

ALAN MIRABELLI: A EULOGY BY A FRIEND

Nora Spinks

Alan Mirabelli was the Vanier Institute of the Family's Executive Director of Administration, who retired in 2007 after more than 30 years of service. He was diagnosed with cancer the first time in 2015 and again in 2017. Throughout his treatment and following his terminal diagnosis, he continued to be of service, mentoring many emerging artists and seasoned photographers, community leaders and elected officials. His characteristic kindness, generosity and mentorship had a significant impact on many people across Canada and abroad.

Nora Spinks is the current CEO of the Vanier Institute of the Family, a long-time friend and colleague of Alan's and part of his palliative care team. This eulogy was delivered at Alan Mirabelli's Celebration of Life held on January 20, 2018 in Ottawa.

I was honoured when Alan asked me to speak today.

Since you all know Alan, you aren't any more surprised than I was when after I said *of course* I would speak, his next question was *do you think I can see the first draft by Thursday?*

If you're in this room, it's no surprise that Alan planned this day down to the minute with all of *you* in mind. He wanted this day to be about us. He wanted this day to be about *life*.

He said a celebration of life is about the living, about family and friends, about life and love. It is about those who *are*, not those who are gone.

There were two things that mattered to Alan: **words** and **relationships**.

Alan had two degrees in communication - **words mattered to Alan**.

He coached many of us in communication... He would say:

Choose your words carefully;
Use your words with purpose;
Use them with confidence;
Use them sparingly; and,
Talk less - listen more!

He encouraged us to **invest in news**: buy newspapers, buy online subscriptions... invest in good journalism.

Words mattered to Alan

Over the past 18 months, during his *dance with cancer*, he would say:

*I am dying... When I go, say "I died"... I did not **pass**... I did not **pass away**... and after I'm gone, I certainly am not "**passed**"!*

*You pass a Sunday driver on the Appleton side road,
You pass the salt,
You pass gas,
You don't pass - you die.*

REMEMBERING ALAN MIRABELLI

Through each draft of the obituary – which, of course, he wrote himself – he wanted to make sure there were no words of violence or negativity, no “**fighting battles.**”

Forever the communicator, he used a gentle metaphor: after his diagnosis, he talked about his *life as one long run-on sentence* – receiving the terminal cancer diagnosis was a *comma* and the last few months was the time between that *comma and the period* in his life.

He **chose** to make the most of that precious time.

He **chose** to live with purpose, joy and love.

He **chose** to focus on relationships and mentorship.

He **chose** to live with gratitude, appreciation and generosity.

He **chose** to find joy and to love and to laugh and to make images in the time he had between the comma and the period.

Words mattered to Alan

He chose them carefully. In his final months, weeks and days, he *focused* his words, choosing to express gratitude and appreciation.

He **talked** often about the people around him on his journey: those who sent cards or cookies, flowers and soup; those who gave their time to drive to appointments and run errands; those who organized his *Last Frame* and who helped to hang his last show; and those who helped with his last few shoots; those who inspired him; those who took his advice, accepted his assignments and shared their feelings; those who shared their stories and those who offered prayers... and he talked about those who held his hand in the dark times and offered hugs in the bright...

Which leads us to the second and most important thing that mattered to Alan: **relationships.**

Alan was all about the relationship of one to another – people: individuals or groups relative to their environment or relative to others; or things: the relationship of one object to another, like a petal to a bowl, a pear to a cupboard, a leaf to a puddle...

If you are in this room, you have a relationship with Alan, a relationship that will not end now that he is gone.

If you're in this room, it's no surprise that he planned this day down to the minute with all of you in mind.

Relationships mattered to Alan

You are here because of your relationship with him.

Some of you knew him as...

a talented artist, a gifted photographer who could take your breath away with an image of

- a flower petal
- a rusty fender from an abandoned tractor
- a Prairie sky
- an Indigenous dancer
- water rushing over a rock
- a garlic bulb on the kitchen counter...

