

## **As He Lay Dying**

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Leo Tolstoy said that all happy families are pretty much alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Happy or unhappy, let's just say that I come from an eccentric family. This was brought home to me during the final few days of my father's life around Memorial Day of 2012.

He had lived independently in his own apartment past his ninety-fourth birthday and, while frail and having some chronic ailments, was still able to lead his life. He had become rather geographically circumscribed, largely to the immediate neighborhood of his apartment in Evanston, Illinois. Even so, he was still making occasional forays to musical programs at Northwestern University. His mind was perfectly clear: he spent his time reading, learning, and enjoying his enormous collection of classical music CDs. He managed his own finances and in general ran his own life. As he approached ninety five, however, biological inevitability started catching up with him.

About a year earlier he had at last made arrangements for me to be able to manage his affairs if he no longer could. This meant he had to share the arrangements of his will and trust for the first time. Until then I had been completely unaware of what he intended. When ten months later he finally concluded he just couldn't keep up, he asked me to handle the usual bill paying, but also the management of his investment portfolio. He had always been a shrewd investor, although with limited capital, and he continued to have a clear view of the financial markets. He watched Bloomberg and the ticker tape crawler regularly. He did his own research on what stocks to buy or sell. I offer this financial review only because it will play a role in our story.

Age and infirmity finally began to win the day. He entered the hospital, was released, re-entered and so on - a not uncommon experience towards the end of life. He moved to a rehab facility and concluded that when he was done with the rehab, he would move into an assisted living facility. This was the first time he ever remotely considered the idea. He had picked one out and started making

arrangements with them when his medical condition took a sudden turn for the worse.

As I received updates from my brother and sisters who live in the Chicago area, I realized we were very likely approaching the end game. It seemed to me that multiple organ systems were now out of equilibrium, with a team of several specialists engaged in a "whack-a-mole" attempt to restore that equilibrium. I mean no disrespect to his medical staff - they all seemed competent, caring professionals. The very finely balanced physiological equilibria the body must hold have evolved over eons chemically, neurologically, hormonally, and probably using several mechanisms we don't yet know. Trying to manage the body using rational calculations of electrolytes, drugs and so on works only up to a point. I concluded he was very likely past that point.

Sure enough, on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, I got a call from my sister who was with him in the hospital. She said he told her "the fight is over," and that he had something very, very important to tell me, but it had to be delivered directly to me. Susan and I promised to drive up first thing Memorial Day morning. As we drove to Chicago, about every hour my sister or brother would call to find out exactly where we were and to get an estimate of our arrival time. We felt like we were in a desperate race with the grim reaper.

We screeched into the hospital parking lot in the early afternoon and ran to his room. We found him in bed, heavily wired to various medical devices and with an oxygen mask strapped to his face. My siblings and my three nieces were all present, although one other brother particularly alienated from my father would have nothing to do with the proceedings.

Susan leaned over to kiss him, but he waved her away, looking for me. My sister told Dad I had arrived and was ready for his vital message. My brother undid the oxygen mask. Anytime the mask was undone, a beeping filled the room to alert staff that the oxygen supply was interrupted. I leaned over the bed while everyone else, including attending clergy, leaned in to catch the wisdom of his dying words. With a weak voice he rasped, "United Technologies." I felt like I had just stepped into the famous "plastics" scene in *The Graduate*. Then, "Take a look

at buying United Technologies for the trust. They just reported good earnings, I like the CEO and the stock has room to run." This was the vital message? Buy United Technologies?

Being true Laufs, my brother, sisters and nieces looked up the United Technologies price on their cell phones and gave the current quote. The quote satisfied him that the price was still a buy. My sister did in fact buy United Technologies for her own account the next day, still owns it and has made good money on it. Here's the disconnect, though: my father knew full well that once he died, and that this was a matter of days at best, I as successor trustee would have been in the business of liquidating the investments, not adding to them.

