

Keep Up the Good Work

My father and I were never very close.
Or, if we were, I don't remember.

I would like to think sometime in those first few days,
weeks, months or years, those times unsaved
by memory's selective process, we were close.
That he knew me as his son, and I my father.
The memory is not there, hope is.

Between those hoped-for first years and now,
there was not much, mainly me trying, desperately,
to be seen, heard or understood - unfulfilled.

Now at 84, he inhabits a world of one
and maybe not even that.

He doesn't recognize any of his sons or grandsons,
doesn't remember his father or mother,
doesn't remember details of his life.

During a week of daily visits he never knew who I was.
He tolerated, barely, the stranger who sat with him.

At every meal he is confused, looking around the table
to mimic how others use a spoon.

He is well cared for and safe.
For this I am glad.

During daily visits we replayed the same conversation,
the same four sentences.

What's that?

It's a bird.

That's fast...

It's a car.

I went to New York...

Yes, during the war.

That was fun...

What's that?

It's a bird.

After a few days of this I settled into the routine.
And found myself.
And found my father.

I spent decades learning how to quiet my mind,

let go of thinking, just be present.
During this time my father gradually lost his mind.
Finally, we were able to meet on some common ground.

My father, with the mind of a two year old,
and I, quieting mine.
It's the closest I ever felt to my father,
or at least that I remember.

That visit was remarkable. I felt elated,
not that he had lost his mind,
but that I had found my father.

On the last day preparing to leave,
I intuitively knew this was goodbye.

I might see his physical body again before he dies
but I knew he would never be present
any more than he was now.

Sadness and grief welled,
spilled over through these eyes that have rarely cried.

I held his hand, grieving the loss of his mind,
the future loss of his body.
Rejoicing that I had found my father.

He looked bewildered,
Why is this stranger crying?

I turned, three steps to the door
while opening it heard him say

Keep up the good work.

Words I waited a lifetime to hear.

My father, Jim Cline, died over Thanksgiving weekend. I wrote this poem four years ago after seeing him when he first moved into a nursing home. Over those four years he didn't have any medical problems other than the gradual deterioration of his mind from dementia. A friend commented, once the mind goes, the body gets very healthy. Curious.

Because of the continual erosion of his quality of life, a few years ago I began to wish, pray and meditate for his relief from suffering by dying. It seemed the kindest option. Last fall, several infections looked like possible pathways to this release, but a hospital's cure at any cost approach and three rounds of antibiotics delayed the inevitable. By the time he died under the gentle care of hospice, he could not form or understand words, swallow, get out of bed or respond to anyone or anything in any obvious way.

As it became clear his time was near, I felt a growing sense of relief, mainly for him. And then, when my brother called to say he had peacefully quit breathing - a large internal tidal wave surfaced: oh, no - don't go. Curious.

I do not know if any of us can really "handle" sudden or lingering death, or if we need to be able to do so. Death has its own unfathomable wake. We know nothing about it.

— Toni Packer, *The Light of Discovery*, pg. 35

At the graveside, three sons and three grandsons carried his casket to a large hole in the ground, next to my mother's grave, who died almost exactly 40 years previously. A Marine Corps color guard honored my father's service to our country, in 20° weather and a 30 mph north wind. Snow flurries whirled. It was very powerful in many ways and I cried a lot. As one of the Marines said afterward, we wouldn't be here today if not for what he did many years ago. So true - on many levels. My brothers and I are now the eldest generation. **Very curious.**

After the funeral I asked my brother and his wife if they had heard my father use the phrase 'Keep up the good work,' as some automatic, routine, well-worn and habitual response to people. They hadn't heard him say it once. Somehow, from the deep haze and confusion of dementia, for a brief moment my father showed up to give a gift I didn't know was needed. You'll be hearing this phrase from me often.

A longtime friend and tai chi partner, Mary Jo Luce, died a few weeks ago from ALS. A newer meditation and writing ally, Melinda Glenn, is *very* slowly recovering from four brain surgeries in December.

Keep up the good work.

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