

THE CORNER

DAVID EPSTON

TRAVELING ON THE JOURNEY TO DEATH: A STORY ILLUSTRATING NARRATIVE PRACTICE FOR COUNSELORS

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“The Third Hand”

Lines for a dying man

no, no—the third hand is never invisible
it is ringed with scars and air is warmer
when it reaches through the dark

it understands all ways of talking
tumbling birds embroideries of fruit
high swing waka

sometimes the third hand is a palm tree
it attends to simple things—an oar’s sideways
glance, the shine of water

—Jan Hutchison, 2014
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IMPOSITIONS OF MEANING

The rain battered the hospice roof. I could see it pelting down on the quarry that my office window overlooked. It had been a busy day for all of us in the hospice

For Shane and Sandra.

This is not a “true” story. Rather, it is a weaving together of many therapeutic conversations and the author’s imagination to create a story representing practice. The idea, to write a story illustrating Narrative practice (White & Epston, 1990), was proposed to the author by David Epston.

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community team. I readjusted my gaze and looked down at the new referral sitting on my desk.

Catherine had requested counseling because she and her husband, Alan, had been fighting for the past year. The referral described Alan as “in denial.” “Whose description was that” had been my first thought. When I telephoned Catherine, she told me she was desperate for the fighting to stop so they could enjoy the last few months of Alan’s life. Catherine said she wanted their three young children to have some time with their father, but all Alan did was work. “How does Alan feel about us talking about these concerns you hold for the relationship?” I asked her. Catherine told me Alan wanted to be at our initial meeting but hadn’t decided if he would talk. He would just listen and then make up his mind whether he wanted to be part of the counseling or not. As Alan was extremely fatigued we agreed to meet at the family home.

I drove to Alan and Catherine’s house, reflecting on the multiple intrusions families have endured in the health system before they begin to receive care from hospice. I respected Alan’s caution about speaking to me. I would ask him about his concerns and address the “bystander” role as the conversation evolved.

FINDING A “WAY”

The inside of the house was in stark contrast to the luxury car parked in the driveway and the affluence of the surrounding area. It was unheated and the furnishings were oddly sparse for the size of the house. Alan sat there on the sofa, as if the weight of his concerns were pressing down on him. He looked shrunken and exhausted, at variance with the deep laughter lines running through his face. His face held no smile now. The yellow color of his skin hinted at the cancer that had spread throughout his body. I had been warned by Catherine that Alan would refuse to speak of the cancer. I wondered to myself how he had reached this conclusion and why. He would have good reasons for doing so. Catherine’s welcome was tinged with apprehension as she asked me to take a seat. She sat on a chair well away from her husband and I moved to sit somewhere midway between them.

“When you were thinking about me coming today, did you have any thoughts about what might be useful for us to talk about?” I inquired, looking at Catherine.

Catherine glanced at Alan nervously. “We have been fighting all year,” she explained, “ever since Alan got sick. I want to enjoy this time together but all he does is go and work in his office. He won’t talk to me,” she said, looking reproachfully at Alan. “I want to get on and do some fun things together with the children, but all we do is argue.” Alan, whose restless movements suggested he was becoming increasingly agitated, chipped in, “We wouldn’t argue if you were supportive.”

Intending to sidestep any invitation to pass judgment on the dispute implicit in Alan’s retort, I asked, “Would it be all right if I asked you some questions about your life before all this happened?” I waited. When they both gave a nod I began,

“What was it that you enjoyed about each other before the illness came into your lives?” Smiling for a moment before answering, Catherine reminisced, “We were very happy. We’ve always been a close family. Alan is a great father. He has always been involved with the children. And, as a couple we have been friends, talked, you know. . . .” Catherine’s voice petered out and she dolefully looked over at Alan. He remained silent and expressionless. I wondered if he had expected such a favorable description.

I proceeded on this track, uncertain as to where it might lead, “How might you like to be together as a couple, and as a family, at this time in your lives?” Catherine responded readily as if her answer carried with it some seemingly well-rehearsed thoughts: “I want to get on. I want to do things together, and talk. Be close, and share things like we used to.” Alan’s eyes were downcast as if he were studying the pattern on the carpet beneath his feet. “What do you think Alan’s wishes for your time together might be?” I asked. Taking her time over her reply as she contemplated, Catherine, in a barely audible voice, finally said, “I don’t know.”

