

Unexpected Healing – A memoir by Amy Lloyd

“If anyone strikes my heart, it does not break, but it bursts and the flame coming out of it becomes a torch on my path.” - Hazrat Inaya.

I had arrived at the house that Tuesday evening, the day he died. When my mother’s call reached me, the panic only mildly tempered in her voice, all she said was, “It’s really bad,.” A nurse was there, holding a stethoscope to his heart, as were the two loving Filipino care givers, Arnell and Oscar. Over the last few months they had worked and slept there 24 hours and had become part of the family. My mother managed to contact the priest in time to deliver the last rites. I stood by the end of his bed, head bowed, reciting the prayers with the rest of them. My dad lay there, cross-eyed and still from the morphine. He was uncharacteristically quiet.

It startles me that I actually watched him take his last breath. Fitting I suppose because he watched me take my first. He made me and now I would carry his *DNA* to the end of my life, a strange sort of passing of the baton. I have my father’s feet: Knobby and narrow, and not especially pretty. These past several months I spent many hours massaging his feet, he liked that, and I had noticed the similarity. When they carried his body out a few hours later and his feet poked through the end of the bag, I was reminded of this again. The odd things that made me feel a part of him, here was another to add to the absurdity of death. And dying. How it all began.

My father and I were never friends. Growing up, he made fun of my looks (my Irish- Welsh genetics had proffered me a pointy chin and square masculine jaw), chided me for my spotty intelligence, and generally instilled intimidation. I regarded him suspiciously and often fearfully. His unpredictable nature was both bombastic and critical, snapping into hilarious and sweet on the turn of a dime. His illness had been with him twenty-two years, but the real end, the sharp decline, was in the last two. It was during that time when our relationship, mercifully and surprisingly, improved.

When someone is very sick, their loved ones actually get sick, too. Our sickness is one of worry, concern, and the whittling away of our energy. Inexplicably, we also carry a surplus of optimism. One has to be optimistic. When I got my dad to walk around the pool with his cane, swearing and complaining the entire five feet, I felt like the head cheerleader at the home game.

Sometimes the triumphs were smaller, like getting him to eat half a sandwich. He loved bacon on a well toasted English muffin. And still other times the best I could rally a cheer for was him sleeping through the night without keeping my mother up every hour. Often I didn’t even know what I was rooting for: wellness, the distraction from illness, the appearance of health or balance or hope or just an ordinary day where nothing, no crisis at all happened. Dying of cancer is very active, very much **a show** and it takes everyone with it.

Here’s what I learned: Watching someone die slowly is impossible, horrendous, and insurmountable. But you do it anyway. I can’t tell you when exactly, but the role of cheerleader morphed into the role of soldier. Now I had been recruited for this tour of duty.

My mother and I took turns answering the baby monitor. I had purchase one as a solution to our many worries about not hearing him from other rooms. We took turns dashing up the stairs when we heard his call: straighten the bed sheets, get more protein drink, and help him to the bathroom. We were soldiers in

the war, hyper alert for anything and we were not surprised when warfare came. Vomiting, mood swings, rage, and despair. We all were infected. “*When am I going to get over this thing?*” my child-like father would ask. The only answer was the one never replied. And what other battles was I fighting? What were our weapons? You know already the enemy is winning, that there isn’t going to be a happy ending, so the battle is for capturing every possible second left. And to be acutely present to it, pressing into the pages of your memory because both time and the disease are closing in.

Like a war zone, my parent’s house descended into chaos. Every possible surface was filled with mountains of medicine bottles, scraps of paper, and half eaten bowls of food. Upon entering the kitchen in search for scissors and discovering my mom popping open another bottle of wine, nearly toppling the cat off the table as she poured, I made her promise we would never slide into the likes of “Grey Gardens.” This made her laugh. It was good to make her laugh. I made a point to do that when I could. Laughter was a tricky tool in my family. Funny, but often duplicitous, especially to my dad who built a career on jokes.

