

Waiting For My Father To Die – Lynne Golodner

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I'm going to miss you so much. I choked out the words as I stroked his hand, my thumb grazing the smooth outline of his fingers, the soft pad of his palm.

I'm going to miss all of you, he said. Outside, the world was white and swirling, cold and hollow. My father lay on a hospital bed in the den in my childhood home.

I cried a lot during the two years of my father's illness. I cried when the doctor gave 30% odds of survival with his diagnosis of acute myeloid leukemia, an incurable blood cancer, and again two years later when another doctor said there was nothing more to do. I cried suddenly and unexpectedly – while driving my children to sports or school, in meetings with clients, during every episode of *This Is Us*.

Before he got sick, I had believed that my parents would live a very long time, that we would be the exceptional family – no sudden heart attacks or prolonged illness. They'd live into their 90s, maybe beyond 100, and we'd celebrate every birthday and laugh in the face of death. I assumed they'd walk down the aisle at the weddings of my four children, cradle great-grandchildren in their arms.

Dad and I were close. Three weeks after college graduation, he drove me to New York and helped me find an apartment for my first newspaper job. When my editor transferred me to the Capitol Hill bureau, Dad helped me buy furniture, took me for a fancy dinner and helped return an empty keg after a party. When I decided to move back to Detroit, he flew to Washington, D.C., packed up my apartment, and drove home with me, getting as giddy as I did when we crossed the Mason-Dixon Line.

Years later, when I started a marketing business, I celebrated with him when I landed a new client and sought his advice when I worried about not earning enough money. I vented to him whenever I had an argument with one of my teenagers or felt frustrated by my ex-husband. When I was divorcing, Dad sat in the courtroom for support as I stood before the judge, heart racing, hands shaking.

He always said the right thing, and he said it simply: Don't worry, Linnie. It'll all work out. Do the work in front of you, and you'll always have enough.

He died at 81 and a half, a decent old age. He had perfect vision and played hockey until he was 70 in an over-30 league because the over-40s were too slow for him. He liked vodka on the rocks and a thick steak. He loved traveling to Japan, riding the bullet train and eating shabu shabu, and he loved his work in scrap metal. He never worried, not even when he got his diagnosis at 79, and my mother, sister, and I twisted our hands and asked, *Why him?* "Does it matter?" Dad said. "There isn't anything we can do about it."

I pored over medical explanations, desperate for answers. It was a rare disease caused by previous cancer treatments (which Dad never had), smoking (which Dad never did) or exposure to radiation or dangerous chemicals (it's possible, I guess). I could make no sense of this malady having afflicted my healthy father, and therefore I could not accept it.

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I don't know if he was afraid to die. I never asked, and he never said, but that was typical. Dad focused on here and now, not on what might happen tomorrow.

Still, he fought to grab more time. Shortly after the diagnosis, Dad checked into the hospital to receive blood transfusions and to surgically insert a port for ongoing infusions of medicine to help his body produce more blood. I insisted on staying with him. I couldn't sleep on the pull out chair, even with the sheet and pillow a nurse laid out for me. My thoughts swirled. How much time would we have? How much of it would be spent in the echoing halls of hospitals?

But my father could always sleep through anything and while I lay awake, I watched him in the arc of moonlight coming through the window, seeing not an ashen, sick man, but the easy-going, take-it-all-in-stride father who had always been there for me.

For the next two years, my mother, sister and I accompanied Dad every fourth week to the cancer center for infusions of medicine to boost his body's ability to generate new blood, joking with nurses, propping pillows behind Dad's head, sipping coffee and scrolling on our phones to pass the time. When Dad turned 80, we flew to Utah where my brother was building a house, and celebrated what we saw as a bonus birthday. I asked each of the 10 grandchildren to write a message to Papa and created a book with their words and pictures. That spring, I had launched a podcast with Dad as my first guest; that episode aired on his 80th birthday, and we listened to it on vacation, tears trailing down our cheeks.

We filled the two years of his illness with conversation, laughter and meals around my parents' dining room table. Except for sleeping 12 hours a night and walking a bit more slowly, he didn't seem to decline that much, so I could lull myself into believing that we'd have more time than the doctors predicted. We even continued our years-long tradition of a weekly lunch, just the two of us – except when his blood count was too low to risk going to crowded restaurants.