“From my experience of speaking to people, a serious illness often brings with it huge challenges that can strain even the strongest of relationships,” I said. Intending to make known some of the effects the cancer might be having on their relationship, I then asked, “How would you say the illness has disrupted the way you want to be together?”

Alan, still bowed, now began to pick at the varnish that was peeling on the armrest.

Catherine continued in her efforts to communicate to me some of what they had been going through. “We were devastated when Alan got his diagnosis. We were very stressed, tired. I wanted to talk about what was happening but he wouldn’t. It’s been endless appointments and visits to hospital.” As Catherine talked about all their efforts to rid Alan of the cancer Alan started to quietly chip in as if he couldn’t help himself. As he started to do this more, I tentatively observed, “I notice you are sharing some of your thoughts, Alan.” I broke off, before gently going on. “Would you like to join in the conversation fully, Alan? Or is it more useful to continue from the sidelines as you are?” I paused, not wanting to impose on him. “I don’t want you to find yourself talking just for my benefit.” I know the people I meet are often generous to me in this regard, or perhaps feel unable to say what they want. I didn’t want him to regret speaking or to come to the end of our conversation without it having been what he wanted it to be.

Alan looked me in the eye. Then, in a voice that held surprising firmness, stated, “I want to talk. Then you can hear my point of view.”

Again, I was as tentative as my tone of voice would allow. “Would it be all right if I asked you about your experience of living with this illness, Alan?” I wasn’t ready for the enthusiastic response I received. “Living with it!” he exclaimed. “Now that’s more like it! Everyone is always. . . . The way they talk to me! But I’m going to fight. I’m going to fight this thing and never give up!”

At times taking a fighting stance can be problematic for people living with terminal illnesses (Harrington, 2012), as it leads to a binary (Bird, 2004) of

“winning” or “losing.” However, I respected the position Alan had taken up as it was obviously meaningful for him and may have been well thought out. Aware we still hadn’t agreed on a name for what he was fighting, I asked “How do you go about this fighting of yours, Alan?”

“Well, they won’t give me any more chemo.” He hesitated. “I am having vitamin C infusions twice a week. My brother offered to pay for them.” Pink color spread over his face, and he started to pick at the varnish again. “I do all I can.” His head dropped, as if he were surrendering something.

“Could you help me to fully understand what you are fighting for?” I emphasized “fully.” In a quavering voice Alan replied, “I am doing all I can to live. I have to live.” Alan’s voice shook with what sounded like fear as he continued to speak. “Being sick, it has taken everything from me. You know we had to leave our house. We’re renting here, though we are going to have to move. To think that I would be in a position of not being able to pay . . . the bills, they just kept coming and I kept thinking I could find a way. I used to earn a lot of money. Did you see my car in the driveway? But now. . . .” Catherine chimed in, “Alan is still doing what he can, though I keep telling him to leave it. He spends all his time in his office pouring over the accounts and doing some work for his old company. He won’t let it go. It’s all he ever does. He barely spends any time with me and the children. . . .” As her voice became accusatory in tone, she seemed to catch herself and quickly trailed off.

“What is important to you about the work that you return to it, Alan?” I inquired. “I have to find a way,” he said with some urgency. “What ‘way’ are you looking for?” I asked. There was a long silence, which Alan finally broke. “A way for them to be okay,” he whispered, releasing a long slow breath, and nodding over to where Catherine was sitting. Catherine was startled. She opened her mouth to speak, but Alan continued, fear and desperation in his lowered voice now: “I can’t afford to die and leave them like this. I can’t afford to die.” I listened to the yearning he had to care for his family. I absorbed every word.

“So when you retire to your office, what are your hopes for your work?” I asked quietly. “I’m working to try and find some money for them,” Alan anxiously replied. Catherine started to cry, silently, the tears sliding down her face freely as if they already knew the way. “My family are important to me.” He looked at Catherine for the first time since the conversation began, tenderness in his eyes. Catherine, returning his gaze, rose from her seat, and moved to sit beside him.

We were interrupted by the sound of a child. Their 3-year-old son, Robbie, had woken. Catherine got up and brought him into the room. Without paying his father any attention, he looked at me with interest, before settling down to play beside Catherine.

