



The author, at left, sitting with her brother on her father's lap.

# Taking care and letting go

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**Y**ou should have let me come to the hospital last night to stay with you," my father half-scolded and half apologized to me, following my emergency abdominal surgery-turned-appendectomy 18 months ago. I brushed the comment aside.

"Not necessary, Daddy. It was a low-risk surgical procedure, you know that."

But seeing him holding flowers at the foot of my bed comforted me. My mentor, parent, and friend, had arrived to visit, but also to inspect my incision, be sure I was ambulating, voiding, and using the incentive spirometer. My father was 80 years old, an abdominal surgeon and obstetrician/gynecologist by training, now board certified in family practice and still actively seeing patients.

## Healing the suffering

Dad began his medical career as a boy working in a pharmacy with mortar and pestle. He served with the Coast Guard in World War II. At the age of 20, he amputated a German's soldier's fingers using only scissors and sulfa powder. Later, he delivered more than 2000 babies. My father was an active companion in healing and suffering; he shared his patients' joys and trials. He was responsive and responsible. Most of his

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patients seemed to enjoy a visit to his office. It was comforting. They learned from lighthearted, yet serious, lectures on any of many subjects. During my formative medical years, I marvelled at Dad's warm ways with patients, his calming influence, and his skill at prescribing to meet patients' needs. He had sympathy and understanding. He could balance the science of his profession with the bitter necessary truths that families of the ill must often face. With death, he knew that each loss was deep and real.

### Struggling

Over the years, Dad's spine arthritis had worsened and his posture was stooped forward. I noted his increasing dyspnea. He kept his medical problems to himself and considered my daughterly concerns accurate but "overboard." Because of his increasing fatigue, a stress test was done. This was positive and showed areas of old infarcts. A cardiac catheterization showed severe disease, and he was scheduled for emergent coronary bypass surgery. He had been making housecalls until his date with the surgeon. Dad's postoperative course was rocky, unpredictable, and frightening. He was suddenly transformed from a distinguished clinician and diagnostician into a debilitated and frail old man. His heroic struggle to live and recover continued over eight endless months, but neurologically he slipped away.

Because of aspiration pneumonia and sepsis, Dad was urgently admitted to the intensive care unit. He was comatose for days. On the sixth day, he woke up asking for his pants, the car keys, a "nice" lunch, and an update on his housebound patients. He was back. But this alertness was short-lived. In the days that followed, he prayed with special priests and nuns, and grimaced in pain with blood draws that left him bruised all over. He spoke at times, and smiled at the sight of his grandchildren surrounding his bed. When we knew that his time had come, we decided to disconnect hydration and feeding tubes.

Dad was transferred to an inpatient hospice unit in which he had regularly cared for his own patients. Hospital personnel and colleagues entered his room during those final days, and froze; they had not expected the emaciated face, the foggy mental status, and the stubble from our sloppy attempts at shaving. We were all helpless. But Dad's dignity and peace had been restored.

### Remembering

He continued to hang on for days. As his breaths became more agonal and shallow on that Saturday night, I grabbed scrubs from the recovery room, extra blankets from the utility room. Our roles had officially changed, and I was spending the night. My stepmother, exhausted, had gone home. My brother, who had been there for days, was back at work in Washington. I dreaded what was to come, and yet this was sacred ground to me. I wanted to absorb an extra dose of strength from my father before he left this world. All night, a steady stream of

caretakers tended to him respectfully and affectionately. They shared little stories about him, of his doctoring, his sense of humor, and his presence in the medical community. The night aide's husband had worked with Dad while he was medical examiner. The respiratory therapist had known him since he was county health commissioner. One of the nurses remembered when he was grand marshal of the Memorial Day Parade. For all I knew, he had delivered some of these people. I dozed on and off, listening to his breathing. I awoke to a different respiratory pattern and called family members back to the hospital. His death, when it came, came quietly. He was surrounded by the people who loved him.

### Waiting

I was dazed. Time had stopped and now nothing seemed real, except the pain. My world looked different. Part of my past was gone. Dad's office manager, Linda, insisted on our going to the cafeteria where I had often met my father and his colleagues for coffee or lunch. She listened as I made the necessary phone calls. She waited with me, outside Dad's room, to introduce me to the funeral director. As the three of us walked down the corridor with my dead father on the covered stretcher, the funeral director, a gentle person, asked me, "How long have you been a doctor?"

"Oh, 17 years, I think," I mumbled. The small talk seemed trivial, but I appreciated the distraction. I did not recognize the funeral director, but he knew me and my father, and obviously understood some of what I was feeling. He did and said what he could to offer comfort.

"It is different with your own," he said. "Nothing prepares you, does it?"

Linda answered for me, "No."

### Accepting

I know about death. My mother died during my medical training. That death is still vivid to me. I have been the professional bearer of bad news, tragic news. I have signed many death certificates. It is not any easier when it is your own, because there isn't anything easy about it. Like my father, I will never be a passive observer of illness or suffering. Dad taught me to acknowledge my emotions, to try to be courageous toward life's ordinary, heartbreaking experiences, and not to dodge or deny our shared pain. Life without my father has a hole in it, but he left me so much. As a physician, a parent, and a caretaker, I think I am a bit better than I might have been without his great and difficult gift to me:

*Heal the human body, as much as you can.  
But more than that, support the human spirit.*

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