

HE SAID, "I KNOW." THEN HE DIED

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As the author's father was dying, they gifted each other – he gave his father permission to go, and his father lifted the weight of carrying his living will in his pocket for years. He was able to sit with his father for the last two days, hold his hand, say he loved him, kiss him good-bye, and tell him there was nothing more he could do for him. His father said, "I know." Then he died. The experience strengthened the author's clinical and teaching work around dying and death more than any other could.

My dad died yesterday.

Actually it has been a couple years now, and I wrote that first sentence on my way home the morning after his death. Some years earlier, my wife introduced me to writing as a way of dealing with the emotions of certain situations. I don't actually journal, in the traditional sense, but I find that writing my thoughts about the major events in my life, both positive and



negative, has served to help me adjust to them. On several occasions, when dealing with major life changes that have affected both of us, my wife and I have written our individual thoughts and then shared them later. As I was driving home that day I found myself in tears, flooded with thoughts and emotions about both my dad's death and his life, so I pulled off the highway and started jotting down my thoughts. The first was "My dad died yesterday." I had spent the two days prior to his death sitting with him in the hospital knowing that this was the last trip there for the two of us together. It was clear when I arrived at the hospital that he would not be going home again. At some point during those two days I had to tell him that.

My dad lived almost seventy-six years, and he spent literally half of that time dying. When he was just thirty-eight and I was in high school he had seven heart attacks in one week. Over the intervening thirty-eight years he had several more heart attacks. During the years after I moved out of his home and was on my own, I would get occasional calls telling me that he had been hospitalized again. Given my geographic distance and family and work responsibilities, I couldn't always get there immediately. Although he lived near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and had his first two bypass surgeries there, he had to be flown to Milwaukee for the third surgery as that's where the only team that would do a third bypass surgery was located at that time.

During his long history of heart disease, I had much time and opportunity to prepare myself emotionally for his inevitable death. After all, I made emergency runs with him in ambulances to the hospital while I was still in high school; I watched him experience, then recuperate from, three bypass surgeries, two quadruples and a triple; I had experienced the deaths of three grandparents, numerous aunts and uncles, several cousins, and a few friends; in the 1960's, as a new recruit in the United States Air Force, I was assigned to make casualty notifications to family members of Air Force personnel listed as killed, captured, or missing in Viet Nam; and I teach workshops on dying and death. Even though his

death was inevitable and I had much time to prepare for it, I was shocked by the depth of feeling I experienced when it came.

To understand our relationship requires a look at his life. My dad was typical of many peers of his age. He was one of eleven children of an alcoholic father and a mother who died in childbirth with her eleventh child. He quit high school and lied about his age to enlist in the Navy at the start of World War II. While in the Navy he learned a trade, which he subsequently utilized as a civilian. After his medical discharge, due to punctured eardrums received in combat, he promptly got married and quickly had a child, me, all of this before he was twenty-two years old. Initially he worked for others, diligently and for long hours, until he was able to open his own small plumbing, heating, and air conditioning business – a one-man shop.



His sometimes interminable work hours made involvement in my activities difficult, but he found time to go on Cub Scout and Boy Scout camping trips, sometimes being the designated cook for as many as one hundred campers. I took great pride in being his assistant and in the constant praise he received for his meals. We lived in the country in my youth, so we had occasional treks together over local farmland hunting rabbits and pheasants. I also occasionally went on service calls with him at night and on weekends, just so that we could spend time together. But many times his work made it impossible for him to attend my activities. As a teenager, I played baseball for the team in the small town we had

moved to. In the four years I played, he was able to attend only one game. In fact, his illness ended my baseball playing as his first hospitalization and subsequent long period of unemployment led to a lifestyle change: my mother opened an in-home day care program for the children of working parents in our area and I took a part-time, after-school job. I admired my dad, his work ethic, and his commitment to his family, nuclear and extended; however, I can't say that our relationship was any closer than those of most other fathers and sons of that era. Some years later our relationship got closer. I'm not sure that he did anything different to cause that; perhaps I just appreciated him more. I often use the old saw that "it surprised me how much smarter my dad got as I got older."

