

Mission Talk (Susan Anthony)
Someone Who Influenced My Life

My grandfather's story is probably a familiar one to most of you. The eldest son of 13 children born to Slovenian immigrants, he went to work young. He spent more than 50 of his 80-some years on the planet underground, working in an iron ore mine, starting as a runner at 14.

I would go visit him every summer when I was young, loving the freedom of the small town, so different from my suburban one, and the beauty of the lakes and the woods of far Northern Minnesota. It wasn't entirely pleasant, since my grandmother could be a hard woman, more given to making sure the house was clean than indulging her only grandchild. But my grandfather loved me with a fierceness that made up for her indifference. And beyond the candy he'd slip into my hand when we'd sit together, he gave me a greater gift—the gift of my faith.

He'd take me to daily Mass when I visited, talked about the saints like friends and knew all sorts of prayers my 1970's catechesis failed to teach me. I remember one daily Mass vividly, I would have been about 13, when I really realized what his faith meant to him. He was in his 80's, and the years of working in the mine had coarsened his hands and the ore seemed to be permanently worn into his skin. But as I looked over at him, those rough hands clasped in prayer and looking at the crucifix over the altar with an almost rapturous smile, a softness shone on his face.

Grandpa was a man who could have chosen to be angry, ungrateful. He had to follow his father and grandfather into the mines to help his family while his younger siblings got to go to school and become teachers and lawyers. He was severely injured in a fall at the mine and his back was in constant pain. His marriage was angry and painful. I'd remember he'd purposely turn off his hearing aids when my grandmother was on one of her rants—because of those rants the only words I know in Slovenian are ones I can't repeat here!

Years later, I found out that my grandfather had not always been a good husband, succumbing to some of the temptations of the mine camp. My grandmother never got over the betrayal, and I understand her anger. But she took her pain and nurtured it, and I never saw her enter the church.

Instead, Grandpa took his pain to God.

He helped me see the beauty of our faith in a sometimes ugly world, and he showed me that God isn't just for the perfect.

That morning as we walked out of daily Mass, he looked at me. I knew he wanted to say something, but he wasn't really a man of words, he was much more comfortable working with his hands. But I knew exactly what he meant when he said, "Keep this."

I'm trying, Grandpa, I'm trying.