

For My Father

By Jim Powell

The past couple of weeks has been an amazing time. That may sound like an odd word to use when discussing the death of your father. A war of so many emotions rages in my heart, and I'm sure in the hearts of those who love him.

Sometimes grief wins a battle, and I cry like a baby. Sometimes anger as I howl in rage... at nothing.

Yet as time moves on, it's respect, and indeed awe that calms me, and comforts me. The respect for his amazing life, and his death.

He did not want death. He feared death. But there were things he feared more.

My Mom's only brother passed away over Christmas, and Stephen and I rushed to California on Christmas day to find him lying death-like in intensive care, hooked up to an obscene array equipment that controlled every bodily function, except his mind. At first we were comforted in the knowledge that man's best technology was working to save our Uncle Buddy.

But as expectant hours turned into days, it became clear that Buddy wasn't there anymore.

I told this story to Dad... what should we do. Should his daughters "pull the plug"; Dad seemed aghast at the question, and said something to the effective of "oh for God's sake yes". That type of life and or death scared him, and he said so.

Dad's physical body was slowly failing him, and there was little anyone could do about it. Dad didn't let on to me in such direct language but told others close to him of his fears. He wrote about it in his journal, which I have not read, but the words on the entry of the last day of his life said it directly "wake up, it's time to die". He rode his bicycle that day, and that evening after talking with Steve on the phone and visiting with Karen and Rachael, he died in the space of a few moments.

So while I can't bring myself to stand here and say "this is the way Dad wanted it", I can say that he lived a full life on his own terms, and died a death that in it's way spared us all the pain that could have been.

Dad loved his life, and his family. Karen and her children brought Dad a lot of joy, friendship and most of all love. My brother and I were close to Dad and I regret that my three nephews – Max, Aidan and now Oliver Elwin McGowan Powell will not have the opportunity to discover their grandfather the same way Stephen and I did as we became adults.

For me, my father kind of started off as one person, split into two and then merged back into one as I grew and matured. In the beginning there was Dad... then in the 60's there was Professor Powell, Non Violent War Lord of the Revolution. I remember so well when this split took place.

If you come to the house after the service, or look at the website you'll see some of the old pictures of this transformation. He started out looking like... I don't know what. Brush-cut, white shirt, black tie, big thick glasses – all he needed was a plastic pocket protector to complete the look. So of course, little Jimmy had the same buzz-cut and we would sit for dinners together and Mom would throw parties over on Fordham drive to entertain the University Social Circle.

Any then one day something magical happened. Dad got tenure. I swear, in my memory it was like a transformation out of an old horror movie... one sip of the tenure potion and Dad was transformed not into the wolfman, but into what looked like Fidel Castro. Actually, maybe there isn't that much of a difference anyway.

Suddenly my friends were saying things like "sheez, Jimmy – what happened to your Dad?"

At the age of 10 or 11, I just wasn't really sure. But I did figure out, eventually, that while lots of things may've changed on the outside, he was still the same "Dad" on the inside... but without Mom's influence anymore it became clear that this Dad on this inside, while unchanged, was, uh, different than most. I think back on so many moments in my life that were unique experiences with Dad.

When I was 12, Dad shipped me off to Texas for the summer on a Greyhound bus. He just loaded me on the bus one evening and said something to the effect of "get off in Amarillo, your Aunt Jane and Uncle Harold will be there to get you."

When I turned 13 – a big event in a boy's life – my friends said "Jimmy, whad'you get? A bicycle? A walkie talkie? No... I'd been given my own copy – inscribed in the cover by Dad – of the Little Red Book: Quotations from Chairman Mao.

At 14 he shipped me off to my very first solo demonstration in Washington with Ken Sherman and his group. Our job was to dress up as Viet Cong, and “play dead” in the driveway of the White House and hopefully block Nixon’s car from getting in. Our goal was also to get arrested. In the end everyone was arrested and loaded on buses to jail. I was evidently too little and they threw me back like an underlimit fish. I walked backed dejectedly to the rallying point with Harry Davis (who was the only person there who did not WANT to get arrested) and called Dad to tell him the bad news. He told me that he was proud of me; I almost expected him to say (but he didn’t) someday son, you’ll be old enough to go to jail... but not now.

At 19 or 20 I got my pilot’s license and I was SO proud of that... I remember talking to Dad about it and he was thrilled as well. “Nah, Jimmuh, that’s great... do you suppose you could fly me up to drop leaflets over the crowds at Niagara Falls?”

I did take him flying and I’ll never forget that experience...

I shoe-horned him into this little two-seat piper aircraft... I sat shaking with anticipation... I was SO excited. I was so serious about my pre-flight checklist as I went through the instruments, gauges and radio settings.... I talked with an authoritative voice into the radio to the control tower requesting take-off clearance and permission to depart the terminal area.

As I finally got cleared for takeoff we rolled down the runway and vaulted into the sky and as I leveled off and cleared the traffic pattern I looked over expectantly at my father... and found him sound asleep with his head nodded over onto his chest.

“Dad -- Dad!”

“Oh, hi- oh, this is great Jimmuh.”; he gazed out the window for a moment and then turned to me and said “Nah, Jimmuh, is there a bathroom in here?”

The first time my wife Debbie met Dad was when Dad came down to Allegany to visit me at Camp where I worked as a counselor. We were going to have a picnic out in the woods and Deb, Dad and I went out to a spot in the woods next to a beaver pond where I’d often go. As Deb and I set about preparing things, Dad grabbed a book and sat down on the pine needles, leaning against a tree. Within a few moments, Debbie told me in a startled whisper “Jim... I think he’s asleep!”; I said don’t worry about it, that’s just my Dad. Little did she know at the time that this sleeping bear of a man would be as a father to her the next 27 years.

I'm sure we've all shared the same experience of Dad talking about his inability to get to sleep at night, and chuckled inwardly at his statement of "Uh, I just don't know why I can't get to sleep."

When I saw a little boy, Dad would read poetry to me... I remember, barely, some snippets of Robert Frost – a Road not Taken, but what I remember most was the "tiger" poem.

Dad seemed to love it and would read it with such enthusiasm – he'd say "tiger tiger" and I'd just squeal with delight, and sometimes hide under the covers.

I don't really remember the end as I'd often drop off to sleep almost instantly.

So now, Dad, I'll read it to you:

The Tyger, by William Blake

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies,
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare sieze the fire?

What the shoulder, and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand and what dread feet?

What the hammer? and what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil ? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Sleep well Dad.