

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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When we lose our parents. On September 19th, my father died, one day shy of his 91st birthday. My mother had already preceded him in death in January of 2007. Certainly, it’s a blessing that my parents lived long, productive lives; and it’s a great joy to remember that they had sixty-seven wonderful years of married life together.

Still, for me, there’s a sense of deep loss in my father’s death. My parents have always been the core element in my identity as a person. They were that place called *home*, that I called every week (in later years, every night). They were the glue that held our closely-knit family together—the source for updates on what was going on with my three siblings and their respective families.

It’s only been a week since dad died. I had talked with him the night before—the usual conversation about his weekly Kiwanis Club breakfast, along with reports on the daily happenings.

One thing for which I am thankful is that my father breathed his last one day before having to suffer the indignity of turning in his car keys, a symbol of lost independence for many seniors. My dad loved to drive. However, with failing eyesight, he had been unable to pass his driver’s test a couple of weeks before.

With his quality of life receding every day, in many ways, my father had a timely death. Just the same, no matter the age and all the accolades of our loved ones’ lives, the loss hits hard. There’s an emptiness from within and an ache in the heart that lingers.

Memories that sustain. My dad had the gift of life. Always a positive, *glass half full* person, he refused to have a bad day. Whether delighting in his weekly hotdog or savoring his nightly portion of chocolate ice cream, dad enjoyed life.

Our parents, of course, live on through us, their children and grandchildren. Throughout our lives, my father was an overflowing fountain of encouragement and support. During our high school and college days, for example, he’d drive hundreds of miles to watch us play basketball or football. Whatever we four kids did, it seemed, he was there (mom, too).

At dad’s Memorial Service back in Aurora, Illinois, a reiterated theme was his absence of fear and unique ability to live *in the moment*. If there was ever a man who marched to the tune of his own drummer, it was my dad ... often bending the rules along the way.

Remarkably non-judgmental, my father was a compassionate and abundantly generous person. He was forever showering people (even casual friends) with special treats that he’d somehow discovered they liked. Dad had a huge spirit and a loud, contagious laughter that could light up a room.

In our grief and sadness, these wonderful memories lift our spirits, reminding us again of the countless little things that matter in life—acts of kindness, expressions of affirmation. I'll always be grateful that my father and I were able to share the words of love. *I love you* followed by, *I love you, too* goes a long way in this life.

Love never ends. The thing about our dying is that no matter what, we're never totally prepared. There is always an element of surprise or shock. For me, the finality of it all hovers drearily nearby. It's a heavy blow—an ending, the idea of which chills the spirit.

Always, we want to think *there's more*. More time, more precious moments, more gentle touches and feelings shared. But it's the meanings that count. And the *meanings* come through the love that *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things*; the love that *never ends* (1 Corinthians 13).

Love never ends because it lives through us and through the family mementos we divided up and carried off to our homes. And through it all, the traditions live on ... of mom and dad, bringing us into this world, nurturing us into adulthood and standing by us along life's pathway.

Lots to be thankful for, to be sure; but lots to look forward to as well. As new generations are born, new faces of life and new gifts of the gene pool light up the future with hope and promise. The old and the new, forever entwined, live on together, forever and ever.

Love never ends.