After the diagnosis, my oldest son, Asher, started calling Dad regularly and the two grew incredibly close. It was like the illness supercharged their relationship.

I knew the end would come; I just hoped it would be far in the future. I wanted Dad to defy the prognosis – he'd always been exceptional.

In the middle of December, two years and some months after his diagnosis, on a dark winter night, Dad, Mom and I sat in the hospital room, and waited for the doctor to update us on whether the treatments were successful. At that point, he had spent four months in the hospital, in an antiseptic room away from everyone he loved, trying one last experimental course of treatments.

The doctor's shoulders sloped and he wouldn't meet our eyes. "The treatments just aren't working," he said.

I felt like I couldn't breathe. Mom looked out the window. Dad seemed calm as ever.

"So what does this mean?" I asked.

"You could have two weeks or two months," the doctor said.

"I'd like a steak at Eddie Merlot's," Dad said.

"Is that ok?" I asked the doctor.

"If you feel up to it, do whatever you want," he said to my dad.

I reached for a tissue. "Saturday night," I said. "I'll make the reservation."

My aunt and uncle in Florida booked plane tickets. My aunt and uncle in town cleared their weekend calendar. We sat at the longest table in the restaurant, seven of the grandchildren crowded around one end. Dad drank orange juice, while the rest of us ordered wine and cocktails. No one toasted, "L'chaim," Hebrew for "to life." We toasted my dad, and the fact that we were all there together, one last time.

Ten days later, he fell. We rushed him to the hospital, where we learned that his blood count was the lowest it had ever been.

But Dad rallied. He insisted on transfusions – three units of blood, the most he'd ever had in one sitting. I didn't understand why he bothered. Early in his illness, a transfusion gave Dad energy for weeks. By the end, it gave him hours. I tried to talk him out of it. "Why bother?" I said. "It's so hard on you, and it doesn't last long anymore. Why put yourself through it?"

Looking back, I realize he needed a burst of energy – it was time to put everything in order.

When my mother, sister and I kissed him goodbye at the hospital that day, I thought it would be my last time touching his soft cheek. I drove home in a cloud of tears and barely slept that night, dreading the call.

But morning dawned in silence, and I decided to comfort myself with breakfast at a fancy restaurant. I sat beside a fireplace with my journal and a book. I sipped coffee, ate a Belgian waffle with berries and whipped cream. I tried to write, but nothing came. I tried to read, but scanned the same page over and over.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed. A picture of my father lit up the screen.

"Lynnie." My father's voice, stronger than it had been in weeks. "Come to the hospital. I have some things for you to do."

I tore out of the restaurant. Sitting up in bed, Dad was all business. He told me where to find a folder for my parents' cars, how to return his car after he died, and who to call at the dealer when Mom's lease ended. "Make sure she pays cash for a new car," he said.

He told me to write his obituary and submit it to trade newspapers in his industry – American Metal Market, the Institute of Scrap, Iron and Steel, and Metal Bulletin, along with the Detroit Jewish News and the Detroit Free Press.

"Find my resume," he said. "I was the chapter president for the Michigan Scrap Institute. Call Tommy and Abe for quotes." He gave me their numbers.

He asked me to call his cousin and my aunt, his sister, to let them know he had days, maybe hours. He told me where to find the insurance information, what Medicare would pay for. He asked me to get his razor and have my husband come to the hospital to give him a shave.

“Tell Ashi when he goes up to get his diploma, I’m there with him,” he said. I pictured my son graduating from high school in six months, a row of family members cheering as he walked across the stage, one seat empty.

I took notes on my phone, riveted to Dad’s words. I would do everything he asked and do it well.

He asked me to distribute his books, to give my brother his collection of *National Geographics*, to give my daughter his 1950s milkshake maker. He asked for her to make him one last vanilla shake when he returned home later that day.

“Make sure Mom makes the right decisions,” he said.

“About what?”

“Anything and everything,” he said. “Hover around her.”

Later that day, Dad came home by ambulance and settled into a hospital bed in the den of my childhood home, the home he built with my mother when I was a year old. My mother had hired a team of caregivers to sit by his side around the clock. He hung on until my brother arrived from Illinois and then he slipped into the space between this world and the next.

