother — Violet Henkenius Buel, what can be said? Forty-nine, almost fifty years of marriage to the same man says it all. On special occasions — birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's Day — I can recall dad's fidgety anxiousness before mom opened his gift. He was proud of her, of her spirit and patience. I can still recall mom's look of love

when opening her gift. She was proud of his thoughtfulness and for his never giving up. They wanted to make each other happy.

Norbert Henry was a unique man, a risk taker, and he did not always come out on the positive side of the risk. He and mom left their families, Nebraska, twice. Both times leaving with so little money and resources that many of us here today would cringe with fear at the thought of such an adventure. He told us kids more than once about the time he was kicked off the premises of the Boeing Airfield in Seattle; he made himself a nuisance because he needed a job. During his lifetime, job-wise, dad "made hay while the sun shined," so to speak. He played the accordion for barn dances in his youth; at one time he had his pilot's license; he owned a trucking business that failed; he sold cars; he went to school to become a tax assessor; he drove cannery trucks at night for extra money; he was a strawberry farmer and a beef cattle rancher and a sheepherder, and who knows what else! I laugh when I think of his versatility. Norbert was an artist at making a living.

Farming and cattle ranching were his favorite occupations. He loved working outdoors, tending the plants and watching them grow and finally bear fruit, having the barn cleaned and listening and watching the cattle feed, loading up the truck with strawberry flats and watching them wobble precariously down the dirt drive on their way to the cannery.

Dawn was his preferred time of day. It was his time for reflection. Five, five-thirty, you could catch him standing outside barefoot, pissing a steady stream.

Meat and potatoes and bread and water were his favorite meal.

Smoking cigarettes, listening to talk stations, playing poker and fishing were his choices for relaxation.

I have just scratched the surface of his life. I could stand here today and go on and on, and in some ways I would like to do that because I do not want this moment to end, ever. Yet I have no choice, just as dad had no choice with death. But before I end this elegy, I would like to share a recent memory of Norbert with you. On the airplane from Boston to Oregon for this unwanted occasion I came across a quote by Kurt Vonnegut, the American writer, who once said of death and moments shared with loved ones, "We are wrong to think that moments go away, never to be seen again. This moment and every moment lasts forever."

Last summer I left Boston and came home to Oregon for two months. I had recently separated from a woman, and mom and dad graciously let me hide out within their protection. Dad loved to fish, although he never did much of it,

and his favorite type of fishing was bullhead fishing. He sat me down one afternoon and asked me if I would go fishing with him — bullhead fishing. I told him jokingly I would go, but that if I caught a bullhead he would have to remove it from the hook. He laughed at me, teased me some, and then said, "There's nothing to be afraid of, son. The stingers won't hurt if you know how to hold the fish right." He laughed again and patted my shoulder and told me he would do that for me with pleasure.

Northwest of Verboort we went to an irrigation pond owned by a man he knew. (That is another thing about dad. I swear he knew everybody in his area, and he loved to chat.) It was a warm afternoon, much like the day we have today. I fished for awhile, then gave up, deciding I would rather explore the shoreline. While doing so I found a green wooden boat tied to a tree stump, hidden by the overhanging branches of a weeping willow. The boat emerged from the curtain of weeping willow branches and when dad saw me in it he shook his head in slight disgust and gave me a message I had got from him a hundred times: "Can't you ever sit still? Always fiddling with something, aren't you?"

I rowed to the middle of the pond within easy talking distance of dad. He sat dead still on his lawn chair amidst the tall grass and spindly cattails. Pole in both hands, feet firmly on the ground, strawhat on his head, thermos cup of ice water balanced on the arm of the chair, he stared intently at the baseball-sized red and white bobber floating on top of the water. He was happy, peaceful, content. Oh, how I loved him but could not always please him. He caught two bullheads. I caught zero bullheads. He gloated with this fact, and as usual he brought them home for mom to clean.

Before we put our gear away and quit fishing he said something to me that at the time I did not respond to because I was not sure how he meant it. He said it calmly, as if delivering a message. It did not seem to me that he was talking about fishing, entirely. I think he was talking about how short life is and that one never knows when one will not see one another again. The quote came back to me this morning as I was sitting in Kenny's workshop writing this tribute. Dad said, "You don't know what you're missing, son."

Many times for us human beings responses come too late. But one must say them anyway. Dad, Norbert Henry, if you can hear me in that ruffle-lined, bronze-colored casket, believe me, I do know what I am missing. Yet I also know what I will have for the rest of my life because of you, and I will never forget. Farewell dad, Norbert. Take care. I love you. We love you.

Le Roy Buel is a writer who formerly lived in Astoria and now lives in Boston, Massachusetts. His father died last August.