

Friday, Jan 6, 2012

Ten years ago when I moved to Alaska I thought: I'll have ten years until I'll have to return to California to take care of my chain smoking mother. I never imagined it would be my father. My father, who except for his altercations with an angioplasty and a quadruple bypass, had never complained of not feeling well.



During my childhood I can't remember a time when he was sick, not a cold, not the flu or even a headache. He did suffer from hay fever like me, but I don't think we considered it an illness, just a time of year when our eyes and throats itched and our noses sneezed. I remember him telling me that his only freedom from hay fever was during his time in the Navy when he was on a ship in the middle of the ocean. As he aged, the only thing I heard him complain about was his back, and after open-heart surgery, his difficulty walking. Like many men of his generation he was stoic until the end. I don't know if that's something to be admired or looked upon as foolish.

What can I say about my father?

He was kind.

I don't think I ever heard him say one malicious word about anyone. However, it made me wonder what he was really thinking. I think my father met people in the moment, allowed them every peculiarity, every eccentricity, even every ugliness, every weakness. He would, however, make comments about behaviors that he found puzzling: "She's rich yet she always orders the cheapest thing on the menu."

On Christmas Eve, after my brother and his family left, my dad was swallowed by agonizing pain. He had eaten a lot. Prime rib for supper. Biscuits and gravy for dessert. He hadn't been taking any pain meds so after he swallowed the palliative it took an hour to kick in. It was horrible to see him in such pain, crying for "it" to end. I thanked him for being a good man. "Isn't that's what's most important?" I asked him. "I don't know," he said. "What was and what might have been." Is this what was filtering through his thoughts that last month he spent confined to the bed provided by Hospice? Those were the words he spoke at the restaurant after his final doctor's appointment when I asked what he was thinking—"What was and what might have been."

Why couldn't I ask him: Dad, is there anything you want to say before you die? It lingered on the tip of my tongue but I kept hoping that he would say what he needed to when he was ready. I guess he said what was most important: I love you. "I wish you could have come to Alaska to visit, to see the cabin I helped build, to see Haines," I said. "Me, too," he said.

I arrived on Wednesday, November 16, 2011 at 8:30 p.m. Three days later, on Saturday, November 19th, my father no longer wanted to leave the house. I had two days to accompany him to his morning pool game with the guys, two days to ride with him in the golf cart to pick up the mail, two days when he didn't need assistance going from the couch to the bathroom. "You haven't changed," he said. "You look and sound like you did when you were 20."

Photos and recordings tell a different story Dad.

What else do I know about my father?

He wanted to have children. He wanted to be a good parent, which requires sacrifice.

When I was in my late 20s and early 30s running like a hamster on an exercise wheel inside the corporate world, I asked my dad how he was able to always be home at the same time every evening from work. How he never had to work weekends or late into the night.

“It was a choice I made,” he said. “My family was more important to me than climbing the ladder.”

He never regretted that choice.

By not seeking the vainglorious of the corporate world at Pacific Bell my dad was the kind of man every kid loved. He played with us. He taught my brother and me how to throw and catch a ball, how to hold a bat, stand at the plate and hit a home run, how to be a good sport.

Anyone who knew my dad liked him. I think because he never yelled. He kept his judgements to himself and tried to defog the emotional outbursts of conflict and find common ground, a reasonable path. This did not prevent him from being disappointed, but somehow he always managed to temper his disappointment with understanding and compassion. Maybe this is why he was such a great softball coach. He was all about mastering the fundamental skills, working together as a team, doing the best you can and, most importantly, having fun. What’s the point of playing if you’re not enjoying yourself he’d say to his very competitive daughter who wanted to win, win, win.

My dad was good at any sport he attempted. But most of all he loved playing golf. When I asked him his plans after retirement he told me: “To golf around the world.” He never golfed farther east than Ohio. “When did he stop golfing?” I asked one of his golf buddies when I arrived in November. “About a year ago,” he said. When did healthy cells turn to cancerous cells? A year ago? When did he notice the difference in his health? In August he called me, said he wasn’t feeling too good. I noticed his voice had lost its volume, as if he were speaking through a cloth. Was that a sign? I wondered if it was something to do with his throat, his vocal cords. He wasn’t coughing. Not the flu or a cold, he said. Stop drinking all that stupid diet soda I told him. Drink more water. Is there a correlation? Or was it all the medication that helped manage his blood pressure and diabetes that caused the cancer to hijack his liver? “I didn’t think

I'd make it this long after the bypass" (12 years earlier), he told me when we talked in September on his final birthday.

