

THE DEATH OF MY FATHER

The guilt that persists

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January 11, 2003, I sat on my father's bed chatting with him at the Mercer Island Care Center. At age 80 he was attempting to recover from a bout of pneumonia. At around 9:30 p.m. I kissed him goodbye, got up from the bed and said I'd see him tomorrow. I can still see him lying in the bed, waving to me, both of us feeling assured that we would indeed be together tomorrow.

At 6:30 a.m. the next day, I received a call from the nurse saying that he was having a hard time breathing and, since I had durable power of attorney for healthcare, the medics would be calling me in a few minutes to confirm that they would intubate him.

I hung up and minutes later the call came stating that he was otherwise okay and, with my permission, they would intubate him on the way to the hospital or when they arrived.

By the time I arrived at the hospital I was shockingly informed that Dad's heart had given out during the ambulance ride. A few minutes later my siblings and I gathered in the emergency room, sobbing as we touched and hugged the lifeless body of our father.

A day or two later, in the throes of my grief, as I reflected back on the events, I felt an emotion begin to well up inside of me: Guilt.

Yes, I was guilty.

Of what?

Of not being there when my father took his last breath.

I was his first-born.
His son. He trusted me.
I was always there for him.

There when he had a massive stroke at age 52. There when the NBA Seattle Sonics lost game after game in the eighties and nineties. There when my mother, his wife of 46 years took her last breath.

And, here he was in an ambulance with strangers literally taking the last breath of his life and, where was I?

Ten miles away.

Guilt spoke to me as it said, “What kind of son are you that would let his father die with strangers? He needed you to be there to be holding his hand, to be giving him words of comfort, telling him it was okay to go.”

I knew guilt well. I’d even written a small book on it. Yet, here I was immersed in it.

During the early days of grief, I often revisited the guilt scenario: Why didn’t I tell the care center staff that I would jump in my car and meet the medic folks and ride with my dad to the hospital?

The answer came in the form of something called Hindsight Bias, which of course says, “It’s easy to look back and say what you should have done, knowing what you know now.”

All I knew at that time was that they needed to help Dad and asking them to wait for me would have delayed the process.

Did this logical explanation suddenly free me from feeling guilty? Heck no. To this day, several years later, despite the logic, there are times when I still feel twinges of guilt. What has this taught me? That despite the facts, guilt is still a feeling. And feelings often defy logic.

One of the things that did help me was writing a letter to Dad, telling him how I would have given anything to have been there.

I still miss him. And, I’m sure, after all these years, he’s looking down at me as I type this saying, “Bobby, I know you did your best.”

Thanks, Dad. And, happy Father’s Day.