Emmalisa Horlacher, 13 Dec 2021

ENGL 218, Professor Budd

Saying Goodbye

I didn’t think I would come back to this topic. I definitely didn’t want to. Put bluntly, it’s hard to write about things that are hard. But like a tide that constantly rolls in and out, here I am. We like to avoid these kinds of subjects because they open up old wounds, rip open fresh tears. We’d rather not cry. Yet the truth is that we need it, I need it. I need to process it, everything that happened. I don’t need an audience; I just need to write.

My Grandpa, Joy Theadore Pearce, died September 19th, 2021. The doctors would say he died of COVID. My family would say he died from the effects of COVID but not to call it a COVID death because calling it a COVID death no longer makes him a person. It makes him into a statistic. The same statistic that is used to drive fear into the hearts of society. I don’t know what to say or what to call it. I knew that he was getting old. I knew that he got sick and tested positive with COVID. I knew he was in a kind of plateau state with lungs scarred from the effects of COVID. Then he died.

When my family had first heard the news that my Grandparents were sick with COVID we were all worried. We canceled the reunion and began saying our prayers. But what do we pray for? If he gets better, he’ll have to live with scarred lungs the rest of his life, spending more time, energy, and money on trying to survive another painful year. Is life even worth it at that point? Contrary, if he were to die he would go onto the next life, where he has long passed friends and family. He wouldn’t have to be in pain anymore. He would be able to know answers to questions he has long been asking, like what is heaven and will he remember a life before the one he lived here? At what point is it mercy to live, or mercy to die.

 He lived a full life and I’ve always loved hearing stories about my Grandpa. How he grew up in a tiny town in Show Low Arizona, the youngest of ten. As the story goes, great-grandma Ione prayed for a boy after having seven girls in a row. With so many girls, it was finally a joy to have a boy and that’s how he got his name: Joy. A few years after he was born his father died, leaving his mother to raise the children by herself on a teacher’s salary. That woman, great-grandma Ione, is a legend in our family. As a young man Grandpa Joy served a two-year volunteer mission for his church. Religion was a big part of his life, just like how it is with mine. Those beliefs become something that connects us, from me to my parents, to him, to his parents and so on. It’s something that each of us had to choose but we chose it together. After his mission he started a construction company and married my Grandma after six weeks of knowing her. They were married for 0ver sixty years. I’d like to have a marriage like that, but maybe take a little longer to get to know the guy.

Grandpa Joy liked rodeos and was a fantastic team-roper, even getting to the world champion level. I remember looking at pictures of him at a rodeo riding on Risky, the best horse that a man could partner with. I remember opening the cattle guard to let the cows out so that he and his partner could practice.

He tried a semester or so of college but left that life to focus on being a farmer and concrete company owner. This route didn’t stop him from being successful in business. I asked him once what he did to be so successful. He said, “It’s the mindset. You have to think like the employer, not the employee.” Maybe he’s the reason I have a desire to start my own business. I remember later, we drove around Show Low and he pointed to different roads and parking lots and said, “I built that.” His company had revenue that went into the millions. Just another example of a millionaire college-dropout. He even bought a private plane, learned how to fly it, and used it to get certain parts for specific jobs he was working on. And if it broke, he would fix it. Cars, trucks, tractors, excavators, back-hoes, planes, he could fix just about anything. He was just that kind of guy.

I wish I knew more about the business but it tanked after handing it off to his children. As smart as he was, I think he had a weakness when it came to passing on that knowledge. He really was not a great teacher. Give him any situation, like hitching up a saddle; He’d say, “watch.” Then he’d hitch up the saddle and then he’d turn to you and say, “now you do it,” and then get frustrated when you didn’t know how to do it. Finally, he would just do it for you. I caught on real fast that you had to watch his every movement like a hawk and absorb everything he did like a sponge. And ask lots of questions, but not dumb questions cause then he’d say, “You should know that already.” I never learned to hitch a saddle, but I did learn how to hitch a trailer onto a truck.

His ranch was a cattle ranch, and he owned horses too. Beautiful black and white American Paints dotting the acres and acres of land. If he wasn’t working on his business, he was working on the ranch, riding his four-wheeler to mend fences, fill the salt-lickers, or blow-up prairie dogs. The cousins and I would wake up early just to see if we could get a ride with him across the fields. He’d pack three or four of us little ones on that orange four-wheeler and assign us each a job to open and close the big gates as we traveled around the ranch. He inherited that ranch from his mother. That’s the land where he raised his kids–where my mother grew up. The ranch is our homeland. We want to live and die on our homelands. But sometimes we don’t. Like when we die in hospital rooms. Empty and alone.

