

# Letting Him Go

Category: Holding On

written by Tracy Gordon Fox | February 6, 2019

My mother held on to hope until my father took his last breath—hope that he'd overcome the debilitating effects of hemodialysis, the toll nine years of kidney failure had taken on his once-muscular frame; hope that he'd have more time with her, his two children, his six grandchildren.

My parents were married nearly 62 years. For the last nine, she took him to dialysis three times a week—making him breakfast at 5:30 a.m., giving him his insulin pen, then making the short drive to the dialysis center in their Connecticut suburb. He'd settle into the reclining chair for four hours while his blood was cleaned. My mother would then return, help him into the car, and have his lunch waiting—chicken soup and a sandwich.

But in July 2018, too much sodium in the dialysate tripped up my father's fragile chemistry. His heart began to fail and he went into atrial fibrillation, a rhythm he never came out of.

He was hospitalized many time over the next seven months, in the hospital where I work as an RN. My colleagues told me to be the daughter, not the nurse. But to my mother, I was both. She'd seek my advice, as if I could impart wisdom the doctors could not. She hung on their every explanation for why he was so weak, on the results of every blood test and CT scan. She did not like the cardiologist's frank prognosis that my father was going to get worse, that eventually his other organs would fail, that he had held on longer than most other patients at the dialysis center.

As a nurse, I knew he was getting sicker, but my mother got angry if I said so aloud. She continued to hold on through four months of failed rehabilitation at nursing homes, through multiple hospitalizations, begging him to work with the physical therapists so he'd get strong enough to come home.

The day before he died, his liver began to fail; he groaned in pain, holding his abdomen. He was sent back to the ICU, where a kind doctor sat down with my mother, held her hand and gently told her it was time to let my father go.

"But what if there if there is a miracle?" my mother asked.

"If there is a miracle," the doctor said kindly, "it will happen whether he's on comfort measures or not."

Those words convinced my mother to let him go.

Dilaudid allowed him to fall into a peaceful sleep. My mother, brother and I and some of our children encircled his bed, talking and singing to him during the 10 hours he remained on comfort measures.

As his heart slowed, and his breathing grew shallow, we told him it was okay to go, that his parents and brother would be waiting. He took his last breath in his sleep, blowing out air as if he were just jumping into a swimming pool.

It has been almost a year, and still my mother dwells on his last days.

But when I think of my dad, I try not to see him in his hospital bed, prone and weak. I choose to remember him fishing on Cape Cod, the sun sparkling off the Bass River. I choose to remember his silly sense of humor, the way his tummy shook when he laughed, the way tears welled in his eyes when he listened to the Marine Corps band.

Remember those things, I tell my mother. Hold on to those.

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