What comes with a tidal wave personality like his was a well equipped vocabulary for killing anything in its path and his viciousness took no prisoners. My dad craved gobs of attention, with appetites both extravagant and massive. A daughter of strength and moderation was no match for him and our interactions were frictional. We never really liked each other.

My childhood experience of my father and most notably was the dinner table event where humor and its *darker side* first made its power known. I am one of 5 children, though in truth it feels as though I was an only child. I don’t remember conversations ever including what we may have learned in history class that day or who we had a crush on, but I do most vividly remember the competition amongst my siblings of who could make my father laugh of even more crippling, who could use one of us as the target. This engendered a strange sort of cruelty, *the mean clown*, and the proverbial rapier wit was fatal for me. I wasn’t fast enough to dodge the stabs of my older brother, who could twist a phrase and load it with acid before hurling it on my behalf. After all, someone had to die at the dinner table and it was usually me. My agreed upon shortcomings, namely my intelligence and looks, were fodder for them. When stung with a zinger, my father would give rousing cheer. I do not like my siblings and I am not certain I even love them. Though my recollections of the verbal and emotional abuse are very clear, they – when confronted – have chosen to be emotional amnesiacs. Convenient. Their total lack of consciousness bred my wobbly sense of safety and prompted a breaking away from my family for many years. They didn’t take kindly to that.

“*You have enemies? Good. Then you have stood up for something sometime in your life.*” (Winston Churchill.) I had made enemies, but I had regained my sense of self back and that was well worth the bloody exchange. Back to the end, the last 6 weeks of his life.

While spending most of the day in bed and rarely getting downstairs, he asked me to read the Sunday comics to him. This event involved explaining verbally what was in each picture. I employed various cartoon-like voices to better create the world of the comic strips. He found my interpretations less than stellar and let me know, but complimented me for a valiant effort. It remains a lovely moment for me. Another lighter moment: Upon administering medicinal marijuana in lollypop form to ease his nausea, my father looked up from his bed, sucker neatly wedged between his lips and said, “Hey Ames- did you ever think it would come to this, feeding your father pot?” No, I never did. He thanked me often for all the help.

“I am so lucky,” he once said after... well does it matter?

“No, I am the lucky one,” was my reply. Those wondrous moments slip in quietly like morning light, genuine and warm.

Some days I lay next to him and hold his hand while we listened to music or watched baseball. The World Series was on and he tried to explain the game to me. Time was moving and he had only so much left. Those afternoons I would bring my arsenal of good cheer for that was within my reach. That is what I could do. I read David Sedaris to him, brought funny stories from the paper, (one he really laughed at that involved a man blaming his cat for surfing a number of pornographic websites) and made him brownies. Throughout my entire life my dad lived on one side of the chasm and me the other, but this illness spun a thread that reached across and held us together.

Most of the time I held it together, both for him and for my mom. I stuffed it all inside until I could get home and release the vapors of anguish. There was one moment though when even I couldn't soldier it through. I remember the day was about two weeks before his death. My father loved the TV channel where they played music. He particularly loved the Broadway station. **La Cage Aux Folies** was playing and in a burst of energy, my father in a rather robust voice chimed in with the refrain, “*I am what I am..*” It was the most vigor I had seen him have in months and it made me smile for the rest of the day. Quite the contrary came a week later. One afternoon I was laying next to him, trying to soothe him, his hand slipping out and away from mine. He was fidgeting and angry and rolled over. I could hear the labored breathing and grew alarmed at the change of his skin. I noticed that particular day he looked ghoulishly white and pasty, a reminder of the disease and its residency in his body. Over the TV came the slow refrain of Barbara Streisand singing, “*Happy Days are here again.*” The picture of his nearly inert body, his twitching feet searching for the covers and the dark evening light broke the dam and my tears gave way. That day I lost the battle.