Grandpa Joy didn’t want to go to the hospital. He was afraid they would quarantine him and he would die alone. After going through quarantine myself, I didn’t want that for him either. Being in quarantine was like having the world pretend you don’t exist except for the few people who knew what you were going through. But even they couldn’t understand how painful it was to spend your birthday in a tiny apartment as you’re recovering from a panic attack brought on by fear of being enclosed inside for weeks. Not to mention the fact that everything felt sore and tired to the point that you almost passed out in the shower but you still had homework to do. Oh well. Oh well. You’re in quarantine and nobody cares about someone whining that they have to stay inside all day. It’s hard to be quarantined and everyone has their reasons why. I didn’t want my Grandpa to have to be quarantined. But his illness got worse and he had to go to the hospital. Quarantined at the hospital where the only people who could visit were the nurses who had hundreds of other patients. They didn’t know him. They didn’t have time for him. They weren’t there when he was teaching me to ride a bike. They weren’t there when he pointed out the jackrabbit so I could shoot my first animal with a gun. They weren’t there when I drove a 12-wheeler truck down a canyon as he guided me on what to do. I know it’s not their fault. I know they’re doing the best they can. But that doesn’t make it easier.

Grandma Beth was sick too, but she recovered. Due to regulations, she couldn’t visit him while he was in the hospital. She was hardly able to talk to him. The woman he’d been with for over 60 years. The woman who bore his children and helped him grow his business. The woman who made sure there was food ready when he came back to the house greasy and sore after working a tired day on the farm or business. She couldn’t even see him. She couldn’t be with him. When she called he tried to rally. He wanted to be strong for her. But he was sick. It took a caseworker to get the family to start thinking of “options” since it was a possibility that he wouldn't make it much longer. I didn’t even know what options meant. Did it mean he was going to spend the rest of his life with scarred lungs, where every breath feels like someone is scratching at your chest? Did it mean he was going to recover, that we would get to see him again? Did it mean we needed to start planning a funeral…

When someone is about to die, we don’t want to talk about it, but it feels like we have to. We use every word, every way we can to address it without ever really addressing it. It’s too hard to call it what it is. I remember I was on the phone with my mom walking to my car. We had been given messages from the hospital on and off about how he was improving, and then he’d get worse, and then he’d improve again. The most recent message was that he wasn’t doing well.

“Do you think Grandpa will get better?” I asked.

 *Do you think Grandpa will die?*

“I think it might be time to start saying goodbye,” she said.

 *I think he will.*

 The hospital set up a video call for us. I don’t know if that made it better or worse. When we all jumped on the video call we could see him struggling in the hospital bed. He needed help but no one was coming. We had to call the hospital to notify the nurse that he needed help because no one was answering his call. Nobody was there. He had over 16 children including in-laws, over a hundred grandchildren. And none of them could visit. We could all only watch through a flat, lonely video screen as we saw the image of our rodeo-world-champion millionaire cowboy Grandfather laying flat on his bed, tubes sticking out of his arms and an oxygen mask covering his face. We could only watch. We’d try to say something, we couldn’t tell if he could hear us. He’d try to say something, over the sounds of all the machines in his room, we couldn’t hear him. We would’ve asked the nurse if she could tell us what he was saying. What were his last words to us? What does he want us to know? But she couldn’t. She had other patients to attend to. And she wasn’t there.

 We tried to be there over the video call. There was always at least one person on, otherwise the hospital would have turned it off. Yet, everytime we joined, it was like we were gearing up to say goodbye. Goodbye. But what is a goodbye over a video call? It’s emptiness. You can’t lift up their cold hand and reassure them that you’re there. You can’t hug them. You can’t lean in close to hear the words they struggle to say. You can only watch.

Then it was September 19th and because of the seriousness of his condition the hospital allowed Grandma Beth and a few of their kids to visit. They had her clad up in protective gear, a full body shield. I heard the full story from her later. He was lying there, no longer trying to be strong. All he was saying was, “help me, help me, help me.” My tender hearted Grandma had to watch as he suffered in bed before her eyes with nothing she could do for him. Finally she said, “I don’t know how to help you.” Then she told him that it was okay to move on. Then she left. She had to tell that story again and again to every family member that asked. Me included.

 I was at my sister’s house when it happened. It was me, her, her husband, and their son Todd, surrounding their dell computer. My mom sent a text, “Grandpa is not doing good. You can get on and see him. The new ID # is…”

 So we jumped on the video call. He was lying there. No tubes. No oxygen mask. He had a wrinkled face from smiling, laughing and singing with family. Big round glasses and hearing aids which never stopped him from asking people to speak louder. He had a wispy full head of white hair. He still had that indent in his nose from when he used black salve to draw the cancer out. Or at least I think the indent was still there. I really couldn’t see specifics through the pixelated video screen. He was just an old guy. Just an old man lying on the bed. But he wasn’t just any old man. He was my Grandpa. From the screen we really couldn’t tell if he was breathing or if he could hear us. He was so still.

