

SPIRIT, MIND & BODY

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Best Get Livin' While The Livin's Good

I've had the opportunity lately to help care for a dying man. He is my partner's father, Freddie.

He was widowed just over three years ago after 55 years of marriage. He was a Sailor in WWII. He spent 4 years at sea without ever coming home. He is 84 years old. He has asbestosis and was diagnosed with lung cancer last August, when he was given six months to live. He was enrolled in hospice and graduated four months later because he was doing "so well". He has a graduation diploma hanging on the wall to prove it.

Two months later, he joined hospice again. He says he is ready to die. He is the lone survivor of seven siblings and is one of the few of his 305 shipmates still alive. He has had a full life and has no desire to continue living. He's had his fun and has given life his "best shot". He has seen so much during his 84 years of life. He is tired. He is sharp-as-a tack.

He lies in the hospital bed set up in the living room of his home. He is hard of hearing and so he reads a lot. He is on oxygen, Vicodin, morphine and anti-depressants. I hear him explain to his curious friends, "What the hell. Why suffer? Don't have to worry about becoming addicted, do ya?"

One lifelong friend has the beautiful courage to ask point-blank, "What's it like, Freddie, to know you are going to die? How does it feel? Are you scared?" I hear this over the speaker phone.

I watch him as he lies there, contemplating his life. I listen to his stories as he recounts his romantic adventures, his youth, his near misses, his survival. I watch as tears well up in his eyes when

he speaks of his wife Barbara, saying, "I don't know what would have become of me had she not come along." I am curious and inquire further into his childhood, his mother, his career during and after the Navy. He speaks to me of the three kinds of justice he witnessed while in the Service: that of an officer, that of a white man, and that of a black man. He tells me too about the signs posted in San Diego that read, "Dogs and Sailors -- Keep Off the Grass!" We spend hours pouring over scrapbooks of WWII memorabilia and photo albums from his life. "You were a real looker," I tell him, and he gets a knowing sparkle in his eye. I think it must be comforting at this stage in life to recall the memory of people who loved you and those whom you have loved, so I encourage the sentiment even though I see it is painful.

I also hear his regrets, wondering if reconciliation is still an option. "Is it possible to forgive?" I ask. "Is it ever too late to tell someone you love them?"

It is obvious that speaking about emotions doesn't come easily to this man, but it is also clear he has grown softer with age and can not keep himself from reacting. He eventually tires from the talking and asks for more pain medicine. It is my feeling it will mask more than just the physical, so I gladly give it. I sense the shame he feels for needing help. I sense his disappointment in not dying quickly enough. He lays his hand across his chest, places his head gently on the pillow and waits -- hoping for a miracle.

We have celebrated his last Thanksgiving, his last Christmas, his last Easter and his last

Birthday. Just as in the beginning of our life we have so many "firsts" (first step, first words, first day of school), in the ending of our life there are many "lasts" -- only they are not thrilling like the "firsts" were. They are celebrations, perhaps, all the same, but ones filled with more sadness than joy.

As I assist Freddie with death, what I think of most is the quality of Life. Will the quality of our lives -- once lived -- bring us countless days of joy while we're waiting, waiting all alone, waiting, waiting, to be called home?

Some questions we might find it helpful to ask ourselves are these: (1) Am I loving my Life? If not, why not, and what can I do about it? (2) Do I love myself? Am I happy with who I am becoming? If not, how might I begin today? (3) Am I in a loving and nurturing relationship? If not, is it possible to turn my current relationship into one that is mutually supportive? (4) Am I, myself, a loving and nurturing partner? Friend? Mother? Daughter? Person? How might I be more giving, caring or understanding, to the people I love? (5) Do I have any regrets? If so, what can I do to make peace with these regrets? (6) Is there anybody I need to forgive (including myself)? When and how will I do this? (7) Is there anybody from whom I need to ask forgiveness? To my knowledge, have I hurt anybody in any way with whom I need to make amends? (8) Do I have something that brings me comfort during troubled times (spiritual practice, ritual, journal, etc.)? (9) Do I understand my beliefs surrounding death? What questions might I ask, and to whom, that will bring me closer to a better under-

standing. (10) Am I making the most of my life as I am living it today?

In hospice they say, "As you have lived, so will you die." If you are constantly stressed and anxious in your life, it is likely you will bring this to your death. If, however, you have lived a full and joyous life, that joy will accompany your final days. I can't think of a more worthy reason for living a peaceful, happy, well nourished, life.

Most of us in this country are fortunate enough to have

a choice in how we live. It might take a lot of chutzpa to turn your life around, but, remember, you're the one who has to address it in the end. Choose well. Live well. End well.

"One does not become enlightened by imaging figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious."

---Carl Jung"

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