

A Celebration of Dad

by Ellie Kahn

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I called my 94-year-old father in Ohio on July 9. I told him how much I loved him, that he was the most wonderful father ever, that I would miss him, and that it was OK for him to let go.

All I could hear was his heavy breathing as the hospice nurse held the phone to his ear.

He died a few hours later.

During our last visit a few months ago, my father had said he wanted to get on with his death. He was feeling useless. He could no longer help people, which was his life's purpose. And he was tired. I think Dad's basic optimism and stubbornness combined to make him hang onto life a little longer. But he finally got his wish to move on.

I'm glad for him, and sad for me.

Losing a parent, even at my mature middle age, is a huge loss. My Daddy, my hero, my cheerleader, my advisor, my first love ... is gone.

Even if it was anticipated, it's a shock. How did this happen? Wait! I am not ready!

Since Dad died, I sometimes wake up crying, realizing that he's really gone. I cry myself out, and then I remember a camping trip in the rain with Dad, and I have to smile. Then I remember I can't call him about a new idea I have for a project, and I start to cry. Then I feel grateful, recalling how he encouraged me to be adventurous.

This transition is exhausting.

Yesterday, my friend Jeanie Cohen, a marriage and family therapist, said, "Grief is such an individual journey. One can feel fine one minute, and the next minute you're sobbing and aching

from the loss. Grieving involves acknowledging and feeling the loss, and also remembering the things you love and appreciate about your dad.”

To help me do both, I’ve been listening to my father.

When I became an oral historian 25 years ago, Dad was my first practice interview. Then, after his stroke at 83, I started recording him every time I visited. I have hours of conversations with him: about his parents and the values they taught him, about my love life, about his love life, about his pranks in high school, about his incredible experiences in India during World War II, about adopting my sister when she was a newborn, about why he divorced my mother, about the time his own mother’s car rolled into the produce section of the A & P, about his belief that people should love each other more, about how he hated being so dependent on others, and about how my sister and I are his best friends and how much he loves us.

My father was someone I could always talk with about anything. Sometimes his unsolicited advice was irritating, but his wisdom was intact right up to the last few months of his life. I wish I could talk with him now, about the other major transition in my life: My son is going 2,985 miles away, to study at the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont.

My father dies, and my son is leaving home. Oy.

I’m flying to Cleveland, Ohio, where I grew up, on Sept. 4. I’m meeting my sister Sue there. I’ll cry a bit about saying goodbye to my son and Sue will hug me. We’ll both cry about losing our father and we’ll hug some more.

Then we’ll have three days to visit all the places we associate with Dad.

We’ll hike in the park where he taught us to catch crayfish and climb cliffs; we’ll wander by Grandma’s apartment, where we had lunch every Sunday; we’ll go to the golf course where we learned to ski and the tennis court where Dad kept shouting at us, “Bend your knees!” And, we’ll drive by Hampshire Road, where I dropped the birthday cake that Sue and I had so lovingly baked for Dad.

Undoubtedly, we will no longer find the penny candy store we enthusiastically patronized, or Mawby’s, where they made the best unhealthy hamburgers, or the Cedar Lee Movie Theatre, where we spent every Saturday afternoon, sometimes sitting through the same movie twice if we liked it.

Our simple plan is to enjoy each other’s company while recalling and celebrating Dad’s life and our times with him. We’ll probably cry and laugh a lot.

And we’ll congratulate each other for having had such a loving, fun, devoted and fabulous father.

Dad and I lived an airplane trip apart for 40 years, so besides occasional visits, our primary contact was through Ma Bell. Dad always said to me, “No matter how far away you are, we’re always in each other’s hearts and we can feel the love. Do you feel it? Can you feel me hugging you right now?” And I did.

I still do.