The family didn’t think it would happen so soon. On the call, a few of us grandkids start taking turns singing to him. My sister and I sang, “I’ll Go Where You Want Me To Go.” Grandpa loved it when we all sang together but the audio system only worked if one device was singing at a time. So we took turns, singing along only if we were muted. Then the nurse came into the room. We asked how he was doing and the nurse turned to us and said, “Oh, uh, he died thirty minutes ago.”

We started crying.

I wanted to leave.

No one was there with him when he passed. I had hoped to be able to hear his last story, his last testimony, his last words. I had hoped to be able to see him at the reunion. I had hoped to get to drive a truck with him again. I had hoped that he would be there at my wedding and tell his silly stories to embarrass me. But he wouldn’t. Not anymore. He wasn’t there. He died in a hospital room, probably while we sang to him. Some could say that we were there in spirit or in song or in the only way we could. Maybe that’s true. But I also think it was the worst way to say goodbye, on a flat, lonely, video screen. And then we started planning the funeral.

My sister wasn’t able to come to the funeral, being 8 months pregnant as she was, but in the middle of the night, she awoke and had a feeling that she needed to read her scriptures; That Grandpa was trying to reach her. She wanted to go back to bed but she felt that if she wouldn’t listen, Grandpa would go find someone who would. So she pulled out her scriptures and found Mosiah 2:14-17 and 41, “consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments.” It was as if those scriptures were the final words to us that he never got to speak. I needed those words. They were his testimony. A testimony that I too, know to be true. And of course Grandpa Joy includes the words “happy” in his testimony. He always loved plays on words that related to his name. My sister shared those thoughts with my mom before the week of the funeral.

I left on Friday to drive down with my brother and his family for the funeral. I looked in his casket at a man much thinner than the one I remember my Grandpa being. Grandma Beth said he lost weight and that the funeral house had him looking so nice and good. But to me he didn’t look like my Grandpa. He looked like a stiff body and I wondered if dead men could ever really look good.

It was a nice funeral. The family sang and gave speeches. We took pictures by the casket at the burial site. There were lots of little kids running around, laughing and playing. My family doesn’t really have sad funerals. We can be sad at funerals, but because we believe that we will see him again, it doesn’t feel so final. Funerals then become just a way to celebrate the lives of the people we loved.

When I came back from the funeral, I had recently moved into a new apartment and my roommates were talking about masks and COVID. One of them had a friend whose uncle died of COVID and the friend didn’t even wear a mask at the funeral.

I thought about how I didn’t wear a mask at the funeral. I didn’t think Grandpa would have wanted me to. Almost none of the family wore a mask.

My roommates said, “His uncle just died of COVID and he still wasn’t wearing a mask. Was he still not taking COVID seriously?”

I didn’t say anything to them. I just left, called my mom and cried to her, asking if I was a bad person for not wearing a mask at my own Grandfather’s funeral. As if my actions had somehow made a mockery of his death. I think I understood why my family didn’t want his death to be a COVID death; My Grandpa was defined by more than just his death. He had lived an amazing and honorable life and I wish his life meant more to statistics than his death did. I don’t want him to be remembered as just another old person who died during COVID. He was more than that.

When I first started writing, a lot of what I put down was in present tense. My grandpa was suffering before my eyes. My family was suffering. It was a current event. Now it’s not. Now the event has passed. The funeral has passed. All those feelings of anger and frustration, they pass too. I don’t know if all of them are gone, but it doesn’t feel so sharp anymore. Funny how time seems to cool down angry tides.

There’s a family song on the Pearce side and even though I don’t have Pearce for my last name I sing it anyway. So many memories accompany that song. Like singing it in the green bus on family vacations, or singing as we’re gathered around a giant thanksgiving feast, and now, having sung it at my Grandpa’s funeral. A line in the chorus goes, “happiness is here with you.” There it is, another word play on his name; happiness, joy. It makes me wonder though, if now that he’s gone, have I lost joy? But no, it doesn’t feel like that. Strangely enough, it doesn’t feel like he’s gone. I suppose I assumed that there would be this feeling like an empty hole left in the world but honestly, it just doesn’t feel like he left. I feel like I can still sense his presence, even stronger now than when he was alive. It’s an odd feeling. Like he is watching over me and my family, like joy will always be with us.

While no one was in the room with him when he passed, I like to think, maybe God sent him angels to be there with him and to guide him to heaven. Maybe he got to see his mother and his sisters and the father who died before he ever really got to know him. Maybe he’ll be able to get to know him in Heaven. Maybe Christ himself came to welcome him home and tell him how loved he is. Maybe when he said goodbye here, he got to say “hello again” to so many others there. At least, that’s what I hope. That’s what I prayed for. I love my Grandpa. And while I say goodbye now, I look forward to the day when I get to say hello again.