

Things I would say to my father

William L. Spence/Lewiston Tribune

We scattered his ashes in a sheltered cove, under cloudy skies that threatened rain.

We saw a pod of killer whales on the way there. Dad would have enjoyed that. Black-legged kittiwakes swirled in the air beside a cliff-face rookery, while marbled murrelets bobbed in the waves.

The ash formed a murky plume behind the boat, before dissipating in the sea.

Mom turned her back to hide her tears. She's never been very emotional - growing up, I remember her crying maybe three times - but in the months since Dad died it's been a constant thing.

They were married 56 years, raised two kids, traveled the world. Yes, he was 88, but this wasn't how it was supposed to end. At least not now, not now. They still had things to do.

I am at a loss for what to say to her. My overwhelming sentiment is relief that Dad didn't suffer, didn't linger. He was at peace. But Mom wanted him to fight, wanted him to hold on; he may have been ready to go, but she wasn't ready to let him.

After he died, she spent weeks going through old photographs: five decades of family vacations, smiling faces, happy times. That's where her heart is now, in the past. There is no joy in the future.

We spread his ashes in July, in Alaska's Prince William Sound. It's one of the most scenic parts of a very scenic state, with towering mountains and glaciers and myriad inlets to explore. We had a boat there when I was in high school. We'd take it out on weekends, dropping shrimp pots in the morning and then spending the day sightseeing and trolling for salmon. Before dinner we'd pull up the pots and marvel at all the squirming crustaceans, stuffing ourselves and wishing for more.

It's been 30 years since I've gone back. The glaciers are still there, gleaming that unearthly blue. They've shrunk in their old age, pulling back up the valleys, but the mountains still loom and drop steeply down to the cold, black sea.

Like the ice, my memories of that time are a little worse for wear. When I left Alaska, Dad was a few years older than I am now. We had a quiet relationship; the love was there, but I was dissatisfied with his middle-class sensibilities and he wasn't sure what to say to a long-haired son who lacked direction in life.

Now I want nothing more than to tell him how much I admire him, how much I appreciate all he did. I see him in the values I hold, and in my sense of humor. I see him staring back at me when I look in the mirror. I see him in the part of myself that's sure of itself and of what's right.

Our parents leave their marks on us before they go. They pour themselves into us, shaping the inner compass that forever influences our lives. And then they're gone, receding, receding, pulling back from the world, leaving behind the memories and foundations they carved in the landscape of our hearts.

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