

Grace

Category: Endings and Beginnings
written by Susan Dirks | February 1, 2023

My father's final gift to me was acceptance and an expression of love that I had wanted for many years.

My father had Alzheimer's disease at eighty-three years old, and my mother was his caretaker. He would wander and escape, and she would have the police bring him home. He would get dressed at 3 a.m. for a day at the beach in January, and she would convince him to stay home. Her health was suffering.

I travelled home to try and assess the options to offload my mother's burdens. I was a newly minted family physician practicing on the east coast, and my parents lived in California. During my visit, I took my dad to day-care and nursing homes and tried to present them in the most optimistic light.

I spent time with him, changing his dressings and cleaning his dentures. At one point, he said "I love you. I wish I had a daughter like you." This from the man who discouraged me from going to medical school and did not come to my graduation.

His statements in the preceding week were enough. They allowed me to unlock the dungeon in my heart and set my dad free.

The second-to-the-last day I was there, my dad curled up in the fetal position in bed and said he did not want to go to daycare or any of the other places we had visited.

I had not "solved" anything. I decided to let go and I spent the last day in California walking along the rocky Northern California coast with my mother and father.

Two weeks after arriving home in Baltimore, at 1 a.m., an ER doctor from California called me. My dad had been brought in by ambulance suffering excruciating back pain. He was intubated and on pressors, but his blood pressure was still falling. The only further option was surgery, and I was asked if I wanted him to go to surgery.

No, I wanted to say good-bye. I wanted to say I love you. I wanted to say thank you. But I had said that two weeks ago when he had told me he loved me through the tangled web of dementia.

This is Grace.

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