We had stretched everyone’s attention and in particular Alan’s energy about as far as I thought prudent. “How has this conversation been going?” I asked them. “Have we talked about the matters you hoped we might, or is there something we have missed?” “It’s been good,” Catherine answered. Alan cut in across her, “Better than I thought.” “Is this a good place to stop?” I asked “or is there something

else we might speak about today?" They both agreed there was nothing further for today. "What are your thoughts about meeting up again?" I asked them. They quickly requested another meeting for the following week.

THE LOVE THAT IS CARE

I arrived at the house the following week to a welcoming atmosphere. Alan and Catherine greeted me and we sat down together in the living room. They sat together, briefly holding hands on the well-worn sofa. I wanted to know if they'd had any thoughts or reflections on our previous conversation that they might like to share with me.

They both spoke together, saying things had been better.

"What is it that's gotten better?" I asked.

Catherine replied, "I didn't realize he was working for us every time he went into his office upstairs. I guess I feel differently about it now." She turned to look at Alan beside her.

"Yeah, and Catherine has been supportive. We actually had a tough week but she was right behind me," Alan piped up.

I smiled warmly at Alan, as I adjusted myself in the chair, eager to hear more. "Alan, what is this support from Catherine that you are telling me about with such appreciation?" You can imagine how curious I was to know more about what had transpired since our first, at times awkward, meeting. He responded with some warm looks that could have been romancing Catherine. "After we saw you I got really sick for a couple of days. Catherine had to leave me to pick up the older kids from school. She told me to stay in bed and not get up." Embarrassment crept into his voice. "Ah, sometimes I do stupid things and . . . I tried to get up and fell. I couldn't get up off the floor. . . ." Some of the alarm Catherine might have felt came into her voice before she could stop herself, "I came home to him lying there. For a moment. . . ." Alan picked up the story, "She helped me up and told me not to worry. I know it was my fault, but she didn't blame me at all." Alan looked over at his wife, the smile returning to his face. I was struck by the love in Catherine's care. Sometimes the love that is in care astounds me. "Catherine, when you helped Alan up from the floor and told him not to worry rather than reprimanding him, what thoughts or feelings were behind your actions?" "I was just so relieved he was okay. I didn't want him feeling bad about wanting to get up out of bed. He's lost enough already. I hate the way some of the people speak to him, like he's a child. He deserves respect" was her answer. "Alan, what does it tell you of Catherine's regard for you that she didn't want you feeling bad in that moment, that your dignity and respecting you, was foremost in her mind?" I asked. "She was thinking of me, yes. Of what I've been through and who I am. It means everything to me" was his thankful reply.

I wanted to draw attention to the support that Catherine gave, mindful that Alan had described her as unsupportive in our earlier meeting. I know only too well that

caring for a person who is unwell can be exhausting, yet invisible work. “What else does Catherine do that makes you feel supported, Alan?” I asked.

As I listened to the care Alan was receiving from Catherine I looked over at her. She appeared to me to be drained. Cancer is tough on everyone.

“I can’t do much at all,” Alan sighed as he reflected on his fall again. “We have lost so much since I got sick.” I looked at him, sinking into his experience. “How long have you been living with ‘being sick’?” I asked. “He’s had it 2 years,” Catherine offered. “What do you call this sickness that has caused the loss of so much you treasure?” I asked them, wanting to find a word that was theirs, but aware the question could bring its own challenges. “Cancer,” said Alan. Catherine’s eyes opened more widely, betraying her surprise. Alan, trusting me with feelings that looked like he was uneasy with them, said, “I don’t like to think of it. It scares me. Being sick has taken so much from me and I still have lots to do.”

Trying to create room for Alan to say “no,” I gently asked him, “Is there a way we can talk about the impact of the cancer on your life, or do you find it best to keep away from the topic?” Alan answered me with some anger, “It’s the way people are so negative. They have me in a coffin already.” Softly I said, “I don’t want to say anything that might take us towards any negativity. What could I do that would make it possible for you to indicate to me that I had started to go down a wrong path?” “I’ll tell you, definitely,” he assured me.

Knowing it was a question covering a vast territory of their experience, but wanting to open up a space for them to speak about it, I asked, “You said that cancer had taken a lot from you. Would it be okay to ask you more about this?”