I kept thinking about how he’d said he’d miss us all. I wondered where he would go, if there was missing there. I believe in the supernatural, but my father, a pragmatist, always scoffed at my spiritual musings, my Runes and incense, the signs I insisted I saw in the clouds—angel wings or a heart. Days earlier, when the rabbi visited, my father had said, “When I’m dead, I’m in the ground, and that’s that.”

For 48 hours, we milled about the house while Dad passed on. This was the first time I had ever witnessed the dying process; I was surprised by how long it took. *Is he in pain?* I asked the Hospice nurse. *We’ve given him morphine*, she said. *He isn’t feeling anything*. So why did it take so long to go? I was finally ready for what would come next, done with being suspended between what I knew and what I feared.

Finally, on Thursday night, a caregiver opened the den door and called for my mother. “He’s gone,” she said quietly. Mom called my siblings and me to her room, pulling us into a huddle, our heads touching. She wailed. My sister cried. My stoic brother’s face was wet.

I had no tears left. I was floating, watching everything with supreme curiosity.

Downstairs, I stared at all the stricken faces. When the funeral home representatives came to take my father’s body, a young man with a scraggly beard and prayer fringes dangling over his waistband, said, “Can I see Norman?” He knew nothing about my dad except the name he’d read on a piece of paper, but with that simple question, he acknowledged my father’s humanity, even in death. He saw what I saw—that my father was still a person to be

cherished. I watched the man walk into the den while everyone – cousins, aunts, uncles, all 10 grandchildren – fled as far from the body as they could. I wanted to bear witness, to see what happens after life leaves a person. I wanted to cling to the present, the way Dad always did.

In an hour, my father's body had shrunk, grown waxy and gray. Jews don't look upon death readily. We do not display open caskets, and we bury our kin quickly, believing the soul lingers until it is put to rest in the ground. My family always sat shiva for the shortest time possible, cut short conversations about death and never visited a cemetery unless it was for a funeral we were obligated to attend.

But I've always been different from my family. When my children were little, I took them to the cemetery where my grandparents are buried. "There's your name," I told my youngest son, Shaya, pointing to my grandfather's grave. I wanted to create connections between the living and the dead. I told my children stories of those I loved who had passed on. I embraced the silence of the cemetery, trodding along the soft grass, brushing my fingers over the smooth stones.

Now I wanted to look death in the face, to escort my father to the tunnel. I loved him that much.

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In the Jewish tradition, a child is supposed to mourn the death of a parent for 11 months by reciting Kaddish, a prayer exalting the virtues of a merciful God without mentioning death or the loved one lost. Mourners recite Kaddish three times daily at services and on the Sabbath and holidays. Many people who never go to synagogue show up after a parent dies just to say this prayer. The person in mourning, or observing *yahrtzeit* (the anniversary of a death), stands while the congregation sits. The standing recite the prayer aloud, while everyone else stays silent except to say *amen*.

I had planned to say Kaddish for my father in synagogue, but because of the pandemic, I could only say it over Zoom during online services, in sweatpants in my living room. My year of mourning ended before the pandemic did, so I never got to stand amid the congregation and wait for their *amen*. I experienced the stages of loss without community, but that's probably how Dad would have wanted it. I can hear him now. *Why waste your time, Lynn? Go do something fun. Be with the kids. Remember me with a piece of key lime pie and the Sunday New York Times*

On the first anniversary of Dad's death, I lit the memorial candle and let it burn for 24 hours. The next day, I went to the cemetery with my mother and sister. Dad's name was etched on gray stone, along with his Hebrew name and his family roles: husband, father, grandfather. The dates of his birth and his death.

We laid stones on his grave as evidence that he is remembered. “What a beautiful day,” my mother said. It was 40 degrees in December with the sun shining. In Michigan, we call that warm.

In my father’s last months, I saved his voice mails, but in the year and a half since he left this world, I have never played them. I hear his voice in my head, and that is enough. I miss him in the oddest moments but not constantly, as I imagined I would. I want his advice, but I don’t need it. I know what he would say. More than anything, I just want to sit with him and talk, and listen. I think that never would have gotten old.

*Lynne Golodner is the author of eight books and thousands of articles, including *The Flavors of Faith: Holy Breads*, *Hide and Seek: Jewish women and hair covering*, and two poetry collections. She teaches writing around the world and is the founder of the signature course, *Finding Your Voice at Midlife*, as well as the host of the *Make Meaning Podcast*. Lynne lives in Huntington Woods, Michigan with her husband and four teens.*