

A son's respite from dark days

By STEPHEN J. STAHLEY

THIS WINTER has been filled with raw conditions and slick surfaces that have had nothing to do with the weather. My father passed away in November. The emotional aftershock didn't begin to catch up with me until January was smothered by snow, ice and freezing rain. Digging out was a chore, literally and figuratively, that it seemed would never end.

Each new day has held pockets of inconvenience and grief. Navigation is tricky on all fronts.

It was on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, that the family assembled at my father's hospice bed in suburban Philadelphia. The lung cancer, diagnosed in July, had migrated to bones, brain and liver. The hospice staff, ever compassionate and pragmatic, had summoned us to take our leave of him. Late that Thursday night, we circled his bed, joined hands and prayed. One of my sisters, a nurse practitioner, kept vigil with him through the night.

To our great relief, my father rallied on Friday. He had smiles and warm words for everyone. We thought he might make it to Thanksgiving.

Early Saturday morning, Nov. 13, he died peacefully in the presence of two hospice staffers. They told us he held their hands, closed his eyes, and took one long last breath. The call reached me at 3:30 a.m. at my home in Baltimore.

As the oldest of his children, I was called upon to deliver the eulogy at the memorial Mass the following Saturday. In my remarks, I alluded to his service in World War II as a radioman on PT boats in the Mediterranean and the South Pacific — where he saw action in 1945. There, an enemy sniper badly wounded a crewmate as their boat patrolled a narrow river through a dense jungle.

The stories I related were drawn from the recollections he had shared with me when I was a young boy. As I endured the standard illnesses of the 1950s, my father recounted his war experiences at

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my bedside. The deepest intimacy I ever knew with him came during those bedside sessions as I waited for the measles, chicken pox and mumps to release me from their grip.

The details of those stories became more familiar to me than any nursery rhyme or fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm.

Those same stories have become an object of fascination to my son who just turned 5. Photographs from my father's Navy days, along with his campaign bars, are mounted in my son's bedroom.

He can't understand why Pop Pop left this world before he could deliver the stories himself. To my grief is added my young son's bewildered confusion about where my father has gone and why he's not coming back.

And so what feels like the longest, most unforgiving season of my life drags on. In the midst of it, I welcome the robust distraction that electoral politics always provides.

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On the personal and the na-

tional level, we live in and through our stories. Authentic war stories, it seems, preserve and celebrate the qualities we most cherish — courage, endurance, resilience and the remarkable strength of the human soul. If it did nothing else, the candidacy of John McCain reminded us of how important those stories are to us all. The man survived an ordeal in the Vietnam War that places all politics in their proper perspective.

As a Baby Boomer, I have spent a good portion of my adult life coming to terms with the generation called "The Greatest" by Tom Brokaw.

I have no quarrel with the lofty designation attributed to my parents' generation. I have immense admiration and an abiding respect for the men and women who survived the Great Depression and defeated the forces of fascism and imperialism in World War II. The deeper issue for me has been access to the hearts and minds of that noble generation. The best access, I suspect, has always been through the stories of war and survival.

John McCain's candidacy strengthened a bridge between two generations that have struggled mightily to change the world and each other.

Through the prism of his experience as a Navy veteran, his stories gave my generation a deepened awareness of the bravery and sacrifice that characterized the lives of our parents. Through the respect accorded to Mr. McCain by my contemporaries, the older generation can see that the enduring values of courage, fidelity and patriotism will always be held in high esteem.

Winter's end is finally in sight.

I will remain grateful for the candidacy of John McCain. When the days were short, dark and as heavy as wet snow, the senator from Arizona helped me to recall my best moments with my father. Those memories came when I needed them most.

Stephen J. Stahley writes from Baltimore.