Such questions mean I am obligated to bear witness, and I willingly do so, not shying away from the pain of the losses that inevitably punctuate their lives. I know all too well how few opportunities people have to speak of their experience. Stories of suffering are usually shut down by well-meaning audiences quick to advise a person to “be positive” (Willig, 2011) or with suggestions as to further actions they should take, too often leaving people alone in their anguish. I sat still, seeking to provide Alan and Catherine companionship in the ocean of loss and turmoil that cancer had created. I only occasionally asked questions that sought to uncover the particulars of detail that might prove useful to them, as they grappled with making meaning of it all. A sense of growing connection permeated our conversation as their story flowed for the first time unchecked. As Alan returned to the solace of his work, he added, “And now I am left unable to leave my family anything. No house. No security.”

“How did your work assume such importance in your life?” I wondered, thinking of all the gendered prescriptions of masculinity and success. Alan gave me a puzzled look. “I don’t know,” he answered. “It’s what I’ve always done.” I decided to take a different tack.

“Where did your capacity to work hard come from?” I inquired. “Not from anyone in my family, that’s for sure” was the somewhat curt reply from Alan. Catherine added, “He was the first person in his family to go to university.” “A pioneer,” I

thought, reflecting on the hidden resources taking a new path required of a person. “When you look back over your life, where do you think such an interest in working so hard started?” I asked. Alan pondered, “When I was young . . . when I was at primary school I guess.” There was a long pause, and I sensed he was trying to retrieve long-lost memories. I waited, my attention fully on him. Alan cleared his throat. “My father used to put me down. He beat me up quite a bit . . . badly.” Alan began to deliberate over the past. “School wasn’t such a bad place for me. No one would hurt me there.” Alan spoke as if he had never fully grasped this before. In a halting manner he continued, a new narrative on his lips, “And then I discovered I wasn’t too bad at it. So I kept going. My father didn’t know what to make of me doing well at school, but maybe underneath he was pleased. I used to study to get away from his violence.” A sound of what could have been pride slipped into his voice. “I went to university and then got a good job. Look at this, if you don’t mind.” Alan opened a laptop that had been sitting on the coffee table in front of us, and showed me a scientific webpage with a photo of himself and a long list of career achievements alongside it. “But then I got sick. Now I’ve lost it all.” Despair seemed to shroud him for a moment. “I am a failure as a man.”

“Alan had worked hard in his life as a response to abuse,” I thought (Wade, 2007). I felt admiration for him as I looked at his downcast figure. Uttering my musings aloud, I asked him, “When you studied to get away from the beatings, what qualities did you draw on that allowed you to take such a constructive approach?” (White, 2007). There was so much to Alan that was clearly visible to me, but I wondered, would he see it in himself?

“I’m determined, I guess. I don’t give up easily,” he managed to pronounce.

“What did you know about yourself that the beatings and putdowns couldn’t squash?” I quizzed him.

“I guess I believed in myself.” Alan’s voice steadied. To believe in himself seemed notable. I wanted to know more.

“What were your hopes for yourself as you worked towards a different future?” I asked him. Alan smiled at me.

“I didn’t want to be like my father. I wanted a family that got on, loved each other. I was desperate to get free, and it was the only way I could see to do it. The funny thing is I see him still, my father, and we’re okay.” Catherine reached over and touched him lightly.

“Who would have known that you would respond to being put down, and beaten, by dedicating yourself to a different kind of life?” I asked him, reflecting on the values he might have held, and continue to hold, in taking this path of working diligently.

Alan moved around uncomfortably in his seat and held his chest for a moment. “My mother, maybe. She died when I was 12. I think she might have known I would do this. I’m not sure.” Alan’s voice trailed off.

I turned my attention to Catherine, “Catherine, what do you make of Alan working hard for this life in response to being beaten by his father?” “Alan has integrity,”

came the swift reply from Catherine. "He is an honorable man," she added with a smile, indicating her pride in him.

"What do you make of Alan and his father being okay now? What does it tell you about Alan's values where relationships are concerned?" I persisted. Catherine warmly began to describe how Alan didn't give up on people.

Looking to pull some of the threads together, I said, "Men are often judged according to the job they have and how much money they earn. Alan, what ideas do you hold as to what makes a successful man? Do you think any of the qualities you have shown in your life could be representations of success?"

