

HIS VIEW: Of life, death and precious lessons learned

By William Brock

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Brock

I was thinking about my father recently when the phone rang. It was my niece, calling with a bit of good news.

She and her husband had just bought a house, their first. Even better, they are expecting their first child - a boy - in early September. The due date just happens to be on her 30th birthday.

We talked for a while before she had to get back to work. I hung up the phone and smiled to myself, remembering vignettes from her childhood. We saw each other almost daily from the time she was 2 until she was 10, and we had a lot of fun together.

Now she's having a baby.

The wheel of life took another, unmistakable lurch forward. Almost inexorably, it set me to thinking about my father again.

He died the same year in which my niece was born. His mind, sharp as ever, was captive in a body ravaged by Lou Gehrig's disease, like a hard burl in a tree consumed by

termites. A professor of mechanical engineering, he spent the morning of his last day working on yet another journal article.

There were several panics that morning, as phlegm accumulated in his throat and threatened to choke him. Nurses scurried in, pumps were started, and the evil humors were kept at bay.

The nurses left after a while and my dad, scribbling barely legible notes and pointing at letters on an alphabet card, made the last decision of his life. He said he'd never considered suicide but, at age 61, he had arrived at the end.

It was time to die.

"Sweet are the uses of adversity," he wrote, stealing a line from William Shakespeare, "which, like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in its head."

There were five of us in the room that day - him, me, my mother, one of my brothers and a wonderful family friend. My dad gave us a long, meaningful and tired look, then asked for an injection of sedatives. His breathing grew raspy and erratic as the phlegm accumulated, but it continued for hours until, late that afternoon, it finally stopped.

That was nearly 30 years ago, in the same hospital where I was born.

I was hurrying through college back then, taking 18, 19, 20 credits a quarter, but my dad never saw me graduate. He never read the letters I wrote during a multi-year odyssey around the world. He didn't attend my wedding. He never met my children.

Those are missing snapshots from the family album, but there's a larger void that's never been filled. Over the years, when I found myself at one of life's crossroads, I thirsted for the advice that only a father can give.

When my father died, it was like the world's greatest library burned down. That's my burden and, with the exception of these words, I bear it quietly. I've come to terms with it.

Now I'm a father, with two impressionable girls looking up to me for guidance. I'm teaching them the little things in life - how to paddle a canoe, tie a bowline and look west to the setting sun. Along the way, I hope to paint a bigger picture about dignity, integrity and the core values of life.

My dad never had any daughters, so he never explicitly prepared me for this new role. Somehow, perhaps through osmosis, he imparted most of the qualities that I now embody. There weren't any formal lessons, but some of his wisdom attached itself to me.

And now I'm passing it along. That's the gift of a father.

William Brock lives in Pullman with his wife and children.