I left home at seventeen to go off to college, leaving behind my dad, my mom, and my sister. For the first ten years of my life I was an only child; then my only sibling, a sister, was born. She was only seven when I went off to college. After that I didn't spend much time at home. I didn't experience any jealousy or upset over her arrival, but the age difference didn't help foster typical sibling closeness or rivalry. My relationship with my sister, like that with my dad, evolved and strengthened in our adulthood.

I don't remember displays of closeness between my parents. To a certain extent, I think my dad's long hours and his commitment to his work partly created that situation and were a result of it at the same time. To the outside world, we were probably seen as a loving, happy family. It didn't always feel that way inside. Also, typical of her cohort, my mother was a stay-at-home mom and homemaker. While my sister was still at home and in high school, my parents divorced, causing an estrangement between my mother and my dad, my sister, and me. My sister moved in with my dad, an un-

common occurrence at that time. As I had already served in the Air Force and graduated from college, I was no longer in that household. It was during that time that my relationship with my dad probably began to strengthen and we grew even closer.

My dad, a very independent man who always attempted to make things comfortable for those around him, never wanted to be dependent on anyone and also had difficulty expressing emotions openly, positive or negative. Several years before his death he said he needed to talk with me, so I drove the two and a half hours to his home. When I arrived, after the typical niceties of "How's everything?" and "How are the kids?" he said he wanted to talk about nursing homes. He said he refused to be a burden to either my sister or me, refused to live with either of us, and wanted to look at nursing homes, saying, "Not for now, but just to be ready for when the time comes."

We spent much of the next few months visiting assisted-living facilities and nursing homes, and he also decided it was time to do a living will and a power of attorney. As I was the older of his two children, the only male, and he had a somewhat traditional male worldview, I was to be the person to handle any responsibilities that might arise.

Given his medical history and the growing awareness in both of us that the next few years would probably be his last, I never went anywhere after that time without his living will in my pocket. Those four or five sheets of paper became the heaviest load I ever had to carry. They were a constant reminder of his mortality. Toward the end of that three-year period he told me he had never written a will. I was sure he had, but he was adamant. I guess I had just always assumed he had one. As he did not have an attorney, I made an appointment with one near my home to coincide with a visit he had planned with my family. With

the will, it seemed all of the legal issues were addressed.

During that same three-year period, on another visit with him, he abruptly blurted out, "What do you think about cremation?" I told him I thought it was a very personal decision that people had to make for themselves. He told me he had been thinking about it, had gotten the paperwork, and was going to join a cremation society. This allowed him to take total control over his final arrangements, including paying for them in advance, an issue that was very important to this fiercely independent man who didn't want to be a burden.

Most years, Christmas celebrations were held in his home with my sister, me, and our families all getting together with him there. Over the final several years, as I would prepare to leave him at the end of those holiday celebrations, he would pull me aside and say, "I made it through another one." As he increasingly accepted that his time was limited, he began to think more definitely about moving into an assisted living facility until he needed full nursing care. During this period, my sister was able to convince him to move into her home, which she lived in alone. He did that the weekend after Thanksgiving, the November before he died the following January. That Christmas was held in my sister's home. Interestingly, he didn't pull me aside to say that he had made it through another year. On reflection, I think both the decision to move into my sister's home and his not mentioning "making" another Christmas were both prophetic and telling. He apparently had emotionally accepted what he had known intellectually all along; his time was truly limited.

During the period he lived with my sister, approximately two months, she and I made several more emergency visits to the hospital with him and dealt with several crises at home. On one occasion, my sister



called me on a late Sunday afternoon, quite scared and concerned about him. She said he was hallucinating and thought that there was a groundhog in his bedroom. No amount of searching and reassurance from her would suffice. This normally very logical, problem-solving man 'knew' the groundhog was there. He had 'seen' it and 'felt' it scratching under his bed.

I made the drive to her house, telling her not to let him know I was coming. When I arrived, he was sitting in his normal spot watching television and didn't see me come in. I walked over and took a seat beside him. He asked why I was there and wouldn't accept that I just happened to stop by. "She called you, didn't she?" he asked. I said she had, and then he said, "I guess she told you about the groundhog, too." I guess logic had not totally escaped him.

