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Father's Day: Art, Technology and a Daughter's Memory

Ulli K. Ryder, Ph.D · Wednesday, June 15th, 2011

This is the 19th Father's Day since my father's death. Most people remember my father as a [visual artist](#). Some also remember him as a jazz pianist. One professor and his wife at Brown University remember him as the neighbor who called the fire department in the middle of the night and saved their home (and the professor) from burning to the ground. I remember him as an amateur historian, a lover of knowledge, a man who always wished his own education had been more complete.

My father's education had been cut short. After high school he pursued the artistic promise he had first demonstrated as a small child. He exhibited his work and moved around – to Los Angeles, to New York – pursuing his calling. He went to college whenever someone offered him a scholarship. He enlisted in the Army hoping for the GI Bill. This was the Vietnam War era and he (luckily) spent his service in Germany painting signs on bases, painting an officer's club (with a bullfighting theme!) and hanging out in the countryside painting landscapes. In this way he honed his skills and was able to go to school a semester at a time. He never graduated.



My father grew up in a household with his grandparents – former sharecroppers and the children of slaves. This, coupled with his own thwarted education, produced in him a reverence for education and knowledge. This was a man who collected books, read several newspapers and kept a dictionary on his dining room table so he could look up words he didn't know. When I imagine him with a computer and Internet access I imagine him staying up till all hours of the night or early morning, combing the web for information. He'd have a website and he'd be on Facebook and Twitter. He'd download music. He'd blog. I'm sure, like many of us, he'd get totally sucked into YouTube.

And he'd have the latest gadgets. An iPhone, iPad or a Kindle...he'd be connected. Probably even more than I am. He'd move from 2G to 3G to 4G to 5G and beyond. And he'd want to know how all these things work. He'd take apart his old technology and it would, inevitably, end up in his mixed-media art. My father completed many series when he was alive – a Vietnam "Body Bag" Series, a Bicentennial Series, Jazz Pianists, Guitars, Anti-Apartheid. All of his work blended enormous beauty, an intense facility with color and a deep commitment to social justice. Had he lived, I'm sure he would have created a Technology Series. Given his knowledge of history and his commitment to exposing injustice I'm sure the Technology Series would visually represent the technology divide – the dangers of some people being plugged in while others are left out.

But as I think of all the wonderful things he'd do with technology and how he'd love the gadgets and all that they can do, I am sometimes thankful he did not have these things available. My parents were divorced when I was 7 years old. My mother and I only lived about 30 minutes from my father and I saw him regularly, for lunch or for weekends at his house. Still, my father loved to write letters to me. And those letters always came in envelopes addressed to me using my full name: Ulli Kira Ryder, a name he clearly loved. The envelopes themselves were works of art. He did not use standard, pre-made ones. He made them himself and embellished them with drawings, or pasted cloth or photos or old foreign stamps on them. I had to reciprocate. We had a contest – who could create and send the most outrageous and beautiful envelope. I still have some of those envelopes.

Today, I (like most of us) do most of my correspondence via email. It's faster and more convenient. I haven't written anything longer than a holiday card greeting in years. But I am so thankful email was not an option when I was a child. Had it been available, I would not be able to look closely at one of those decorated envelopes and find a fingerprint from my long-gone father imbedded in the dried glue.

Images: The author with her father, Mahler B. Ryder, Jr., and "Blue Monk" mixed-media and wood collage by Mr. Ryder dedicated to and inspired by Thelonius Monk.

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