

Necessary Words

By Halloween of 1999, we knew my father wouldn't make it to Christmas. By the time we were two days into November it became clear that Thanksgiving was beyond his reach as well.

The spot on his lung that the doctors had found in mid-July was the first sign of the ravenous cancer that had now taken hold of him. The rapid spread of the disease combined with a series of astounding medication errors by his physician hurled my father into a downward spiral by Labor Day. The autumn brought with it the gift of in-home hospice care and life became more tolerable for him than the final weeks of that wretched summer.

Most weekends that fall, I was able to get up to Philadelphia from Baltimore, sometimes making the round trip in the same day. His appetite was dwindling, like the rest of him, but I'd always show up with a chocolate milkshake—one of the few things he still enjoyed. More times than not, I'd end up drinking the shake.

Sundays offered a full range of sports on television. As the baseball season wound down and the football season cranked up, we shared our final season of shared commiseration on the fates of the Phillies and the Eagles. With football, there was a bit of consolation. The Eagles had an energetic rookie quarterback named Donovan McNabb. The Eagles continued to lose but the losses were a lot more entertaining.

With each successive visit, I could clearly see that his decline was accelerating. The opportunities for sustained conversation were diminishing. Heavily medicated sleep seemed to be the most welcome escape from the relentless torment of the cancer.

My life was clearly approaching the point where my father would be absent from it. Within me arose an imperative for some sort of leave-taking, but I struggled to define its meaning. There were things I needed to say to him with some level of assurance that he heard them. What he might say in response mattered less than my need to give voice to the words.

The window of opportunity for such an exchange was closing, and quickly. I had to decide what I wanted to say and prepare myself for the saying of it. The first two statements felt straightforward and simple: that I loved him and that he had been a good father. While I was certain that he knew my feelings for him it was nonetheless essential that I say the words to him clearly and purposefully. As his life drew to a close it was necessary that I articulate the fundamental truth of my feelings for him. The need to do it became all consuming.

The third thing that I had to say was more nuanced and far more complex. It was a mixed bag of mixed bags. There seemed to be no easy or succinct way of expressing it. How does one communicate to a father that his hair-trigger temper, his harsh physical discipline, and his habit of biting sarcasm fueled his son's considerable store of roiling anger and paper-thin sensitivity to verbal abuse that resulted in a lifelong struggle with a ferocious temper but also fearlessness, bordering on recklessness, in the presence of bullies?

I struggled mightily to give expression to a cavernous ambivalence that was rooted deeply in

my relationship with my father. There was not the time or the energy to analyze the particulars; neither on his part nor mine. I needed to acknowledge what had been bequeathed to me in words that would, at least, satisfy me. If he expressed the desire to explore the topic further, that would be his choice. What felt most pressing was the need to get the words out—somehow—and then let the chips fall where they would.

And finally there was an urgency to tell him that I would write about his service on the PT Boats during World War II. By late 1999, I had published a string of Op-Ed essays in major American newspapers and had a few stories and poems published in small literary magazines. A literary agent had encouraged me to complete a book-length manuscript on my experiences transitioning from the Catholic priesthood to life as a husband, father, and government employee. Efforts to market the manuscript went nowhere but my ability to churn out written “product” was established. My parents were both surprised by and supportive of my literary achievements. And so I wanted my father to know that his Navy stories, so tenderly shared during my childhood confinements with the chicken pox, measles, and the mumps, would find their way into written words.

There were important things to say and a rapidly shrinking period of time in which to say them. Eloquence and precision mattered less than the necessity to give verbal expression to the sentiments. It was becoming powerfully clear that I needed to hear the words more than my father but, on some level, my father deserved to hear them while he retained some level of comprehension and the chance to respond.

It was a midweek visit in early November when I decided that I must get the words out. Time was not on my side. Further dithering about how best to say the words was served no useful purpose.

Besides, the resistance to saying the words was building its own momentum as I allowed each overnight visit to come and go without speaking the words. Each return trip south on I-95 to Baltimore was one more missed opportunity. My father's accelerating deterioration made it less and less likely that he would be able to grasp my words and respond in any meaningful way.

And so on a chilly Wednesday evening, I showed up at my parents' home with milkshake in hand. We sat down to dinner. My father had not had a particularly good day. The smell of the meal my mother had prepared only served to aggravate the nausea that he had been contending with since early afternoon. He excused himself from the table and said he was going to lie down on his bed. His usual pattern in the evening was to sit in his recliner in the living room to watch the evening news.

This was not going according to plan. The familiar argument in my head began to gather force as I stayed at the dinner table and conversed with my mother. Tonight was not the night for telling him, the argument said. He's sick to his stomach and he's had a really rough day, the argument argued, you don't want to make him feel worse. You'll be up again on the weekend and maybe he'll be feeling better by then, yes, he'll be in a much better frame of mind on the weekend and it's only a few days away, the argument proffered. You need more time anyway, said the argument, to make sure that the words are just right..