Knowing that he had been to see his cardiologist (he was also under treatment by a neurologist) the day before, I asked if the doctor had changed his medication. We had had concerns on a number of occasions that his two doctors didn't collaborate well, each frequently changing his medications without discussing the changes with the other. He said the cardiologist had in fact changed his meds. I told him I thought that maybe what he was experiencing was a result of the medication change and that I was going to make an emergency call to the cardiologist. His response, "Oh, so now the child knows more than the parent," came as a total shock. Never before had he made such a comment to me. It seemed he always valued my thoughts and suggestions, so this was totally out of character. I said, "Not normally, but maybe in this situation." I called the doctor's service, which contacted him, and he called me back within minutes. When I discussed the medication change he had made the day before and reminded him what medications the neu-

rologist had also prescribed for dad, the doctor responded, "That could cause hallucinations." I was less than pleased and reminded him that he and the neurologist had previously promised to stay in communication with each other. He said to immediately go back to dad's prior drug regimen. We did that, and in a day or so my sister called me to say he was fine again. He spoke with me on the phone at that time, and I asked how he was feeling. Never one to miss a chance to display his notorious sense of humor, he responded, "I feel better, but you made me lose my pet." Obviously the groundhog had moved out.

A few weeks after this episode, I got another worried call from my sister saying that she was concerned about him again. I made another visit and spent the night sleeping on the sofa right outside his bedroom. During the night he began talking and making grunting and growling noises. He had always talked, yelled out, and made odd noises while sleeping, referring to it as re-fighting World War II. I wasn't greatly concerned, but I did move into his bedroom, sitting in a chair next to his bed for the rest of the night. When he awoke in the morning he seemed disoriented and uncoordinated; he had also wet his bed. I held him up, walked him to a chair, cleaned him up, and asked him if he preferred to go to the hospital by ambulance or in my car. He didn't protest, and said he preferred to go in the car. Shortly after getting him to the emergency room, I was informed that he had had a stroke. I felt guilty and responsible. I sat there watching him have a stroke and didn't do anything to help. Intellectually, I was able to get past the guilt; after all, I'm not a physician, and what I saw that night was a rerun of things I had observed in him ever since I was a child. Nonetheless, the emotional burden and sense of guilt took some time to get over.

A week or so later, my sister again called me to say she thought he was having another stroke. The ambulance was on its way and she was going to the hospital with him. I said that I would not leave immediately but that she should call me should there be a problem. It's not that I wasn't concerned, but I had made that two hour trip to her home and the hospital several times in the past two months, I knew she was with him and would keep me updated, and I was in the midst of some project or another when she called. Within a half hour she called again to say the doctors wanted dad's living will. I had a chill. I faxed the living will, dropped whatever the project was, and jumped in my car for the drive.

Having had to make many phone calls and visits to hospitals with my dad over the years, I had learned a very helpful trick that had served me well on numerous occasions. I would introduce myself on the phone or in person as Dr. Lyter, Willard Lyter's son. Although both parts of that statement were true, I knew medical personnel would draw the inference that I was a physician, not a Ph.D., and they would respond to me more quickly, fully, and professionally than they might otherwise. When I arrived in the emergency room and announced who I was, the nurse said she had just come on duty and had report, but didn't remember hearing report on Willard Lyter. Knowing this particular E.R. quite well, I didn't wait for approval or any other help but began a search of all of the beds myself, asking the nurse to check the log for the day. I was sure he had died and I got there too late – guilt again. He was not in any of the E.R. beds. The nurse returned to say he had been transferred to Intensive Care before she came on duty; thus, she had not heard his name. I sprinted there, introduced myself to the nurses on duty, and was directed to his room where I found him and my sister. It was readily apparent to me that

this was going to be the end. As my sister had been caring for him throughout the day and had to go to work the next morning, I suggested she go home to get some rest, that I would call her should there be some new word.

Dad was conscious and alert. We were able to talk and visit with each other, but he looked worn out. It seemed he, too, realized this was going to be the end. The next day and a half are somewhat jumbled in my mind in terms of the exact sequence of events, but at some point while dad was sleeping, I walked out into the hallway just to stretch a bit. At that time, his cardiologist walked down the hallway and asked how both dad and I were doing. Having been my dad's physician for many years, having seen dad just a few days earlier in his office, and having just gotten report from the nurses on dad's current condition, he simply shook his head "no" when I asked if he wanted me to wake dad so he could examine him. He said not to wake him and that he wasn't even going to see him; there was nothing left to do for him.

