

The Last Breath is Breathtaking

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Auntie died at age 94. Sometimes, I wonder if I had known it was the last year, the last six months or even the last three months of her life, what would I have done differently, if anything? I will never know the answer. I am human. I cannot help but wonder what would I have done differently? Not a thing. Auntie lived until she died. My mom, a nonsmoker, was diagnosed with lung cancer that had metastasized. Her three-month prognosis was devastating and her passing was challenging and hard for our family. Mom was our North Star and it was the first time our family experienced a death of a loved one.

Mom did not want any medical intervention; she wanted to go home, so we honored her wishes. The oncologist referred Mom to hospice. During the last three months of Mom's life, there would be a lot of firsts for the family. My siblings, my father and I would learn first-hand how to care for Mom at home with the support services of the local hospice. We were fortunate. Mom was easy to care for. She did not experience any pain. Just a low-grade fever.

When Mom died, I was home. My youngest sister Nancy, just minutes away, was driving up from Southern California. Another younger sister Barbara was moving her car. I let Dad know it was time. We were there when Mom peacefully took her last breath.

It has been 29 years since Mom's passing. And every now and then, I think of the decisions I made on her behalf, even after sharing with my father and siblings what Mom's expressed wishes were. In retrospect, I could have handled things differently and better. At the time, I was dealing with my own grief and loss. I am ashamed that I did not recognize that Dad was hurting and grieving, too. His wife of 54 years was gone. I apologized to Dad, years later.

"Mom, I did the best that I could to honor your wishes."

"Dad, please forgive me." He did.

Fourteen years, after Mom's passing, Dad would be referred to hospice by his cardiologist. The last six years of Dad's life, I took over from Barbara, the responsibility of making and taking Dad and Auntie to their doctor appointments. Auntie came to live with her brother after Mom died. Prior to caring for her brother, Auntie had been employed as a live-in caregiver for an elderly Chinese couple in the Central Valley. Dad's cardiologist knew I worked for a nonprofit hospice. I asked him if it was possible, if he would provide a six-month window when the time came. I remember the conversation to this day. I knew this day would come, but did not know it was going to be that day. I had a sense, but I was still not prepared. I don't think anyone ever is. The cardiologist addressed my father and then looked at me, nodded and said, "It's time."

The manner in which he conveyed the news to my father was genuinely gracious and kind.

I will never forget his kindness and the positive effect it had on Dad. He extended his hand to shake my dad's hand. He leaned in and gave him a hug and a pat on his shoulder and proceeded to tell Dad that it has been a pleasure being his doctor all these years. After this visit, he would no longer need to come to see him. A nurse will come to the house to check his vitals. My dad's response, "Alright." Meanwhile, I am fighting back the tears and laughing at Dad's joyous reply.

The cardiologist continued that it's quite remarkable that you are still here. It must be the great care your sister and daughters are giving you." My dad agreed. Still fighting my tears, before driving home where I knew Auntie was waiting, I had the presence of mind to ask Dad if he was up for a short drive through his old stomping grounds: Salinas Chinatown, Confucius Church and the National Steinbeck Center—the location where his café once stood, the United Café. Dad said, "Yes." During our brief sightseeing trip, Dad was very animated and engaged. He was excited as he recalled where he lived when he first arrived in Salinas as a teen. On the way home, we drove by the home where he worked as a live-in house boy for a wealthy family.

When we arrived at home, Auntie greeted us at the door. In my best Chinese, I shared Dad's news, while Dad, nodded, smiled and confirmed what I was saying. Full disclosure, the doctor and I never told my father that he had six months or less to live. I believe Dad knew without saying this out loud, as I had explained to him that he will be receiving the care like Mom had. I think that was all that was needed to be said. When Dad was in his room, Auntie asked me, "What does this mean." Again, in my best Chinese, I thought, how do I soften this news? I sat her down, held her hands, looked into her eyes and mindfully told her that Dad has six months or less. Shock and disbelief came over Auntie; her demeanor changed. She asked, "Does your father know?" I said, "No". Auntie said not to tell him. We never did; but I believe in my heart, Dad knew. In the last six months of Dad's life, he was able to attend his grandson Andrew's wedding. Four months prior to Dad's passing, I arranged for hospice. The day we scheduled to have the hospital bed delivered was a gut-wrenching and emotional day.

My father was adamant that he did not want the hospital bed or changes to his room. My siblings had already dismantled his bed and moved furniture to accommodate the hospital bed. I arrived minutes prior to the bed being delivered.

I sat with Dad, trying to calm and reason with him. I told him the hospital bed was more for us, so that we could better care for him and protect our backs. Plus, the bed moved up and down and it had a railing to keep him from slipping off the bed. I reminded Dad that over a year ago he slipped off the bed and Auntie had to help him. When Dad transitioned to the hospital bed, later that day, he never got up out of bed again. I think Dad knew this. I placed a sleeping cot next to his bed. This is where I slept when I was home.

Dad was easy to care for. The day Dad died, Barbara and Auntie were in the garden. They came to Dad's room just in time. We were there when Dad peacefully took his last breath.

In hindsight, during the last year of Auntie's life, she was ready to go; there were signs. It was me who was not ready. With Barbara on the phone, I was there when Auntie peacefully took her last breath.

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