This was a typical example of my father's inability to be straightforward in his communications. I realized at once that this important message was a transparently bogus ruse - he wanted me there as he lay dying, but was unable to just say that. This long-standing behavior formed one major reason for my brother's deep estrangement. Somewhere along the line, I had come to the realization that his behavior wasn't going to change and had given up getting my knickers in a twist over it.

Over the next two days, the family came and went, talking with the usual family loquacity and raconteurs' observations, and eccentricity ruled in full vigor. At one point Dad mumbled something. My brother went through the drill with the mask and heard him ask to hear Bach's Goldberg Variations. My nieces immediately started searching their iPhones for an on-line recording. Catalina found one and played it as she held her phone to him. It was a very short recording. He said, "That's only the theme - the genius is in the variations!" Madeline found a recording by Glenn Gould that contained much more and started playing it. Dad immediately started vehemently shaking his head NO!, declaring he didn't want to hear such dry and mechanical playing of this monumental work.

I realized that there was a CD back at his apartment with Daniel Barenboim playing the Goldberg. We had been going through his thousands of CDs trying to find the ten or twelve he planned to take into the assisted living place as the very distillation of the classical canon. This CD was high on his list, and I had found it

and set it aside. While we had been looking, he told me that as unlikely as he originally thought it was, "Barenboim's recording is the definitive Goldberg Variations available." After the Glenn Gould rejection I did make it to his apartment later to fetch this definitive Barenboim.

Some members may recall John Tew's fine paper on the healing powers of music. John recounted that he regularly listened to the Goldberg Variations - particularly his personal favorite - yes, the Glenn Gould recording. My father is no longer available to have that debate with John, so we will just have to declare it a draw, recognizing that music connoisseurs love to argue which performance they rule "definitive."

Somewhere along the line, he told the four children present that he was very proud of each of us. This was more praise than any of us had ever heard from him in our lifetimes. While perhaps somewhat late, his praise was heartfelt and warmly received. One sister in particular was deeply moved, saying that it was very important to her to have heard that.

On Wednesday morning, my father dismissed me and Susan, telling us, "I have said everything I wanted to say and just have to get this over with now." He told us to go back to normal operations in Cincinnati, but asked the Chicago based family to make sure some family member was always with him. Thus dismissed, we sent my sisters to the cafeteria to catch their lunch before we left.

Susan and I took this time to say good-bye to Dad for what we all knew was the last time. We were on either side of the bed and we each took one of his hands in ours. He looked straight up at Susan and mumbled something under the oxygen mask. I once again undid the mask, leaned over and listened. As I heard his final words to us, I broke out laughing. Susan immediately asked, "What did he say?" I told her, "*che gelida manina*." This comes from Rudolpho's opening aria in La Boheme - "your little hand is cold." Not bad - the very end of life and he was still able to give an apropos and funny line he knew both of us would understand and appreciate.

He slipped away in the early hours on Friday, my brother with him and the Goldberg Variations playing in the background.

It took us some days to get a death certificate. None of the small army of doctors in attendance wanted to sign. I leave it up to our physicians to speculate why this might be. I personally suspect none wanted to harm his batting average by signing. In the end the certificate was signed by the very young Nigerian immigrant "hospitalist," the very bottom of the medical food chain, but nominally the coordinator of multi-specialty care.

If outcome statistics are the reason, the doctors entirely misapprehended the situation. This could make a textbook case of a good death. Ninety five years of life; lived independently up until the very end; clear minded and able to see humor into the final hours; dying surrounded by family; listening to music that showed mankind's genius. This is the natural order of things and a very fine end in an otherwise Darwinian nature.

With that Memorial Day and my father's death now history, we approach another Memorial Day. I can't help but bear in mind Herodotus' famous lines in Book I of his History: "After all, no one is stupid enough to prefer war to peace; in peace sons bury their fathers and in war fathers bury their sons."