



Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

WITNESS

Issue Two

Our Father's Beautiful Death

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Seven years ago, our family had the incredible opportunity to walk with our father all the way to death's door. Thirteen years prior, we had accompanied our mother to her own peaceful death at home. Through these dramatic experiences, we as siblings recognized that we had learned something valuable which has been lost in the modern age. Since death and birth are outsourced to the funeral and medical industries in industrialized countries, we as a culture have forgotten what we are supposed to do at such critical moments.

The trajectory towards death is not often clear to the family since there is a strong reluctance to face death in the culture. Sometimes this is perpetuated by the medical community, as when medical staff continue to offer more solutions, even when they themselves are privately pessimistic about the outcome. In the case of our mother, we had not enlisted hospice until just two days prior to her death. That short window shows how we lacked objectivity, so when the hospice nurse said, "Yes...those are the signs that she is departing," it was arresting to us. From that moment, our duty then became to be with her as we awaited the moment of death, instead of wheeling her to another appointment.

We learned two main lessons from her death which we applied to our father's passing many years later. First, when the dying person can remain at home, he should; it makes all the difference to family, especially children, who can visit with ease, unlike in the hospital setting. The patient's room is a comfortable bedroom, and the waiting room is a comfortable living room. Family members, not the nursing station, control access to the loved one. In order to support the family in this decision, a good hospice is invaluable, helping the family navigate as yet unknown situations which might trigger a panicked decision to run to the ER. Consequently, as our mother lay dying, my sister had her newborn on my mother's bed while she sang to both of them, and another time, my three young children played quietly under her hospital bed which had become their fort. In these experiences at home and sustained by hospice, death was very close to us, and we became familiar with it, yet without fear.

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Within an hour of her passing, the funeral staff arrived with the hearse. We were in the bedroom with her empty shell, and although they were respectful of our grieving, their directive to us—“Let us know when you are finished”—provoked this question: “What are we *supposed* to be doing that we were supposed to finish?” We did not know.

That was the second lesson we learned. Since the funeral industry has arisen, taking the burden of holding a wake (which used to be held at home), and burying the dead, we no longer know what we are supposed to do in and around death and dying. The process has been made “easy” for us and we have lost much of the hard work which helps with the grieving process. We did not think deeply about this though until many years later.

After our mother’s death, our father remarried and had a happy twelve-year run with his second wife, but in his 86th year, he suffered an intra-operative stroke during an elective heart procedure. The stroke led to undiagnosed seizures which continued to enfeeble the man and make him paranoid about finances. He would call his banker daily to hear the balance and believed, despite the healthy numbers, that he was impoverished. His mental and physical health continued to decline steadily until it became apparent to his six children that we were no longer going to “visit” him, but that we were going to be taking care of him. And so we did. Each one at various stages of life, some with little children, others with jobs, none of us living nearby, took turns flying to see him and take care of him for up to a week or two at a time.

Our father, like many elderly people, had told his family that he “did not want to be a burden” to them. We wanted to say, “Dad! You *won’t* be a burden to us,” but both he and we would know that would be false. So, we acknowledged that in fact taking care of him *would* be a burden, but a burden that we *wanted* to shoulder for him. And he accepted that. Our experience, then, of traveling back and forth, both siblings and grown grandchildren, setting aside our lives (while spouses took up the slack), was that the burden was actually *good* for us. By carrying the heavy emotions along with the heavy physical work of caring for him, especially when he eventually became bed-bound, we front-loaded our grief. And we all acknowledged that we wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere else.

Hard conversations have to be had with the dying who may not know that they are dying. Although our father was always a church-going, trying-to-believe sort of man, his faith was not robust. As far back as his days in boarding school, however, he had been impressed by the prayers asking for a peaceful death. Yet, his perception of the choice of heaven or hell was not clear. My husband, who was a hospice director in our home state, counseled me to ask if there was anything of which he was afraid. From his wheelchair in the kitchen one day, our father answered that “yes, there was.” I inquired what that would be, and he responded, “Total darkness.” Not skilled in how to respond to this existential fear, I did what I knew best, which was just to continue to tend to him with love. But now, I would acknowledge that while we do not know exactly what is beyond death, we can draw much from our Christian belief. There is a profound gravity in appearing before the Just Judge the second a soul passes from this life. The judgment is made without appeal because the soul is standing before the Truth. I would talk about how one can be best prepared by confessing all known sins and then about all that we have read and believe about heaven. At this moment a priest could have been invaluable, but although four of his daughters had become Catholic, our father had not, and so there was

no priest to be called and no last rites to be considered.

The final end came two weeks before Christmas 2016. His wife went out to get a Christmas tree with her son. Dad fell asleep in a chair and, busying myself around the house with my three young children, I hardly noticed that his nap began to stretch on for more than a few hours. When his wife returned, we discussed his sleeping and even later called the hospice line for guidance. Sadly, they responded that he was “probably just tired.” All of our siblings were alerted that he was not waking up, and by morning two were on a plane, and three remained united with us at home. The hospice nurse arrived and helpfully suggested that we call EMS to help us transport him to the bedroom, as the hallway was serpentine, and he was nearly 200 lbs. We were so grateful that the EMS who are normally supposed to intubate anyone comatose, used their common sense and simply transported him. His only son arrived later that morning, and he “woke” briefly to say “Hi, Chuck!” And never spoke again.