His stunning images are in homes, offices and galleries across the country and around the world. His images are on dining room walls, hospital corridors and corporate board rooms. They are available on loan from the Ottawa Art Gallery.

Relationships mattered to Alan

For some of you, he was...

**a committed mentor;
a patron of your art; or
a dependable friend.**

He mentored young professionals; elected officials and cabinet ministers; faith leaders and academics; public servants and business leaders; friends, neighbours and family members.

Alan invested his time cultivating talent, encouraging others and helping to build their confidence. He helped others see the best in themselves. He invested his time and money in emerging artists of all ages.

He encouraged us to invest in **art and artists**, go to galleries, attend a vernissage in your community, buy art from established and emerging artists.

He encouraged us to **invest in things that bring joy to ourselves or others.**

Relationships mattered to Alan

For some of you, he was...

a gifted cabinetmaker, building your kitchens and offices that are as attractive as they are functional.

He could spin a bowl that defied physics out of a carefully chosen piece of wood.

He gently guided cabinetmakers and photographers, writers and leaders, broadcasters and editors to discover their very best.

Relationships mattered to Alan

For some of you, he was...

a unique boss, a manager, a leader... he was an influential writer, editor and publisher, whose publications are still used in classrooms today and will continue to be so for many years to come.

He was a committed communications professional and volunteer dedicated to children's broadcasting. He was an inspiring speaker and media resource, appearing on television and radio, in print and online.

Relationships mattered to Alan

For some of you, he was...

a reliable neighbour, lending a hand and always there to offer help.

You could always count on him be there for you, to provide help... *but you knew never to ask him if you could borrow his tools!*

Alan encouraged us to **invest in our communities**: attend local events, by tickets to local shows, visit local museums and participate in community activities.

REMEMBERING ALAN MIRABELLI

Relationships mattered to Alan

Many of you knew him as...

a sometimes curmudgeon.

He would say, "I have *no patience for stupid*"; and he didn't have much tolerance for inattention or the mundane.

When he asked, "*How are you?*" he *really* wanted to know how you were.

Walking down Main Street in Almonte with Alan required planning: you had to factor in the time for all the chats and hugs along the route.

Relationships mattered to Alan

His *most treasured* relationships were with those who knew him as

a dad, a grandfather, a father-in-law, a brother, a brother-in-law, an uncle, a partner...

He burst with pride talking about his son and his grandchildren. He cherished every moment spent with family. He burnt out his printer the week before he died, printing hundreds of family pictures for Michel so the whole family could remember the time they spent together. While there was never enough time, the moments he had with family lifted his spirits and brought him immense joy.

Alan was a complex and complicated man...**He was an artist, a university professor, a keynote speaker, a government advisor.**

Whether he was teaching you *to saw with your shoulder, to use a tripod, to focus on what's important*, or teaching you how *to use your new camera or create the perfect image*, or how *to confidently and boldly express your creativity*, or teaching you how *to trust in yourself or to listen...*

Whether he was teaching you a skill or helping you to discover something in yourself – he did so without hesitation, sharing his wisdom, talent, skills and knowledge with those in whom he saw possibilities, potential or pain, hopes and dreams, fears and uncertainty...

If you are here today, you are connected through one of those relationships. You shared a common interest or a shared passion; you come from his community or you are part of an extended family; you are a friend, a neighbour, a collaborator or partner in some project, some initiative or some adventure. You experienced his determination; you were the recipient of his generosity; you witnessed his authenticity.

Alan lived his life with integrity, generosity and authenticity

He was a confidant, coach and facilitator, guiding people through their own personal journeys.

Alan smiled. Many of you were the recipients of one of those smiles. Alan was happiest when he was creating something or expressing himself. His smiles were biggest when he was covered in sawdust or grass and mud, with a chisel or a camera in his hand. He smiled when he was in his favourite white chair, reading a book, watching a tutorial video on lighting techniques (*which he did right up to the end*) or engaging in conversation with a friend.