The funeral was a circus. Having gained a reputation as the dark sheep of the family, the one who left, my attendance was met coldly. Death becomes so personal that it is almost comedic. I witnessed all the hands gripping too tightly to the cocktail glasses, the false frozen smiles, and the well intentioned, impotent words. I stayed upstairs and lay on the bed where my father had been, thinking about him and hoping where ever he went it was peaceful.

Grieving isn't about forgetting. It's about dividing up one's feelings. Portions to mourn and release and portions to re-claim and build again. It is architecture and construction- creative, tedious and unpredictable.

At his memorial everyone spoke of his large appetites, and his robust joy of life. I do not share that with him. I am moderate, cautious of this world, a small foot in it at best. To my credit, I have built a solid relationship with myself, having navigated my interior deeply and thoroughly. My dad did not. He couldn't or wouldn't access his personal self I suppose because his public self was so bright and playful. The truth is I believe what lay deep in there terrified him and so he scooted away from everything too emotional or candid. Uncomfortable with intimacy, with anything that involved self reflection, we were strangers from foreign lands, joined together in crisis.

The day after he died my mother immediately had the handicap rails and ramps, bars and stools all stripped. She wanted no reminders. There is a steely practicality to my mother, her Irish ruggedness, her “forward moving, stay in line soldier” attitude. We lost this battle but we have to keep moving. She confessed there were times in these many months that were so excruciating that she wanted to get in her car and drive far far away. The anguish of watching someone die is so overwhelming, so impossible that it is to marvel anyone can manage it. When the brink of my despair broke and fell before me, I was shocked to see that same pain created something even more astonishing: My heart had grown and taken on a new shape.

The weeks afterwards: random moments that break me up. Weird reminders, wheelchairs, canes, the smell of bacon. What do we all silently promise to do to the ones who made us? **We promise to hold their hand.** Cancer was my prison, dad was the prisoner, and the light through the cell window was love. He wasn't freed in the traditional sense, but I believe his heart was given redemption. So was mine. I never did impress him much with my intelligence or wit nor did he me. Our conversations were never deep. Who would have guessed that I felt the closest to him when in the silence we held hands and watched CSI? There was no need to dazzle with words-words were futile and false. But I had the most elegant of weapons- a blunt sword that required simply holding, not brandishing. It was what reflected off the shiny tip that mattered. The picture of father and daughter connected by flesh, quiet and undisguised.

I do not have regrets. I spent precious time with him that weaved the smallest strand we could both tread across. It was a joint effort and one that I know involved a series of miracles. My heart is shattered for sure, but like a mirror that has fallen to the ground and the pieces have cracked and splintered, they can also be glued together. More profoundly, what is now reflected back will be better. For that is the thing about death. You change. And if you were present to it you will absorb this experience into the gallery of your life. Turns out, you don't acquire wisdom: You become it.

As horrifying as it sounds, disease is a gift. All this time I thought I was showing up for him, administering mercy and kindness to help with the transition. But I was there for me. I suppose I had always wanted a close relationship with my father, I would have asked that he always be kind to me, respectful, and supportive. I would have hoped he and I could have been great friends, with private jokes, and mutual tastes. We weren't and I have often wondered what other woman I would be had I had his nurturing. My dad was not my hero. He was an unformed man, demonized by his excesses and crippled emotional blankness. Sometimes when I lie on my bed, I reach my hand across the pillow like I did all those months. His hand isn't there, but I can see his face looking back at me, with gratitude in his eyes. Never underestimate the power of holding a hand.

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“Control the Pain”- *Raw Magazine* Fall 2009 Edition

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The Secret Lives of Freaks- young adult novel. *VarsityPrints.com/* e-book publication. 2009

“Idebenone”- *valleyscenemagazine.com/* Beauty product review.

“The Floating Classroom” monthly column- *L.A. Family Life Magazine*.

“Steps” -*Humdingerzine* 2006- (personal essay)

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