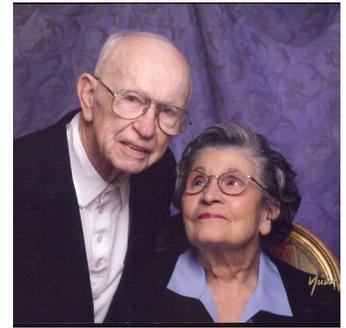




# Save My Place

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When I was twelve, I worried that my parents would end up in hell. Because I had gotten religion and they hadn't.

Mama saw to it that my brother, Brady, and I, received a "religious foundation" at the neighborhood Presbyterian Church. For a couple of years she and Dad went to bible study and Dad sang in the choir. Then they quit going and just dropped us off at Sunday school. At puberty, I was carried away by the charismatic calling of God until I became confused by the duality of the details. We sang, "*Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world...*" yet were assured that if those in far flung tribes in Africa did not accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior, they all went to hell. Perplexed, I asked, "What about a newborn who died before meeting one of our missionaries?" No matter; it would rot in hell for eternity.

Mama and her sister Virginia (Ginger) apparently had constructed their own faith; a combo ideology that leaned to the superstitious. They avoided black cats and ladders and would never have sat 13 for dinner. We never heard them say 'God has a plan' or 'angels are watching over you.' And as far as the "hereafter" goes, what Mama really believed was that someone who died before you saved a place for you, I assumed, in heaven. Ginger's husband, my Uncle Wes, was the most religious person I knew, upholding the fire and brimstone brand of Christianity that caused him to eventually leave his beloved neighborhood church when they entertained accepting openly gay members. He cursed them and grieved that loss for years.

As she got older, Mama began to fret about who was saving a place for her, since Dad was still alive.

"Mama, won't your twin brother, Bud, save you a place?"

"Oh, no, he would have saved a place for your Aunt Ruth."

"How about your brother, George? He didn't have a wife."

"He probably saved a place for his best friend, Wiley."

"Well, Mama, can't you save a place for more than one person?"

"Oh, I don't know...I guess I don't know all the details."

Our family talked plenty about death's details. By the time Brady and I were in junior high school, we knew our parents wanted to be cremated. Dad wanted his ashes sprinkled on the 14<sup>th</sup> hole of his favorite golf course 'cause that's where he shot his hole-in-one. Mama joked that she wanted her headstone to read, "I TOLD YOU I WAS SICK."

Dad's 'Do Not Resuscitate' orders were clear: "If you come to our house and see me lying unconscious on the floor, don't call 911! You won't know how long I've been lying there and I don't want to be resuscitated just to be a vegetable. Here's what I want you to do: step over me, sit down on the couch and watch TV for about 30 minutes. Once I'm good and dead you can call 911." This is called an Advance Directive.

By the time Mama was 88, after the medical mistakes, the paralysis, the first amputation and the malpractice case, caregivers tended to her round-the-clock for almost seven years. I was privileged to be one of them.

Every night we would transfer her from her wheelchair to the hospital bed at home. We'd remove her prosthetic leg, change her into a fresh Depends and put on her favorite threadbare nightgown.

"Oh, no, don't buy me a new one - this one's finally been washed enough to be soft!" Then we'd take out her dentures, raise the head of the bed and tell Dad, "You can come in now!"

He'd shuffle down the hall in his slippers calling out, "Where's my bride?" Sitting on the edge of her bed, he'd take her hand in both of his and lean in for a kiss. She'd look up at him, glasses big as window panes; no teeth; in that faded, frayed nightgown with her hairdo all smashed against the pillow.

His line: "Sweetheart - you're just as beautiful as the day I married you." Then he'd break into song. Which he did several times a day. He'd sing: "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," "Five Foot Two," "Side by Side," or his anthem:

*"You are my Sunshine, my only Sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. Honey, I love you so much I couldn't live without you."*

Her reply, "Well, you're going to have to let me die first, because I couldn't stand the pain of losing *you*."

They were like a pair of swans; mated for life.

When Mama was 95 and in the hospital for the fourth time that year, the doctor talked of feeding ports and IV's. She looked up at me: "I don't want to stay here. I just want to go home." We knew it wasn't time for healing; it was time for hospice. So I drove her home. And at 95, Dad was helpless to care for her; but he could still sing, so he took her hand in both of his and crooned his love:

*"You'll never know, Dear, how much I love you, please don't take my Sunshine away...."*

With unconditional love between her and her family, she was free to be unafraid of death. And she was ready. Like when someone passes you the butter - you take it.