The vigil began with three of his children, his wife, and four granddaughters keeping him company in the room, turning him every two hours for comfort and offering damp swabs to keep his mouth moist. Any attempt to offer water was met with choking. In a hospital setting, he would have had an IV which would have only prolonged his death. So, we kept him as comfortable as we possibly could, trying to think of anything that we could do. He did not seem to be in any pain and had no furrows on his brow, so he was given minimal morphine. By contrast, our mother had been given so many narcotics that she became very drowsy under the effect of the medications making communication difficult. It is a challenge for families to walk the fine line between giving adequate pain relief and maintaining mental acuity in the patient. A good hospice will honor that and not hasten the dying process. Others have been known to snore the patient under as soon as the dying process begins, which shortens precious moments of communication with grieving family members.

Since our father had no water, we thought he would die within two to three days, but he lived in a comatose state for six with the only water coming from the swabs in his mouth. This interval showed us how the timing in the drama of exiting this life is a mystery. Whatever time each family has, though, there is much that can be done. Our family united in prayer times, particularly the Divine Mercy Chaplet at 3 p.m. and daily rosary and singalongs, with up to 20 family members FaceTiming together. Whenever a loved one called, we would put the phone to our father’s ear so he could hear. That family member needed it, though we were uncertain how much our father received it.

In God’s perfect timing, all those who had taken shifts to care for Dad happened to be at the bedside at the very same time. Our brother was the first to notice and say it: “I think he is passing.” It felt as if we all stopped breathing and the air was still. We were standing right there as he took his last breath. It was a holy moment, and the drama of his passing from this life to the next was over. His prayer for a peaceful death had been granted. Our brother somberly led us in prayers for the dead.

The hospice nurse arrived shortly thereafter and helped guide us in washing the body. Washing our father’s body was a reverent act and the last act we could do for him. We closed his eyes and his mouth and covered his body with a blanket, leaving his face exposed. Candles were lit as we continued as a family to discuss what we had seen and experienced.

In times past, the body would have remained in the home for several days until interment, but for his wife, that seemed a traditional step too far. Also, we had considered transporting the body to the funeral home ourselves and perhaps to the place of interment, but nowadays, the funeral home legally must have “chain of custody” from the place of death to the funeral

home, to the cemetery. The rationale is so that nobody can arrive at a funeral home or cemetery with a body and an unverified story. Sadly, the care and burial of the dead is no longer in the hands of family as it still is in many countries around the world. Nevertheless, we were graced with an incredible employee of the funeral home sent to transport the body. The man seemed positively Dickensian in his dress and manner, and he preached and ministered to us all as he expertly and reverently enshrouded our father's body.

The issue of burial versus cremation had come up suddenly near the end of our father's life. He had reportedly told one of our sisters some months earlier that he was considering being cremated with his ashes interred in California where he lived with his second wife. His expressed reason was "to make it easier on us." However, it was important to us, his children, that he be buried in the plot that had been bought next to our mother in Houston. Once we understood his rationale—that cremation was considered so as not to be a burden to us—we were relieved and felt free to accept the burden of burial. With the blessing of his wife, we arranged transport of the body to Houston. "If *easy* was the most important thing," one of his granddaughters said, "We would have all just FaceTimed for the funeral." Yes, taking the harder path was salutary for us. In fact, it was a joyful journey.

The journey began when most of the family members flew to California for the memorial service in the church where our dad had worshipped. The grief seemed to be harder for those who had not been present during his decline and death. The day after the service, we rented cars and vans to convey all the immediate family on a road trip to Houston, while the body was transported by air. The first day of our journey included a stop for a hike at Joshua Tree National Park and culminated with an elegant dinner at a restaurant in Tucson which had prepared a special menu for our memorial caravan of 25 people. After the dinner, we drove through the night, and made it to San Antonio by afternoon to tour the Alamo and enjoy the Riverwalk. By late night, we made it to Houston, the last home of our family, to bury our father the next day.

The cemetery staff had been advised that our family valued the traditional way of burial. With our mother's interment, we had been confused and dismayed that, after the graveside service, the coffin had not been lowered into the ground until all the family had left. Even though the undertaker had assured our father that he would oversee the process, we were left feeling that the chapter had not closed. We were told then that some people are "disturbed by the sound of the machinery which lowers the casket." Prepared by that experience, we knew what to expect, so we requested that the casket be lowered into the ground while we were there, and we also asked if it was possible to lower it manually (not that we were disturbed by machinery, but that it seemed more human). So, when the hearse arrived, six grandsons manfully and reverently carried the coffin, directed by our brother, up the steps and up a hill to the final resting place next to our mother's grave.

Our brother had hired a bagpiper, and the prayers and songs were beautiful and dignified. When it was time to lower the coffin, several gravediggers who had been waiting respectfully at a distance suddenly appeared and manfully struggled to lower the casket with large woven straps. A wheelbarrow of dirt which we had requested was present and each family member took turns throwing dirt onto the coffin with a spade our father had used to break ground on one of his companies. We stayed at the graveside well over an hour praying, singing songs, and telling stories. We did not need the funeral staff to tell us where to stand, what to do, when to come or when to leave. We were learning the art of saying goodbye to a cherished father, and it began to feel so natural.

As a family, we continue to consider the ways of dying; we consider what has been lost by

outsourcing; and we consider how we benefit from taking the burden back upon ourselves. When we had the opportunity to accompany our sister all the way to death's door two years ago, we were able to demonstrate to our children in a more experienced way, all that can be done to put one's grief to work. We learned even one more lesson. Proverbs 31:6 offers timeless advice: *Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to the sorely depressed.* When it is our turn to approach death's door, we may plan to use bourbon instead of morphine if needed.

Pondering how societies have honored the passage from this life to eternal life helps us as humans regain what has been lost in the modern effort to make things *easy*. Grief does not have to be a helpless emotion. We process and use our grief as we work at the bedside, as we field the phone calls, as we honor the sacred moment of departure, as we wash and enshroud the body, as we prepare the song sheets, and as we lower the body of our loved one into the ground for the final goodbye.

