

Letting Go

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By David Mas Masumoto

My father died this month. You may know him from my stories about his talking with grapevines during an annual sojourn into winter pruning or learning to walk on uneven ground following his first stroke.

He was neither famous nor wealthy. He was quiet and hard-working. A good man with a shovel in his hands.

When we lose our fathers we lose a buffer between death and our own mortality.

My father suffered a major stroke in 1997, but through hard work and therapy, he recovered adequately -- and even relearned how to drive a tractor. I realized we had switched roles -- I was the teacher and he was the student.

A second major stroke five years ago knocked him off his feet. My mother became his primary caregiver. We all did the best we could. Yet I began to dread the ring of the phone late at night.

A few weeks ago, a final stroke took him. In his last moments, I held his rough hands. Throughout the years, they continued to manifest the many years in the fields with their old, ingrained calluses.

He was strong and independent with a stubborn streak that was both his strength and weakness. He willed himself to recover after each setback, yet struggled when he needed assistance. Finally, he had to accept help and we were fortunate, because not everyone does.

Shame may be the reason he wanted to be left alone. He deserved more but resigned himself to the fact that growing old was lonely. He had support around him. My mom dedicated her life to his care -- my father would not be left alone. We tried to acknowledge his need for autonomy and self respect. He didn't want to be a burden.

Mom faced an impossible situation -- Dad was not going to get better. She labored daily with commitment. She prolonged his life with love and care. Her hands maintained his dignity and enabled my father to pass peacefully. My mother could do no more.

In our fast-paced and youthful-oriented world, her emotional loyalty was rarely acknowledged nor rewarded. Caregivers bear this burden, as if it's a penalty to take care of someone aging and gradually declining. My mother shared a spirit of caregivers -- a corps of devoted individuals too often invisible and neglected.

Yet, despite all the years of time and effort, following my father's passing, my mother quietly said, "I'm going to miss taking care of Dad." If I could muster half as much love in my heart, I'll be blessed forever.

Dad was a farmer. We grew savory peaches and sweet raisins on a simple and small 80-acre organic family farm. I don't recall him ever saying he loved us -- he was a stoic farmer who spoke through his actions of caring.

Emotions were implied and unspoken -- and clear in my memories. As a child, I remember him picking up and carrying me after I tripped on a vineyard wagon tongue and split my lip and broke a tooth. Or when I was a teenager, he quietly rescued me without getting angry when my tractor got stuck in mud and needed his help to free the equipment and me.

During his final years, he wore the public, stolid face of an old dying farmer. We all knew he still cared about life. He spent hours looking out the window at his farm. A family farm.

As he gradually declined and could not work in the fields, mom gave me a stack of his work clothes. The first time I wore them I could still smell a hint of his sweat. A gentle yet sweet aroma, a working-class scent. Work was his life and in the end, as I walked our fields, I realized his spirit was now part of the farm.

The final years were a challenge for all. I realized how unprepared I was for the inevitable. I lacked wisdom and struggled to create systems to care for an aging parent. Few organizations and community structures were in place to help: I lacked the social and cultural infrastructures to adequately adjust as Dad declined.

Death would probably be easy, dying was the hard part.

It took a toll on our own health, especially my mother, his primary caregiver. The challenge of care and commitment was overwhelming, yet sadly expected. I often thought of the thousands of other caregivers, laboring in silence, suffering in their own ways, still wanting to believe caring for a loved one was a privilege.

Dad knew he had become a burden. He struggled with his own sense of worth. Part of his dignity was lost, although we sometimes found meaning in the little things that had become the hardest to endure.

Dad loved getting a bath and he looked like a kid, scrubbing himself with his good left hand, smiling as a stream of warm water danced off his head. Yet going to the bathroom was a daily struggle to maintain that sense of worth.

Some of the most basic aspects of life were hard. When we ignore their significance, we devalue their importance and we foster a culture of denial.

It's time caregivers tell their personal stories. By sharing intimate stories publicly, they acquire new meaning -- a type of legitimacy, a validation of their labor of love.

Caregivers, you are not alone. Growing old is not a secret and dying should not be hidden in whispers. It's easy to lose dignity when life is lost in seclusion.

I stayed up with my father the last night of his life. We had called hospice and they helped tremendously with pain management during his last weeks. Dad was suffering but still had some self-respect.

Some claim that at the very end of life, there's a burst of energy, a final surge of activity. Life's finale. That final night, Dad sat up and wanted to stand.

I helped him and on shaky legs he rose for a few minutes. Then he could no longer hold himself up and sat, leaning on the side of the bed. I was next to him and told him it was OK. Exhausted, he leaned on me.

Silently we sat in the dark. I could hear and feel his rapid breaths. He sighed. I patted him on the back. I asked if he wanted to lay down again and he nodded.

He lay peacefully as I watched him sleep. It was a role reversal: As a father, he had once watched over his sleeping son. Now it was my turn.

The next morning our daughter flew in from graduate school to see her grandfather. Her intention is to take over the farm one day.

One of Dad's final acts of life was to see his granddaughter, reach and grab to hold her hand. He gave a soft laugh, patted her hand and rolled over. Perhaps somehow he understood and was passing the farm onto the next generation, the next farmer who was planning to work these fields of gold.

I had made a promise to keep my father on the farm as long as I could. Over a decade ago, while recovering from this first stroke, we made a pact: I'd bring him back to the farm and he would never leave.

We were very fortunate that circumstances allowed us this opportunity. In the end, with family gathered around his bed, he died in his farm house. Promises made, and gratefully, promises kept. He could leave in peace.

Death was not a passive act -- we were all witness to his life at that moment. It will take years to process it all, but I sensed both a loss and an opportunity.

I no longer have a living father, yet will always remember him. With the gradual loss of warmth in his body, it was OK to miss him.