A few weeks later when I was at Mama's bedside. She said, "There's a river running down the hallway outside my door. Do you see it? I'm going to have to cross it. Maybe you'll help me when it's time."

"I will, Mama." Whether I could see the river or not, I would damn well make sure she got across it and anything else she needed. She wasn't on medication that would cause hallucinations and she didn't have that much dementia; she really saw a river.

A few days later, when I phoned: "Hi Mama, I'll be there in about 10 minutes. How are you this morning?"

"Well, I'm trying to figure out what to do with these people lying on the bed."

"Are your caregivers chatting with you?"

"I don't know who they are."

"Are they old or young?"

"Oh, they're...no age."

"Are they talking with you?"

"No, they're lying on either side of me talking to each other. They're making some kind of arrangements."

"What are they wearing?"

“Long, blue robes.”

“Are they scaring you, Mama?” (Because they were scaring the hell out of me.)

“Oh...no.”

“Okay, Mama, I’ll see you in about 10 minutes.”

When I arrived I was disappointed; the people were gone. I wanted to be in the room when she saw them. It was too good to miss. And Mama wasn’t afraid; so why should I be?

The next morning I was arrived early to help her dress; “Which blouse, Mama?”

“I’ll need my thin blouse.”

“Is it this one?” I held up one of her lighter-weight blouses.

“No, a thin blouse.”

“Hmm. This flowered one?”

“No, like gauze. A rowsh. A drowsh.”

“Do you mean a *shroud*, Mama?”

“Yes.”

The next afternoon she said, “See how the river is running all through the room and under the bed? It’s red. I just stay on the bed.” It wasn’t disconcerting to her, it was a simple fact, like: “I had Cream of Wheat for breakfast; your Aunt Betty sent a card; and I’m crossing over a red river.”

I couldn’t see it, but I had no doubt she could. And since I was sitting in a chair next to her bed, I was *in* the red river. Mama didn’t seem to think that was odd. It occurred to me that’s where the phrase ‘one foot in the grave’ comes from. Because Mama was still alive, but she was clearly stepping into another world.

It turned out Mama would be saving a place for Dad. The next morning at 6:00 as I was leaving to visit them, the caregiver phoned: “Dori, your mother just passed away.”

I called my brother. We both began driving towards Mama and Dad. I don’t remember driving the six miles or stopping at red lights.

When I got there I asked them if Dad knew yet. He was still in the dining room, eating breakfast and they said they waited for us to tell him. “In a minute,” I said. I went directly to her room. She was propped up in bed and I kissed her cool cheek and stroked her little hand. For the last three weeks, she’d been in no pain. She was just visiting, (and apparently *being visited*) and getting tinier and tinier until she was just a wisp of grey hair, essence of Mama, a thin ray of Dad’s Sunshine; easy for angels to carry across the river.

We brought him back into the bedroom, wheeling him right over to her bedside. Brady beautifully handled telling him: “Dad, something has happened we knew was coming. Mom passed away just a few moments ago.”

My father cried out, “Oh no. Oh, NO! OH, CLARA!” I sobbed watching him take that hatchet to his heart. Never before had I seen anyone in whole-soul pain. His entire countenance ruptured with agony. Every muscle seemed to fall and cave, as if he was accepting blows. He keened and wept.

After a few moments, he hung his head and let go of her hand. here was nothing left for him to do. She was gone. He stopped crying.

In a while, the caregivers came in and told us a story. The night before, on the eve of her death, the caregivers were getting my folks ready for bed and chatting with them as usual, ‘Ralph, let’s get your pajamas on,’ ‘Clara, shall I brush your dentures?’ They realized Mama and Dad were talking, but it wasn’t in response to what the caregivers were saying. And they weren’t talking to each other, either. They were responding to someone audible and visible only to them.

“What time should we be ready?” “How long will it take?” “What should we bring?”

During the night, my mother called out. My 95-year old mother was calling for *her* Mama. The caregiver hurried in, “Clara, what can I get you?” “My thin robe – Mama has on hers.”

The next morning, they went in to get my folks ready for the day, but Mama said she didn’t want to get dressed. Dad said, “I’ll need my hat and coat.”

“Ralph, we’re just going into the kitchen for breakfast, you won’t need a hat or coat.”

“I want my hat and coat. Clara and I are leaving this morning and I need to be ready.”