"How about a piece of pound cake for dessert?" asked my mother.

I welcomed the intervention of her voice which broke the building force of the argument which was running through my head like a freight train.

"No thanks, Mom, I think I'll just go see how dad is doing." And before I could talk myself out of it, I was walking down the short hallway to my parents' bedroom where my father was stretched out

on the bed.

“Dad, how are you feeling?” I asked as I stepped into the room.

The room was dark, illuminated only by the light from the hallway that filtered in from the half closed door.

“Lousy,” he said. “This nausea has been with me most of the day. I can’t even tolerate the smell of food, any kind of food. I’m sorry that I can’t enjoy the milkshake you brought; why don’t you have it?”

“Maybe you’ll feel like it later,” I said. “The upset stomach will probably pass and you might be able to handle it when we’re watching TV.”

Just do it, my mind said. Just start; just get the first words out. No more talking about stomachs and milkshakes, my mind said. It was shouting now inside my head. You’re not leaving this room until you say the words, said my mind. Just do it.

“Dad, there’s a few things I’ve been wanting to say to you. Is it alright if we talk for a bit? It won’t take long.”

“OK,” he said after a brief moment of hesitation. “OK, that’s fine.”

I made myself sit down in the chair by the door. In the semi-darkness, I could barely see his face and it was impossible to read his expression. From the bed, I was certain that he could not see my face with the light from the hallway making me into a silhouette

“It’s just a few things that I wanted to say, wanted to make sure you knew; that’s all.”

“OK,” he said.

“Dad, I want you to know that I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too” he said in response, practically before I had finished speaking.

“You’ve been a good father,” I said.

“You’ve been a good son,” he said, responding even more quickly than he had to my first

statement.

I took a deep breath and allowed the silence in the room to embrace me and fill me with its stillness.

“Dad, I also want you to know that you gave me a toolbox to carry through life,” I said, “and it’s been quite a tool box, with lots of different tools. I’ve used some of them in some situations and some of them in other situations and for the most part, they’ve really served me well.” You gave me a lot to equip me for a lot of different things in my life...”

What the hell are you saying? I asked myself. Does this make any sense to him? Does this make any sense at all? I was second-guessing myself inside my head. And to my surprise, I found an answer somewhere else in my head as well: it makes sense to me and that’s enough, damn it.

“You gave me a pretty good toolbox, Dad, and I’m grateful for it, that’s all I wanted to say about that,” I said.

“OK,” he said. His voice was distinctly fainter than just minutes before. “Ohhh...” he said, that nausea is like a wave inside me.”

“I’m sorry about that, Dad,” I said, “just one quick thing.”

“OK,” he said.

“Dad, I’m really very, very proud of your service in the Navy and I remember everything you’ve ever told me about those days on the PT Boats. I promise you that I’m going to write about your service. I don’t know what form the writing will take, but I’m going to get the stories down in writing and I’m going to do my best to find a way to publish them. I’m so proud of what you did in World War II and I want to write about it.”

“OK,” he said. “Can you get your mother? I’m going to need some help here.”

“Sure, Dad, sure, I’ll get her now.”

“OK,” he said.

And then I stepped out of the room and went toward the kitchen to get my mother. And when the questions started to well up inside me: “did he understand?” and “was the toolbox thing too subtle?” and “why didn’t he want to ask questions?” and “what do you think you accomplished?” Then I dismissed them all, waving my hand in front of me as though I were clearing some thick smoke or a heavy fog that was blocking my path.

The words had been spoken. And if the timing wasn’t perfect, so be it; there was no perfect timing to begin with. And if the toolbox reference was too vague or abstract that didn’t matter in the least because the toolbox does exist. And although some of the tools are so sharp that I’ve cut myself as I used them, I knew with all certainty that they worked. If some tools need to remain in the box for the rest of my life without ever being used again, then that’s alright, too. The toolbox is something that I received from him; it’s as real as my flesh. And every tool in that box was earned because several of them were used on me.

Acknowledging the toolbox was my task. I had just done that. And I had done it to my satisfaction. Nothing mattered further.

And as to the chronicling of his service on the PT Boats, that begins here as I set these words down before me. The narratives will be chronicled. I will seek additional information I will search for PT veterans who may remember him. There are archives to be investigated. The research is something I’ve yearned to do for longer than I can remember.

What I have learned through all of this is that all the words are necessary: the words that are spoken in farewell and gratitude, the words spoken to acknowledge the pain and ambiguity, and the written words that commemorate military duty and courageous service in faraway places. If any words are reverent and holy, it is surely the words that do these things.

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