

When The Time Comes

by Rachael Shea

My father had finally agreed to have full-time hospice care. Relieved, we looked forward to the expected services. He died that morning at 3:00 a.m. I have since learned that this scenario is very common.

How had it happened? I was a hospice volunteer. At my instigation, the family had discussed it many times, usually with both of my parents present. They were calm and level headed, saying of course we will want hospice when the time comes.

That was the sticking point, as it turned out - a surprise to me and my sisters. As sensible as my parents were, both medical professionals, they could never say, "The time has come." As a result, some of the most important hospice services were never available to them. Although we managed to get home health care three times a week, we had no case management, no counseling, and no one asking the obvious but neglected question: "Do you want a rabbi to come see you?"

We daughters did not find a way to break through their reluctance to recognize that Dad was dying, even though they made it clear in subtle ways that they knew. Dad stopped working six months before the end. We always said that he would not last long if he had to stop working. I do not think it was a coincidence that he cleared out his office at a time when I was in town. Two of us daughters went with him. He showed me his treasured medical books, lovingly wiped them off, and put them in a box. He looked right at me and said, "I don't know if I will use these again." On the other hand, he would not let us tell any of his colleagues what was happening. They leaned in the doorway with kind expressions, ready to be included and to offer some friendly words. When I opened my mouth to speak, my father gave me the famous freeze look, a piercing glare that said, "Uh-uh, not a word."

I was there when he died, having received an urgent call to get on the next plane. I listened to him exchanging jokes with Cousin Sydney from the other room. I heard him lecturing our youngest sister on a medical procedure he wanted her to have. I heard him snap at another sister who tried to say good-bye in some way. Ah well. With me, there were no lectures and no words, really. He told me he would try one more time to stand up. Watching him straining to pull himself up, with three strong grandsons tugging at his weak body, was difficult for me. I don't know why he wanted me to witness, but I accepted it as I had accepted the role six months before when he dismantled his office. Finally, he lay back in his bed, but not before shooting me another piercing glance. This time, it seemed to say, "Damn it, that's it! I am done."

It was what it was. I cannot help wondering what I might have done to get my mother and father more personal support than a bath every other day. The long, vigilant months were harder than they needed to have been, especially for my mother. I feel that my father would have loved to talk to the young rabbi who officiated at his service, even if only to give him a hard time. However, if I look at the whole process strictly from his point of view, I have to see that it went just as he wished.