REMEMBERING ALAN MIRABELLI

His laughter was loudest when he was in conversation over the phone or over coffee, when he was engaged in conversation on television, on the front porch or on Parliament Hill. He engaged in conversation in the neighbourhood and at conferences, with people he just met or people he'd known since grade school or high school. Each one of those conversations was personal and deep, and you got his full attention.

He made the most of these last few months – in the space between the comma and the period – with attention and intention.

He spent his time creating images and mounting his last show, which he affectionately referred to as *his living wake*. He spent time on the things that mattered most. He spent time with friends, helping many of them deal with *his own* cancer, helping them articulate their feelings and express their grief and loss.

Most importantly, he focused the limited time and energy he had on family, with long conversations with his sister, Marilyn, and quiet time with Michel.

He cherished his time with Michel. In these last few months, he talked often about how proud he is of his son Michel and how *he wished he had been half as good a dad as Michel is today*.

For years, Alan lived with indescribable pain and he lived with PTSD.

When I experience occasional monthly pain, I can bite someone's head off. Not Alan: enduring excruciating pain after yet another back spasm, he would grimace, catch his breath and get back to what he was doing, knowing the next painful episode could happen at any moment. He lived with chronic pain for years with few complaints and with a conviction not to let it limit *life or living, joy or happiness or love and laughter*.

In the last few days of his final chapter, every time he woke up, his first words were "I'm a lucky man... I'm so blessed." He was so grateful – and he was so appreciative of everything that you in this room brought into his life.

You are here because you have a relationship with Alan, you are the recipient of his generosity, you received his attention and his love...

Alan lived with **attention and intention**

In honour of Alan's memory, we can all choose today as the comma in our lives – and choose to move on with attention and intention.

In life, we can live with **attention**:

- We can attend to life's details and our relationships.
- We can attend to others with an open heart and an open mind.
- We can attend to ourselves, our health, our mental health.
- We can attend to building our self-worth and our self-confidence.
- We can attend to our learning and our continuous personal and professional growth and development.
- We can attend to the learning of others.

We can:

- Be still, be present and be in the moment.

REMEMBERING ALAN MIRABELLI

We can:

- Express our ourselves through discovery, exploration, experimentation.
- Sing out loud and dance with abandon.
- Learn continuously.

We can find joy in time with friends and family, laugh often and cry without apology.

We can honour Alan by choosing to live with **intention**:

- We can choose our words carefully.
- We can remember “no” is a full sentence.
- We can focus on what really matters: family, friends, community, country and planet.

We can live with intention and bring joy to others every day.

We can just “be” in someone’s company.

We can focus on the little things to demonstrate we are living with **intention**:

- We can present the best us that we can.
- We can polish our shoes, make our beds every morning, set a beautiful table every day, choose items in our homes that we find attractive and bring us joy.
- We can smile more, share more, give more...

When we want to honour Alan...

- We can stand still.
- We can ask each other “Are the children well?”
- We can *get out of our own way*.
- We can champion another person.

To honour Alan, we can focus on the relationships we have with each other and with the environment around us.

We can honour Alan through our actions, through our words and through our relationships.

Alan lived with love in his heart, gratitude in his soul and generosity in his life. We can honour him by doing the same.

Looking up at a full moon a few days after Alan died, Tate asked his mom if Alan was up there taking pictures of the angels. Emily said, “Yes, that’s exactly what he is doing – and they would be great images...” Remember Alan and smile when you look at a full moon and see Alan with a camera around his neck, smiling with the angels.

It was an honour to be asked to speak here today. I will leave you with one more beautiful thought...

A friend recently said to Alan that her daughter Ella told her that *when you die, your heart breaks up into more love*. Alan embraced this image – as should we all when we remember our dear friend. Let us each take a little piece of that love and let it grow to more love and spread it around in Alan’s honour.

À bientôt, mon ami, à bientôt.

Nora Spinks