

### **Chapter 3 - The Turning Tides: My Dad's Passing and My Promise**

I think the moment you know your parent is dying is one of those times when you feel the loneliest. You are in the process. You realize it is a process. My dad was not actively living. And, he had not yet passed. This was so similar to knowing my daughter was sailing the Atlantic Ocean in a small sailing vessel during the month of December and not knowing if she was ok. Two of the most helpless, confusing times in my life, happening back to back.

I leaned on Dad to help me cope with my fears about Alex. Now, who could I lean on with my fears of what was happening to him? Dad was the loving and beloved Patriarch, the rock for each one of us, not just immediate family, but for almost every family member, and most all his friends. The world without him was incomprehensible.

That day in the hospital room, I began to feel the tides turning, our roles in the family shifting. The room was full. Barely standing room, yet, like the biblical story of the fish and the loaves, there was somehow enough space for everyone. Me, my four siblings, my mother, who is disabled and was in a wheelchair, my brother in law, my daughter, her boyfriend, who had never met the family, and my nephews and their significant others. My Dad had a living will and his wishes were to refuse any procedures to prolong his life. We knew what we had to do regarding the medical decisions.

After consultation with his doctors, the intubation tube was removed. I remember, there was such a close, warm feeling among all of us at that moment. But, walking with Dad through his dying process? None of us had ever discussed that with each other, and, I don't think it ever crossed our minds. It was like a taboo subject, one so dreaded that no one wants to venture into it. We knew the

facts. Dad was 87 years old and had lived with numerous health problems. But, up until the stroke hit him, he was much more active than most of us. I wasn't prepared for this.

The topic of the time AFTER Dad had died had been discussed, among my Dad, Mom, me and my siblings. That is what responsible families do. Make the final arrangements. Plan the settlement of the estate. Gail would be the executor, there was a trust to take care of Mom, who would live with one of us. Those things were understood. I'm sure we had some thoughts of what it would be like with Dad gone from our lives; but we never talked about that painful, emotional part.

What unfolded during the next five days was astonishing to me, especially given our complete lack of any preparation. And, it was so markedly different from the majority of stories I had heard over the years as a therapist from clients' whose parents had died. Most of those stories were full of conflict, suspiciousness, distrust, hurt, loneliness, detachment, rivalry and avoidance, during the hospital vigil right on through the funeral and sometimes throughout the years that followed.

In contrast, the steps my family and I walked as Dad was dying were of the most beautiful, fulfilling, rich, and creative experiences of my life. The only experience that comes close to this was my journey of labor and delivery of my daughter, Alex. How profound! Most people would agree that the birth of a child is a beautiful, joyous experience. But to think that an elderly parents' dying process could be equally as beautiful and joyous is a foreign concept in our culture.

Looking back on it now, I think being fully present during Dad's dying process, and keeping my heart as open as possible, was what allowed Spirit in and helped me make a soul connection with Dad and my family. I had no conscious awareness of choosing this at the time. What I was conscious of was my decision to join with my family and go through this together rather than bring conflict to the situation. It's hard to contain emotional reactivity at a time of crisis. Yet, this is what

Dad would have wanted. It's the way he tried to live his life during his retirement years, and, I believe his guidance came through to me, even as he was physically leaving us.

With no prior discussion or preparation, my family and I strengthened our bonds during my Dad's dying process. We stayed in the present moment and stayed close as a family. We respected each other's personal choices. We even trusted our spontaneity, like the wonderful night we decided we could have pajama parties with Dad by spending the night in his hospice room. And we did! All thirteen of us! And I remember staying intuitively tuned in to Dad, often taking the lead from him. And in doing all this, we dignified Dad in so many wonderful ways while he was dying.

On January 20, in the early morning hours, I was alone with my Dad as he lay dying in his hospice bed. I played soothing music and reflected on the previous 5 days since my Dad's stroke. I remembered the first 6 hours that I spent with him, my hopefulness when he tightly and fiercely gripped my hand, never letting go, looking into my eyes and showing expression when I told him we all loved him and were coming to his side, and as he tried to lift his head off the pillow. I remembered also, the excruciating pain, arriving the next day to his hospital room to find him in a coma from drugs administered to sedate him. How he never again regained consciousness. I thought about our lives, how much Dad's influence was surging through our veins, how he had transformed himself throughout his life to respond to the needs of his family, even when it meant stretching far beyond the bounds of what was normal and comfortable for him. I remembered all our conversations about how surprising his life turned out; how remarkable the transitions were that affected all of us. And, I promised him then, as he lay dying, that I would write a book about his life. I would do it to honor him, for our healing. And, to be true to the way Dad lived his life, this book

would be one that would also help others and make their lives better.

Dad took his last breath around 8 pm on Wednesday, January 21, 2015. Strangely, I was not with him as I thought I would be. When Gail called to tell me, I was taking care of my Mom, and with my daughter, Alex, and her boyfriend, Steve. I think Dad wanted it that way. He always wanted me to be closer to my Mom. When I told Mom that Dad was gone, she broke out into a song in her native Church Slavonic tongue. It was haunting and beautiful. She told me it's what you sing to help the soul on its journey. I later learned it was a farewell prayer for the deceased, words that translated to "may the saints comfort the soul of the deceased."

After spending a few moments with Mom, Alex and Steve, I drove to hospice alone, to be with my siblings and my Dad. My siblings told me they were in Dad's hospice room when he passed, but they weren't by his side either, like I thought they would be. They were talking to the nurse, telling her funny stories about Dad and his life, when he passed on his own. It's the way I'm sure he wanted it.

Since I was back in Dad's room, my siblings were again off the clock, and they left after we placed some flowers on Dad's bed. I remember how strange it felt watching them walk down the hall and out the door as if in a trance. It was surreal.

I stayed with dad, yearning to feel his presence all around me. I must admit, it was a little frightening. I had never been in a room with someone, let alone a significant other, who had just passed. I talked to him and prayed for his soul. Then, I suddenly *felt* him communicating to me,

saying, “Go back to the house. That’s where the life is, that’s where the party is, celebrate me there with all the family. That’s where I’m going. See you there!” It was incredible and I knew it was time to leave.

I left Dad’s body lying in the hospice bed alone. There was absolutely no one around. It was late, it was dark. Dad’s soul had even left by that time. I walked the long dark corridor alone and out the door.

Little did I know, when I promised to write about Dad’s life, that the book would be about how his death influenced *my life*.

That decision, as I came to find out, was Dad’s.