

Eulogy for my father, Ronald Shlensky

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Yesterday, I was sitting at my dad's desk, trying to write something about somebody who isn't easily boiled down to a few pithy words—though when I think about it, no one that I know is that easily described. I had a little twinge of guilt because I'd moved his computer mouse, one of about 7 that were lying around his cluttered desk, to the right side of the keyboard. (My dad, like his grandson Eli, was a lefty, and it used to drive him crazy when I rearranged his workspace.) But even stranger was the feeling of not needing to move the mouse back when I was done. The keys on the pad were sticky from the thousands of hours my dad spent perched over his computer, his loyal dog, Suerte lying on his feet, as he was lying on mine now. I was sitting where my dad must have been sitting when he sent his last emails to me the day of his accident.

My dad spent so much time at his computer, facing the wall, that there is no other place I could sit that would make me feel closer to him. I was surrounded by so much of the clutter of his life – pictures of his family and himself when he was much younger, with a broad smile and stomach, sharing a drink with friends; a newspaper clipping about the alarming rate of population growth; discarded cell phones; unfiled stock statements; at least half a dozen cowboy hats; and a few rusty saws. There are kooky signs and unknowable contraptions tacked to the door of his office, and a grimacing red Indian mask covered with stringy hair hanging over his desk. Each picture, dusty object, and newspaper clipping, reveals a little part of my dad's odd and delightful sense of humor.

So because this is where I sat, with a sad awareness of his permanent absence, I used the computer as a launching pad to talk about my dad. Before anyone else I knew, with the distinct exception of his dear friend Rich Appelbaum, my dad was a proponent of the possibilities and promises of the Internet. I thought it was another of his outlandish fantasies when he spoke about things called “gophers” gathering

information from government and university computers. But my dad was hooked, and equipped us all with apple macintosh computers for the coming revolution when we went away to college.

The computer also became a mode of my father's escape. Especially in my dad's later years, he would often forgo meals, outings, and even actual human interaction, spending hours in front of the flat screen of his Mac. But for my dad, the flat screen wasn't an escape from human interaction altogether- rather, he used his computer to reach out to his family and friends, even if we were in the next room. We could all count on a steady stream of articles related to our work or interests, usually accompanied by a short, hilarious commentary.

Taped on top of my dad's computer screen, right next to the red "PANIC" button he glued on, is a little slip of paper from a Chinese fortune cookie, that says "You will be successful in a business of your own." That piece of paper says so much about something that was very important to him - being an entrepreneur. Each week after receiving my email newsletter my dad would cheer me on with an encouraging missive

about what a good service I was providing to my subscribers. My dad was feeling especially proud of me last week because a big company had offered to buy my newsletter. Though they hadn't named a price and I had no intention of selling, this idea fueled his recurring success fantasy. The last precious message he sent to me the day of his accident was "viv, take the 2 mil, start a new list. Love dad."

My dad drove himself so hard to succeed. That drive led him to propel himself through medical school, law school, and enough years of work and education to proudly wear 13 professional letters after his name (MDJDFAPAFACFP). He was a pioneer in the field of forensic psychiatry, and founded the American College of Forensic Psychiatry. He later started his own successful legal and psychiatric consulting business. But my dad was also famous (some would say infamous) for his inventions and get-rich-quick schemes, most of them only on paper or batted around the dining room table, and some of them, like the neckleash for dogs, filling battered cartons in his garage. Each invention contained a kernel of my dad's original genius.

While he was financially and professionally successful by any measure, he always wanted more from himself and for us. Like a modern day prospector, he still dreamed of striking it rich. This was a charming quality, and his success provided many opportunities for his family, because he was so generous with us. But the sadness in his drive, is that I think my father, deep down, never felt he was truly successful, and nothing would ever convince him that he could stop working and inventing and hustling, and just enjoy the fruits of his labor.

If my dad were still alive, right now he would be impatiently waiting to reclaim his favorite seat at his desk, and I would be trying to convince him that I hadn't screwed up his computer. I would cajole him to get up from his computer chair and join us for a hike, or a bite, or a cup of coffee. But since he probably wouldn't be ready to terminate his daily stroll around the e-universe, I would eagerly await 6:00 sharp, when he emerged from his office, poured himself a drink and sat down for his plate of raw veggies and peanut butter, and joined the family for the evening. His presence always meant humor, compassion, charm and a truly unique and insightful perspective on our world. Like loyal Suerte,

waiting faithfully for his daily run with my dad, we will now perpetually be waiting for my dad's attention to turn to us again. His time with us was precious, though too brief. We miss him tremendously, and I wish he was here now.