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Awakened by Death

My first experience with the death of a relative occurred just weeks prior to my twelfth birthday. It was an experience that altered my life in many significant ways, but above all else, it caused me to realize that I cannot take life, neither my own nor others', for granted.

I was born in 1961 to parents who had their heads on straight. Therefore, I had what I consider a very stable, ideal, and blissful childhood. I grew up comfortably, in a nice home in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. My two sisters, Roberta, nine years older, and Cynthia, thirteen months younger, and I never wanted for any necessity. The house was full of all manner of diversions, too. A plethora of educational materials was also available: "visible woman" (a foot-high, see-through plastic replica of the human female anatomy), a chemistry set, a microscope, a telescope (which my dad built from scratch), and so on. The window wall of my bedroom was completely covered with built-in bookshelves full of books. My cousins and friends were always awed by how much we had and by how nice our home was. All of this was possible because my dad was a Mechanical Engineer with a Master's degree. My mom never had to work a single day outside of the house because my dad provided more than enough for us from his income alone.

Then came the year 1973, the year I would turn twelve on July 22, and two days after my own birthday, my dad would have turned fifty. Bobbie (Roberta's nickname) had just married, which brightened my already joy-filled life. Cindy and I were both doing well in sixth and seventh grade, respectively, earning straight A's, making our parents and us proud. Life was grand.

However, my dad developed a persistent, chronic cough that year. Several doctor's visits yielded no definitive diagnoses, so hospitalization for additional tests was ordered.

If memory serves me well, the hospital stay was near a week long. The tests revealed nothing; technology then was not what it is today. My father came home and even returned to work. Nevertheless, within a couple of weeks, Dad was far worse than he had ever been; so bad, in fact, that he went into the hospital again. I wasn't worried. He had come home last time; he would come home again.

We would all go to the hospital almost every day. However, because Cindy and I were "so young," we were not permitted to see Dad. I hated that terribly. Nonetheless, my siblings and I fully expected our dad to come home. No one gave us any reason to think otherwise, and life went on as it always had in every other way. Mom and Dad had always made sure that their children made their schoolwork their number-one priority. As a result, we would spend our time in the hospital waiting room doing our homework and studying. It seems to me that that continued for about six weeks.

Then, on July 3 of that year, my mom's brother — my Uncle Jimmy — came into the hospital waiting room and sat down next to me. He said, "David, I have some bad news; your dad is gone." I responded, "Gone? Gone where?" Uncle Jimmy repeated himself: "He's gone, David." I sat silently, contemplating what my uncle was attempting to convey. I did not, could not, believe what Uncle Jimmy was apparently trying to tell me.

When it finally sunk in, I did not even come close to comprehending the totality of the event, and I believed, until the viewing, that a huge mistake had been made; I was certain that my father was going to be accidentally buried alive! Even so, according to Bobbie, I had refused — or was, perhaps, psychologically unable — to speak to anyone for over a week. So much had changed in what, from my perspective, seemed only an instant.

It does not seem logical now, but we found out from the autopsy that my dad had succumbed to leukemia, a cancer of the blood. After that, life changed drastically. Money was scarce. Apparently, my parents also took my dad's life more for granted than they ought to have done, because the life insurance policy was inadequate to maintain the lifestyle we had never dreamed would change. In addition to the lack of financial planning, there was no professional counseling provided, nor did anyone step up as a father figure. All of these factors combined had to have played at least some part in the many poor decisions I have since made, ultimately leading me to the eighteen-year prison sentence I am now serving.

Throughout the entire period of my father's hospitalization, life went on for me without any more worries than it had before. My dad's passing, from my perspective, was sudden, surprising, and difficult to believe and accept. I was completely unprepared, and that made it all the more difficult. The effects have lingered. I recently passed the age of forty-nine years, eleven months, and eight days. That is the age at which my father passed away, and as it approached in my own life, there was no way I was going to take for granted that I would live longer than my father did.

Now I live with a different perspective: every day is a gift and no day is guaranteed. Therefore, I cannot blame my mistakes on the past nor on anyone else but myself. Death has awakened me to the fact that life is what I make it.