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What My Father's Death Taught Me About Living

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We buried my dad on Friday. He asked to be interred in a pine box. He had long ago lost his once ardent interest in organized religion, but he remained committed right up to the end to the idea that burial helps the soul escape the body.

He endured a long sojourn in the twilight of dementia. Obituary-ese would call it a struggle or a battle, but that wasn't John Polgreen's style. He accepted his diagnosis with equanimity and bore it with no self-pity. He died a few days short of his 73rd birthday.

Like many families around the world, mine has seen a lot of loss in the past couple of years. It started with my paternal grandmother, Beth, who died early in the pandemic, though not of Covid, at the age of 92. She lived a long life filled with adventure, surrounded by a loving family and friends.

Next came the shocking, sudden death of my father's younger brother Bob. He died of a heart attack last year, three months before his 70th birthday. He was building, with his own hands, as was his habit, a dream house on the shores of Lake Superior for him and my aunt to retire to and enjoy their growing passel of grandchildren. And then, just like that, he was gone.

And now it was my dad's turn. For the first time since these deaths, my family gathered to mourn. We all missed so many celebrations during the pandemic — graduations,

weddings, bar mitzvahs. But there is something especially cruel about not being able to gather in the aftermath of a loved one's death.

Saul Bellow, one of my dad's favorite writers, wrote in a letter to Martin Amis that "losing a parent is something like driving through a plate-glass window. You didn't know it was there until it shattered, and then for years to come you're picking up the pieces — down to the last glassy splinter."

So much of who I am came from my father. He grew up in a conservative white Midwestern family. He was seized early on by a curiosity about the world that would ultimately carry him across the globe, helping farmers in poor countries improve their lives. He would marry an Ethiopian woman, my mother, Rahel, and dedicate much of his life to helping the rural poor in the Global South, especially farmers, improve their lives.

When I was a kid, my father and I were close. We spent most of my childhood living in Kenya and in Ghana. He impressed upon me a love of discovery and of books. He was a white man with an African wife, raising Black American children outside of the United States, and took it as his responsibility to educate us about what life would be like when we eventually moved back. He pressed a copy of Malcolm X's autobiography into my hands as a preteenager.

But he was also a footloose dreamer, often distant or even absent. He traveled a lot when he had a job, though he went through long periods of not working. He was forever short of money: My mother's cherished gold jewelry was in and out of pawn shops throughout my childhood. We were always struggling to stay one step ahead of an eviction notice. Not long after I graduated from college, he persuaded me to co-sign a mortgage so that he and my mom could buy a house, then proceeded to ruin my credit by being constantly late on the payments.

As so often happens in families, my parents' bitter divorce after decades of marriage strained our relationship. I was busy with my exciting career as a foreign correspondent; he quickly remarried. We grew apart.

A few years ago, he started having little strokes. His memory had never been great, but he started forgetting things that had just happened. He grew unsteady on his feet, making the march from cane to walker to wheelchair. His wife, Pam, lovingly cared for him through it all.

We reconciled. The shortcomings that seemed so glaring when I was young suddenly faded because I could see how the story worked out. The things he failed to provide were nothing compared with what he had given me: the raw materials for a life filled with

adventure, connection and meaning. A belief in the fundamental goodness of people across all kinds of difference. A commitment to trying to understand the world and make it understandable to others.

During the pandemic, my wife went back to school to train as a social worker focused on helping people with terminal illnesses. She was drawn to that work after the deaths of her parents — her mother seven years ago from cancer, her father from a heart attack in 2017.

One night over dinner I asked her about her work. What, exactly, do you do with people who are dying? How do you help them and their families? Beyond helping with their practical needs, she explained, she tried to help them normalize their feelings, minimize their regrets and see that people have the capacity to change, right up to the end.

She said that the thing people wanted more than anything was answers. How long does my wife have? Is my mother suffering? These are questions that are impossible to answer, so her work consisted of something else.

“I try to help them increase their tolerance for uncertainty,” she told me. In the absence of answers, she tried to help them live with not knowing.

There is something so powerful about this idea, something so broadly useful to modern life. We all want to know what happens next, to fix upon some certainty as an anchor in the rough seas of our times. But to tolerate uncertainty is to become buoyant, able to bob in the waves, no matter the tide.

Not long after my father's passing, I learned that an old friend from college, Billy Sothern, had died by suicide. He and I had lost touch over the years, but it wasn't hard to keep tabs on what he was up to. He was a celebrated defense lawyer in New Orleans who specialized in death penalty cases.

What always blew me away about Billy and his work was the improbable optimism of it. There are few things harder to achieve than exonerating a person sentenced to death for a crime he or she did not commit.

As we drove home from seeing his widow the other day, my wife said, “You have to be incredibly vulnerable to admit that you think the world can be better, to believe that what you do could actually make some kind of change.”

We live in a time dominated by pessimism and cynicism. These poses are a kind of armor against the vulnerability of hope. To be cynical is to close the door to the possibility of disappointment. To be pessimistic is to foreclose the risk of being made a fool by optimism.

I realize now that the most precious thing my father gave me was an example of how to live a life devoid of cynicism and pessimism. He was a dreamer and an optimist, sometimes to an absurd and even dangerous degree. But a bias toward the vulnerability of hope — that is a true gift.

As my father lay dying, I was glad I had the chance to tell him that I loved him and I was grateful. I don't know if he could hear me, and that's OK. As we sat together, I thought about the principles for dying and realized that they are also rules for living. A set of maps for navigating a broken world on a dying planet. Tolerate uncertainty. Normalize feelings. Minimize regret. Know that people have the capacity to change and connect, right up to the end.

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