Alan looked pensive but responded immediately. "My family are my biggest success," he said with confidence. Catherine and Alan seemed relaxed and the smiles that had been hinted at now radiated from them.

We were coming to the end of our session. I knew there would be many other stories to explore. They might be required to draw Alan's attention to other ways he had been a success in his life. Further inquiry would also allow us to expand on the theme of hard work as a way to contextualize his abusive and demeaning experiences as a boy. I looked at him with an appraising eye. He might survive a month or two although it was possible he could die at any time. No wonder Catherine had been insistent in her request for me to talk with Alan. I felt a sense of urgency.

CONNECTING TO FEAR

Sounds of happiness made their way out to me standing at the front door when I arrived for our next session. Catherine and Alan had taken their children away for a holiday. Alan had been able to sit outside and watch the children play on the beach. Catherine had had a much needed break from some of the normal routine. The happiness spread to me, and I beamed back at them.

"How did it come about that you decided to have a holiday as a family?" I asked, smiling at them. Alan explained to me that he had decided he wanted some time with the family. "I got thinking how much the family meant to me after we talked. I didn't feel so worried about going away somehow."

"How did thinking about what the family meant to you influence the worries about what you could do?" I queried him.

"Spending time with them seemed more important and the possible consequences of going away seemed less important. They kind of faded into the background," he revealed. Alan's mood appeared buoyant.

"What did it mean to you and the family that you could be together and have the holiday away?" I inquired, looking at them both.

Catherine leaned forward and said, "We got some really good time together not just as a family but as a couple. I felt closer to Alan than I have in a long time." Catherine seemed to glow with warmth and love for Alan. Alan nodded in agreement, clearly enjoying her enthusiasm.

“What difference will it make if you continue to prioritize having time together as a couple and a family?” I asked them. Alan and Catherine speculated about regaining some of what they had lost. I couldn’t help holding in my mind how little time they might have left together. After underlining what they had discovered, I returned to the other thought Alan had shared. “Alan, you said the consequences of going away seemed less important. What did you mean by that?”

Alan briefly looked grim. “The consequences . . . you know . . . if something happened to me. . . . I felt less afraid, I guess.”

“Would it be okay if I asked you a bit more about that?” I carefully asked. Alan nodded, so I continued. “What are these consequences that you have been feeling less afraid of?”

“Of the end. Dying.” Alan looked up at me, seeming to check to see if I could hold a conversation about death. Apparently convinced of my steadiness, he went on, “I don’t want to die but it feels less scary somehow. Not all the time, but. . . .” He looked up at me expectantly.

As I listened to Alan I wondered what particular fears he had and how they were influencing his life. “What is it about dying that is most scary for you?” I tried to ensure that my respect for him penetrated my tone as I conveyed an invitation to talk about this, the most steered away from, subject.

“It’s the not knowing,” he said, looking down. A wracking sound that could have been a sob began to make its way out of his body and was quickly stifled. “. . . And leaving the family. I don’t want to leave them. . . .” Catherine reached out to comfort Alan. I waited until he was more settled and then asked, “When you are feeling connected to the family, what happens to the worries about dying?” Alan became more composed.

“I feel less alone, I guess.” A slight grin tried to return to his tense face. I turned to look at Catherine, “Catherine, I noticed you reached out and touched Alan as if to comfort him. What was it you were hoping to communicate with your touch?” “That I will be with him every step,” she responded.

Our conversation flowed, and I reflected on the love that was present in the relationship.

As I noticed Alan was able to talk about fears and death, I found myself wondering what had allowed him to do this. I reflected back to the description of “denial” that had been imposed on him in the referral. “We have been talking about topics most people find very demanding and difficult. How are you both going with this kind of conversation?”

It is normal for me to ask checking questions when speaking with people and I did so then, hoping to create a space for Alan to tell me if the discussion wasn’t useful. I was mindful there could be an unforeseen impact on him later. However, they both stated that they wanted to continue in the same vein, which led me to ask, “What has made talking about dying possible, rather than a ‘negative’ experience?”

Alan looked serious, then, a look that could have been shame seemed to cross his face. “I couldn’t go there. The idea of dying a failure. . . . I was fighting for

my life because I wasn't going to die like that." Alan choked up, tears appearing in his eyes.

"Are you saying it was unbearable to contemplate dying because of the feelings of failure?" I checked as sensitively as I could.

