

“I want to show you something,” my father says as he extends his bear-paw sized hand. I am giddy with anticipation. Walking hand-in-hand, my father’s chest proudly puffed inside his soft-grey three-piece suit. His stride is deliberately slow so my six-year-old steps can keep an easy pace. As he escorts me down a hallway of the hospital where he works as the administrator, he points out a series of colored footpaths he designed, explaining how they are meant to guide patients and families through the maze of hospital departments.

“Nobody naturally looks at the ceiling while they are walking,” he says with a cherubic smile. “Everyone looks at the ground. So why not put markers on the floor, like the yellow brick road?” He speaks with a simple elegance. Straightforward and filled with joy.

I had no idea where we were walking. In hindsight, I am certain my father did.

We pause where the pink path diverges from the green. My father points to the continuation of the pink line and says, “That leads to the labor and delivery unit. That’s where babies are born.” His smile glows as he continues to speak, “And this green line leads to the Intensive Care Unit, for people who are really, really sick.” We stand for a moment as he tells me about the program he developed requiring the nursing staff to rotate between these two areas specifically so they can be reminded of the full cycle of life. And before we resume our walk he adds, “Please know this: I would never want to be in the Intensive Care Unit. I would much rather that money, time and energy be put toward my grandchildren’s education.”

My heart begins to race as thoughts swirl inside my head, “Did he just say he expects to have *grandchildren*? That would mean I would have to be a mother!”

Thirty years later, the seeds he planted in this conversation would come full bloom.

His wish for grandchildren had come true. They were five and six by the time he died. During the last six months of his life, I brought them to visit nearly every day. He loved to run his hands through his granddaughter’s curly hair.

I rarely saw my father cry. One night before he was to have a procedure, he whispered to me, "I just don't understand why no one is asking me what *I* want." A few moments passed and as he wiped his face with his ever-present white handkerchief, before adding, "The hardest part of all this is not being able to see my grandchildren grow up." He knew his death was approaching. He only explored cancer treatments to appease my mother. After all, he was very clear that he would much rather that time, money and energy be spent on his grandchildren's education.

My father more commonly shed tears of joy. A few weeks after his procedure, my mother arranged for a small concert to be performed in their home. Though he was too weak to leave the house, my father was always the epitome of elegance. He dressed in his favorite silk smoking-jacket embroidered with green dragons and orange and pink begonias. Despite his pallor, he was radiant. He held my mother's hand while his head gracefully swayed to the serenity of the music, both cheeks glistening. My father knew how to savor what he loved.

The last time I saw him cry was the most painful. It was four days before he died. He had scheduled a visit with his long-time doctor. The room was already cramped with my father sitting in a wheelchair. My mother and I barely fit once the doctor arrived. His knees kissed my father's as they sat face-to-face. Yet somehow, it was as if my father were in his three-piece soft, grey suit, chest puffed out with pride and elegance, as he asked his doctor to arrange for hospice care at home. It wasn't until I pushed his chair into the hallway that my father's tears surfaced, "I guess that means we aren't going to take that cruise." This was his last wish, he now acknowledged, would not come to pass.

He was restless his last night alive. Lying in bed just before sunset, he asked me to clear the objects off the bureau in front of his window, "They are blocking the view!" His soft voice articulated a clear demand. His final words spoken to me just as the full moon began to rise, "Now all I want to do is sleep."

And so he did.

He died with his hands over his heart. Exactly how my mother and he promised each other.

My father's courage to speak plainly throughout his life was an unexpected gift. His ongoing communication of values and priorities sprinkled throughout his life is what

now gives my entire family peace of mind for the rest of our lives. We are not only clear we supported him in living his life, on his terms, through his final exhale, we also now see how his actions, his words, his love, taught us how to do the same for ourselves and each other, and most importantly, his grandchildren.