The doctor and I had gotten to know each other rather well over the years, both in the hospital and when I had accompanied dad to his office. He told me that he had placed the living will on top of dad's chart and instructed the nurses to do nothing more than relieve any pain he might experience. Although he simply affirmed what I already knew, his comments had a true sense of certainty and finality that I was not totally prepared for, regardless of all of my earlier preparation and experiences. He had also told the nurses that any decisions were to be made by me. I greatly appreciated his support in enforcing dad's wishes.

When not sleeping, dad continued to be intellectually alert. In one of his wakeful periods while we sat together, I told him that there was nothing more that could be done for him. He seemed relieved. I think

he was accepting of his condition and was just too tired to fight any more. He had been fighting to stay alive for thirty-eight years. He might now finally get some rest from the fight.

My sister continued to come to the hospital whenever she wasn't at work, but I would suggest she go home to sleep at night. On that last night, the forecast was for a heavy snow in the area, so I again suggested she go home. I would stay with him through the night.

During that evening, while dad was awake, I was sitting next to his bed holding his hand. It seemed to me that he was just too tired to continue the fight and was simply waiting to die. At that point I kissed him and I said, "I love you. There's nothing more I can do for you." He said, "I know." Then he died.

On reflection, I realize that he and I had given each other gifts that night. I had given him "permission" to die. I think he was ready, but he was still being the caregiver for his child; he had to know that I, too, was ready. I took that burden from him. He gave me the gift of unloading the "weight" of the living will.

Knowing that he didn't want anything done to revive him, and even though I knew the doctor had given specific orders to the nurses not to resuscitate him, I sat there with him for a while until I was fairly certain he had died. Then I walked to the nursing station and told the Nurse Manager and the Shift Nurse that I thought my dad had died. They responded as I had hoped they would, getting up out of their chairs at a normal speed and walking, not running, to dad's room. The Nurse Manager put a stethoscope to dad's chest and said, "Not yet, hold his hand if you want." The two of them sat there quietly with me for the next several minutes while I continued to hold his hand, kissed him again, and said "I love you." The Nurse Manager checked his

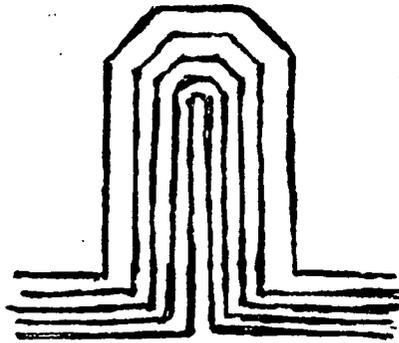
heart again and confirmed that he had died. The two nurses let me stay while they closed his eyes, covered him with a sheet, and made other necessary arrangements.

After that, they walked me to the nursing station where they called the necessary hospital personnel to report his death. They helped me complete the required paperwork and asked if I needed to call anyone. I called the cremation society to notify them of dad's death, and then I called my sister. As the expected snow had come, essentially in the form of a blizzard, I told her to stay home as there was nothing she could do at the hospital; I would drive to her house. It was past midnight when I got there, and we spent the rest of the night talking and, somewhat surprisingly, laughing at some of the reminiscences. The groundhog was mentioned several times.

I had a long time to prepare for my dad's death and felt confident that I would be able to do the things he needed me to do to protect his wishes when the time came. I also felt confident that I was emotionally prepared to accept his death; after all, I provided workshops on dying and death and have helped hundreds of social workers and other professionals examine their own feelings on these issues in preparation for working with clients and their families. I succeeded admirably with the first, not so with the second. I learned that no amount of preparation and no length of forewarning is enough to make this transition to acceptance easily. The finality of the death must still be dealt with.

It has taken me a long time to finish what I started writing the morning after my dad's death. My sister and I reminisce often, and I still find myself overcome with emotion at unexpected times and in unexpected circumstances. I miss him greatly. A recent commute found me overcome with emotion, and my eyes filled with tears as

thoughts of him rose to the level of consciousness. These reactions have allowed me to gain better insight into my own reactions to a loved one's dying and death and, I hope, better able to empathize with others in similar circumstances. I believe they will help me be a better social work educator, trainer, and clinician. Intellectually, I have always known that such reflections were crucial to professional development. I'm still working on the emotional aspects.



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