

When Holding On Means Letting Go

Category: Holding On

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The summer before I began college, my grandfather's health rapidly declined due to heart failure. He was soon admitted to a VA nursing home. Though we made plans for him to leave, I think we all knew the fantasy involved in those conversations.

I remember when Grandpa was removed from the nursing home and hospitalized. I listened as my mom and the physician discussed his care. Grandpa had seemed out of it, but suddenly he perked up and said, "No more treatments. I am ready to die." The room came to a halt. Light streamed in from the window, illuminating dust particles pirouetting through the air. It was a strange thing for me to hear my grandpa say; he was a Purple Heart war veteran, a man who had always stubbornly clung on to life whenever it had threatened to abandon him.

Shortly after this, my mom explained to me that Grandpa would be staying at the nursing home and wouldn't be hospitalized again. At the time, this decision seemed inconsequential; my grandfather had said he was ready to die, so I didn't think it mattered where it happened. I was so focused on my own process of grieving, of letting go of someone I loved so much, that I did not consider how my grandfather might have wanted to spend his final days. I did not realize that the coming afternoons—in which my brothers and I got to sit with Grandpa in a sunny garden outside the VA, my parents got to visit and say goodbye and my grandma got to hold his hand while they listened to his favorite music (Sinatra)—were not inevitable, but rather could easily have been replaced with a few afternoons of futile and dehumanizing treatment.

When my grandfather said, "I am ready to die," I interpreted it to mean that he was giving up on living. In hindsight, I think that interpretation was incomplete; for the decision to transition from curative to palliative care was not one solely of relinquishment, but also of strength. He was giving up on life, but only because that had become the cost of holding on to the things that made his life worth living: time with his wife of sixty-five years; time with his children, of whom he could not be prouder; and, time with his grandchildren, who had the largest claim to his heart.

It takes courage to hold on to these things in the face of death, especially when doing so might mean meeting death a little sooner. But by holding on to the things he cared about, my grandfather made it so much easier for all of us to let him go.

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