

My father-in-law, K. Dane Mills, died unexpectedly last Sunday. I presently lack the necessary documents to travel home because of a pickpocket in Italy. But Jennifer is there with her family, and my thoughts are with her. The following is a reflection on a man I knew for almost 21 years, and very much loved and respected.

I met Dane for the first time on Easter Sunday, 1996. Jen and I had been dating for about two months, and we strategized that if I came over during the large family gathering on Easter, that I would not be the center of attention and could more or less blend into the background. I honestly don't remember if it was Mills's or Halstead's or possibly even both. But I remember Dane and Pat met us at the door and he said, "Happy Easter, nice to meet you. All these people may seem overwhelming but I assure you, we're just as normal as any family you'd find in a Tennessee Williams play."

I laughed. In that first moment he showed me that he was the kind of person I could get along with. A sharp sense of humor, often self-deprecating, bolstered by a well trained mind. It seems strange then, to reflect after 20 years of being married into his family, that I didn't actually know Dane very well.

I've thought a lot about this over the past few days. I think in some respects he was a difficult man to know. Not that I made this any easier, but this may come as a surprise to some of you who know Dane as an affable, easily approached, community engaged individual. You can probably say a great deal about him, but may reflect on a distance between you. Dane tended to keep closed mouth on a great many subjects unless he felt he had to speak. Instead, if you talked with him, you heard stories..

Dane was a story teller. Not a teller of tall tales or anything like that, not a spinner of yarns, but rather someone who showed himself in the stories he would tell. He didn't just tell stories that were interesting, he told stories like parables, and if you paid attention, in between the lines, in the details offered and the details left out, he would tell you what he valued most about himself and others.

The stories I remember most that he told about himself were two-fold.

The first was his summer spent as an RC Cola delivery man. He said there was a little convenience store along his route, and in the soda aisle RC had only one shelf for display purposes. Coke and Pepsi, being bigger sellers and generally bigger companies, each had four shelves. Well one day, Dane comes in to make his delivery and sees that there has been a spill in the soda aisle, and everything is a sticky mess. The proprietor worked alone and hadn't had time to clean it yet. So Dane proceeds to take every can and bottle off of the shelf, get a bucket and soapy water, and wash down the shelf before placing everything else back the way it was. Next thing Dane knows he gets a call from his supervisor, saying, "I don't know what you did, but we now get four shelves in that store for RC."

I don't tell it as well as he did. I might even have some details wrong, but it doesn't matter. The message is the same either way. Take time to do the little things, the little kindnesses, the finishing touches that put everything right. Take time to do that even if you don't expect anything out of it. People will notice.

One story he was fond of telling in these last few years was of the day President Kennedy was shot. The death of the President clearly had an enormous impact on Dane as more than a few stories he told were about this. But in this case the hero of the story was the principal of Cox High School. Apparently the school superintendent had issued orders to not let students know what was happening in Dallas. But the principal, whose name I forget, refused to obey orders and piped Walter Kronkite over the loudspeakers to let students listen to history as it unfolded.

Dane had nothing but admiration for the principal who took this stand, and usually began the story by explaining how one night in a bar in Charlottesville, college student Dane ran into his former Principal and was beaten quite handily at pool by him.

Parables are funny things. Sometimes we hear what we want, we take the lessons that are easiest to learn from them. To me, it was no mistake that I only began hearing this story in the last few years. It was a kind of reminder that what is right isn't always easy, doesn't always come with the consent of your superior. But what events in his world that he saw unfold that led him to think often of this story, I don't know. Suddenly it seemed very important to remind us that what is right does not depend on law, but rather the other way around.

Lastly I will say that if you ever heard Dane talk about me, you know probably one thing: on that Easter day 21 years ago, Dane discovered that I too was a Red Sox fan. And he would say, "I knew he was alright, because I asked him what Ted Williams's lifetime batting average was and he got it right." I never told him that I don't think that's true. That if I got it right, it was a good, educated guess, and that even now I'd have to look it up to know for sure what it is. But I always liked hearing the story, because it told me that Dane thought of me as the kind of person who would know, the kind of person who was alright in his book.

Dane and I didn't connect exactly, but I hope he understood how much I respected him. How much of his best qualities of service and compassion and community I see in Jennifer, and how much I hope to be able to pass these qualities onto Benjamin. He was much loved and will be missed.

--Joshua Mills-Knutsen