So, the caregiver put on his hat and coat, wheeled him into the kitchen and made him some cereal and toast. She went back in to see if my mother wanted anything, but she was already gone. The caregiver said, “We’ve been in this business for 30 years we have been present for the deaths of about 100 people. Many of them see visions and have spiritual experiences of some kind, but your mother has had more experiences than most. And your dad, who isn’t dying, was clearly part of it.” And then she winked and said, “Your folks are in cahoots with angels.” I guess lots of people had been saving a place for Mama.

My brother, Dad and I sat with her for a couple of hours; lost, but together. We sat around a little round coffee table next to her bed; Mama still lying where she died. We decided to start calling family. My brother put his phone on ‘speaker’ and dialed our Uncle Wes first.

Uncle Wes, Mom’s brother-in-law was 96 years old. He and Aunt Ginger were not only relatives; they were my folks’ best friends and had been in business together. Wes was an intelligent, resourceful man who still cleaned his own storm gutters from a 10 ft. ladder. He took no medications and was in excellent health. He’d never had a surgery and or heart problems. From sturdy genes, he had once homesteaded in Edmonton, Alberta and was the king of do-it-yourself. Ginger, had died 20 years prior, suddenly, from an aneurism.

When Wes answered the phone and Brady told him our mother had just died, he was sweetly supportive to Dad.

“Oh Ralph! I’m so sorry that you’ve lost Clara! Oh, Buddy, that’s just terrible. It’s been 20 years since my Ginger’s been gone and I know how hard this is.”

Dad could barely speak, but thanked him.

“Ralph, we had so many wonderful times. We’ve both had good lives. You know, we can join the girls whenever we want to.”

My brother and I looked up at each other over the coffee table with raised eyebrows. What a strange phrase. It wouldn’t have been odd if Wes had said, “Someday we’ll all be together.” But - “we can join them whenever we want to?”

After Dad and Wes had reminisced a bit and consoled each other, they began their goodbyes. Wes lived in a city about 4 hours away. Neither of them had been taking trips for a couple of years. They knew they’d never see each other again.

“Well, Ralph, I’ll be thinking of you.”

“I’ll be thinking of you, Wes.”

“You and Clara are surely in my heart.”

“Goodbye, my friend.” Dad’s voice broke.

We made more calls to immediate cousins, asking them to help spread the sad news. Finally, we phoned for the funeral home to pick up Mama. I didn’t want to stay in the room while they placed her in the black body bag. I walked outside in the crisp February sun. A few minutes later, the respectful, professional funeral home team wheeled out a gurney with a sheet over a tiny body-shaped form. They gently put her into the van and drove away. Brady followed them out and we stood, arm in arm. I asked him if it was awkward watching as she was zipped into a bag. He said, “Not at all. Since she was there at my first moment of life, I wanted to see her through to her last moment in my

sight.” Then we noticed the bald eagle soaring overhead. You can’t make this stuff up.

The next morning, a niece on Wes’s side of the family phoned me. We knew each other, but hadn’t chatted for several years. I began with, “Hi, Mary, I was just about to call you.”

She said, “Really? So you’ve already heard about Uncle Wes?”

“What about him?”

“He died yesterday.”

“What? We just spoke with him yesterday around noon. I was going to call you to tell you my mother died yesterday.”

“Oh, Dori, I’m so sorry. Yes, this morning the neighbors noticed that Wes hadn’t opened his drapes or taken in the paper. When they went to check on him, they found him in bed, fully clothed, with the covers drawn up under his chin.”

She said the coroner listed time of death at about 6:00 pm. There were no pill bottles found in the house, and there didn’t seem to be any fall or struggle. It appeared he just went into the bedroom, pulled the covers up over his clothes, and died. He joined the girls. When he wanted to. We never told Dad Wes had died.

I knew what Dad would do next. For the next minute and every minute thereafter, he would die. He would physically, mentally and emotionally shut down. There was not one thing he had left undone in his life. There were no unsaid kind words, no undelivered thank you’s, no apologies withheld. All that had been taken care of when she breathed.

He was polite but not forthcoming. He did not laugh or brighten. No car doors to open. No jacket or purse to hold as she got into a car. He may have become weaker by eating only two bites a day, but his stomach wasn’t starving; it was his soul. He simply had no purpose.

And he never sang again. He had no one to sing to. It took him just 30 days until he could join her.

Looking back, I realize I didn’t have to worry about my parents everlasting souls when I was a kid. My parents’ religion was their love for each other and their family, which ferried them through life. I watched as two pragmatic people stumbled into ravishing spirituality; no chanting, no crusading, no dogmatic arguments. Only contented peace. And that’s what I want. And for someone to hold my hand in both of his.

At least, now I *know*, someone’s saving me a place.