

A Good Word for Donnie McGowan
May 8, 2013

I'm sorry that I did not know Donnie McGowan well, because I know that I would have liked him. Everyone else did!

I would have liked Donnie because he was a people person. His smile and his easy-going demeanor spoke to people even before his words did. People were comfortable around him. Donnie never met a stranger – could talk to anyone. He was gregarious and interesting, could carry a conversation. It was a trait that made him a good salesman and an even better friend. It was a trait that spoke of the man he really was; it wasn't just a role he played. Donnie's spirit of friendship made people feel they were more than just friends. And they were, for if you do it right, friendship joins people at a soul-deep level, making casual acquaintances feel like best friends, and good friends into family. Donnie had more friends than you can shake the proverbial stick at, and family all over... Geneva Owen told me this week how it was that Donnie came to call the back-yard neighbor of his childhood his second mama. Since that frisky little encounter when he was just a boy, she's held a special place in his life. Every time he talked to his mother, he asked about his other mother.

I would have liked Donnie because he loved sports. Two weeks ago we sat in that beautiful back yard and talked for two hours, and he told me all about it. He was a good athlete. Now, he didn't say that, but he didn't have to... I just knew. His mama has told me he loved a ball... any kind of ball. He was all boy! He loved to play, and he played hard. He told me about his high school baseball team going all the way to the championship. He told me about playing legion ball, and though that was years ago, and though his body was ravaged with cancer, you

could tell that in his eyes, he was still there. Could still feel the laces in his fingers, still feel the thrill of winning, the adrenaline of competition. I learned from my father-in-law, when he was an old man, that the body gets old, but the spirit of the man never changes. The day we sat in the sun talking, though Donnie only had a few days left in this world, he was still a ball-player at heart. That spirit never dies.

I would have liked Donnie because he was a fighter. I don't mean with his fists, though he was feisty enough that he may have known how to throw a punch! I mean that there was tenacity in his spirit. He fought for things that are good and right; he was a man of certain conviction. He fought for the underdog; he defended the needy. And when he got that diagnosis more than two years ago, he fought. He fought the good fight, and though Donnie never gave up, like we all will one day, he finally gave in. There's a difference, and though that final enemy claimed its momentary victory, when you toss those ashes, you can be sure they have a little fight left in them!

I would have liked Donnie because of the way he loved his grandchildren. Those were three lucky boys! Not everyone gets to have a Papa who has the wisdom of lived experience, and is young-enough at heart, even with cancer nipping at his heels, that he'll go to the den and campout with you for the night. Three boys got tents for Christmas this year, because camping with the grandsons was on Donnie's "bucket list." They didn't make it to the woods, but that night in sleeping bags at Papa's side is a memory that will keep. Every young boy needs a Papa like that.

I would have liked Donnie because, like any man who has good sense and a little bit of luck, he married above himself! He and Toni had half a century together, which is a long time,

but it's really only the start, because scripture reminds us that *Love Never Dies*. They started dating in high school and raised a wonderful family on love and hard work, made friends everywhere they went and nurtured those relationships, and in that half-century they've tested those vows: for better, for worse, in sickness and in health. I've already told you what I think about "till death us do part." *Love never dies*. Toni has been amazing. There at his side to the end. Allowing Donnie to be Donnie. When he was kind... and when he was not. (It's the price you women pay for outliving us... you've got to put up with us, even when we don't deserve you.) Toni let Donnie die his way, in his place, in his time. *Well-done, good and faithful servant*. Just as every boy deserves a Papa, every Papa deserves a Nona who will be true to the end.

I would have liked Donnie because he *honored his father and mother*, in the best possible way. Donnie told me about his dad, and though there had been some head-butting over the years (I think maybe that's the role of the oldest son), he never lost respect for Mack, and you could still hear the pride and the appreciation, the love in his voice. A 70 year-old man, honoring his father. And you could tell he loved his mama... just by talking to her! There's a special bond a mama and her boy, and Mary's and Donnie's connection was deep and true.

And I would have liked Donnie McGowan because he was a man of real faith. Not easy faith. Not shallow faith. Not faith by habit or obligation. Real faith. Which means it has to be worked on... wrestled with... You remember that Donnie was a fighter? Here, too. The nation of Israel got its name in a wrestling match – Jacob on the banks of that river and a messenger of God, going hand to hand. It's the metaphor of faith. Like old Jacob, Donnie wrestled with God. I think that's the way it's supposed to be. I love that story in the Bible where Jesus comes to heal the man's son and says to the man, "*Do you believe?*" And the man says, "*Yes, Lord, I believe*."

Help my unbelief!” Belief and unbelief, faith and doubt, comfort and challenge go hand-in-hand in real faith. The sage of the Proverb says, “*Train up a child in the way he is to go, and when is old, he will not depart from it...*” And Donnie did not.

I asked Donnie two weeks ago if he was afraid to die, and without hesitation he said No. But then he paused and he said, “But this is going to be... interesting!” When you *walk by faith and not by sight*, living is interesting... and so is dying. I’m grateful for what Donnie experienced on this side of death, and I take him at his word that whatever is on the other side... is going to be interesting!

You didn’t hear Donnie’s faith, so much as you saw it... in his gregarious love of people... in his passion for sport... in his quest for success... in his generosity of spirit and resources... in his fight... in his family. So though we will shed our tears, as we should, we can also smile because if you listen carefully you can hear Donnie’s voice loud and strong:

For I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4.7-8)

I have fought the good fight of faith... And he has. For Donnie McGowan, friend, foe, fighter, father, faithful companion and son, fearless man of faith... Thanks be to God.

Amen!

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Donnie McGowan was raised in the church. And when he and his brother, Bob, and their partners in crime weren't being called down at Park Road Baptist Church by its strong and charismatic pastor, he was being corrected by the neighbor across the street, who was the strong and charismatic pastor of Park Road Baptist Church! When my wife, Amy, and I came to Park Road to share all pastoral responsibilities Rev. Charlie Milford was sitting in the pews, giving us fits! So we were uniquely connected to Donnie – as protégés of that same preacher, we could feel his pain! And having been blessed by Donnie, the honor he bestowed on us by calling us his pastors, even from Atlanta, we've enjoyed all of those pastoral privileges as well. His mother is one of our most faithful members; she's been an ardent supporter and a surrogate grandmother to our two, now-teenaged sons. So we've come to love Donnie because we know what's in his blood... and in his last weeks we came to

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