My dad loved to bowl, like his father before him. At one time his average was over 200. At one time he bowled a perfect 300. At one time I loved to bowl too.

My dad always took us on an annual family vacation when we weren't visiting relatives in Omaha, Nebraska: Disneyland, Marine World, the San Diego Zoo, Yellowstone, Clear Lake, Crater Lake, a dude ranch in Nevada, the badlands in South Dakota, Mt. Rushmore; the Oregon Coast to show us the places he was stationed during his Navy years, 1950-1954; a cattle ranch in Colorado, and, most memorably, Lake Tahoe, where we would stay in a cabin owned by one of my father's colleagues. I loved our summers in Lake Tahoe especially when my paternal grandparents would meet us. While my parents would go off gambling my grandparents would take us miniature golfing and horseback riding or play cards and games with us. My last vacation with my parents, just the three of us, was a week in Tahoe in their Airstream at the Zephyr Cove campground. "Your grandmother and I stopped here for the night on our way to Fort Mason in San Francisco. It's where I shipped out to sail to Guam during the Korean War." Since I knew my grandmother didn't drive I asked how she got home. By train. I must not have wondered what happened to the car.

Zephyr Cove is on the southeast Nevada side of the lake just past the California border. The resort was built in the early 1900s and still retains the integrity of its original architecture as well as its sins against the Washoe people who had lived along the shores of the lake for more than 6000 years. It was early September just before Labor Day sometime in the early 1990s. Near where we set up the Airstream was an Airstream that looked more like a home. The man who owned it told us he'd been spending summers at Zephyr Cove for 30 years, arriving mid-June and leaving the weekend after Labor Day. Of all the places I have travelled I have to say that Lake Tahoe is one of the most beautiful places on the planet. For a moment, I felt envious of this man's

ritual and obvious love of this place, although I could not quite understand the stationary bike on his deck when there were beaches and trails to walk.

What I remember most from that vacation is how cold and dark and starlit it got at night and the night my parents came back at 2 a.m. from the casino and my dad throwing a thousand dollars on the bed where I was sleeping. The craps table had been good to him.

Your father never said a whole lot. Henry's words. Did he keep his thoughts to himself? I wondered. Did he believe complaining didn't accomplish anything? Did he believe that if he didn't talk about something it would resolve itself, go away? "I think he did it to please your mother." Henry's words. Henry's perception when I asked if my father ever said anything about getting the Veteran's loan and buying the house for my brother and his family at the age of 77.

Speculation is probably futile. All life is a mystery. Each life is individual. Everyone has secrets, the unspoken, the unsaid, the unexpressed buried dark and deep. I will never know. I can only speculate. Happy? Restless? Fulfilled? Unfulfilled? Content? What did you think of your life? Your children? Your marriage? Your friends?

When I was 21 my mother had a breast cancer scare and had to spend the



night in the hospital for a biopsy. I rarely had time alone with my father, but after visiting my mother at the hospital my father and I went to one of our favorite Mexican restaurants for dinner. A married man had recently asked me out and it made me wonder about my father's interest in other women. Women often flirted with my dad and often told my mother how lucky she was. So I asked if he had ever had an affair.

"When would I have time," he said. "And besides, I'd rather spend my time golfing." I was a bit disappointed that he didn't say anything about his love for my mother or about betraying his marriage vows or hurting

his family. He did tell me about a friend of his at work who tangled himself in one affair after another, even though my father would warn him. The last time my father mentioned this friend he was on his fourth marriage.

My father was not an intellectually curious person. He read only one book in his life. Unfortunately, it was “Ivanhoe,” which I tried to read once and gave up—and I am a voracious reader. My father, however, could fix almost anything. When I asked how he learned to repair things, he said lack of money to pay someone else, reading the manuals, and trial and error. When I was forced to learn to snake a toilet at the age of 52 because the local plumber refused to do such work, I immediately called my dad. He laughed when I said I was adding the skill to my resume.

On Thursday, January 26th, 2012, we said a formal good-bye to my father. It took place at the Sacramento Valley National Veterans Cemetery in Dixon, California, a place I will probably not visit again until it is time to say good-bye to my mother.

The service was a formal Navy service which included the playing of “Taps.” Where did this song come from? Does it make me cry because it is always associated with a loss of life or because it is inherently sad, tearful, sorrowful—an emanation of grief. “Grief strikes where love struck first.”

My brother broke down in tears: “I’m gonna miss him.” My mom complained that more of his friends didn’t attend.