"Yes. I feel less of a failure at the moment. I'm not saying I'm a success, just not a complete failure." I looked at him intently. "What have you connected to in your life that has contributed to feeling 'less of a failure'?"

Alan reflected, his humility making its way into his voice, "I guess I've been looking at myself a bit differently lately. I realized I had the family. I feel good being Catherine's husband, a dad to the kids."

"When you feel close to the people who are important to you and see yourself 'a bit differently,' what happens to the fear of dying?" I asked. Catherine reached over to hold Alan's hand. "The fear, it gets less," Alan tearfully replied, "but then I lose feeling okay. Something happens like another bill comes, and I'm back where I was, feeling a failure again." This didn't surprise me. Changes don't usually happen quickly.

"Are you saying that when you feel connected to the significant people in your life, you see yourself differently, and the fear of dying is less, but certain things like the bills can bring the failure and fear forward again?" I said seeking to offer him a brief summary. "Yes, that's it," he replied. Catherine nodded her agreement.

"Could you help me to understand what allows you to see yourself differently?" I asked. "How would you describe the kind of connection that does this?"

We talked over the detail of these connections, underlining them, and gathering information to expand Alan's understanding of them.

I then asked him, "Having returned from a holiday with your family, what parts of yourself do you notice with a different appreciation?"

"I got to thinking about growing up after we talked last time. I hadn't thought about how it was with my father when I was young for a long time. I realized I hadn't done too badly, considering." Relaxation settled on Alan's face, and I found myself uplifted that he had perceived this.

"When you reflect on your constructive response to your father's violence can you see qualities in yourself that you could be pleased with?" I asked him. "Yeah, though I haven't really thought about it like that," Alan replied.

There were qualities hinted at in Alan's response to his father's violence that I wanted to research. There could be old stories that, when reviewed, could bring alive fuller descriptions of Alan that might contribute to a new way of seeing himself.

Alan held his head, as if weary. Seeing this, I decided to bring our conversation to an end.

Over the following weeks we worked hard together to find other stories in Alan's life that could provide alternative descriptions to seeing himself as a failure (Epston, 1998; White, 2007). As we did this the fear of death diminished, and Alan became happier. Alan and Catherine said they were closer as a couple. The family went on another break away and Alan retired altogether from working in his office.

THE DESPAIR OF PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

An urgent call came from a nurse in the community team one busy Friday. Catherine had rung in desperation, alarmed that Alan had gone to bed in despair and refused to talk to anyone. Catherine was at a loss as to how to respond. The nurse's voice was layered with worry as she spoke with me. We all knew how competent Catherine was. The nurse requested that I urgently meet with Alan. I looked down at my diary. Full. A distressed couple who had just heard the news that cure was not an option, a young girl grieving for the loss of her mother, and a family who had gone to great lengths to come together for our planned meeting. Yet I couldn't put this off. Alan might live a few more weeks. He might also die any day, and I didn't want him to die in despair. I immediately phoned Catherine. Would she ask Alan if he would be willing to see me? Alan agreed to a meeting with me at the end of the day.

I arrived in the early evening to the news from Catherine that Alan had risen to see me. For a moment emotion welled in me that he would go to such lengths. Alan looked up from the chair in the sitting room. When he caught sight of me a look of relief sat on his face briefly. Even in a week I could see how the cancer had increased its hold. He was thinner and paler and every bodily movement seemed to tax his existing strength. Alan set aside any greeting to tell me about his exhaustion. His voice was barely audible, slow, and laden with effort. "I'm at the stage now where all I do is sit in this chair. I get up and sit here as I try to build up energy to have a shower. I'm so tired." He halted for a moment before continuing. "Then I can't find a towel and I lose the plot. I just can't do it. And I have to rely on Catherine again. I ask myself, 'Do you want to end it?' God, I ask myself that every day."

Alan's suffering permeated the space. "And how do you answer yourself?" I asked him. Alan leaned against the arm of his chair as if even his body was too heavy to hold up. He gave a cough and the words spurted out. "Yes, definitely. I want to end it." "How is it, to want to end it, while having done so much fighting for your life?" was my steady response. "It's the selfish side of me that wants to bring an end to it," he told me by way of a confession.

I absorbed the harsh judgment he extended towards himself. "If you were acting in your own interest, would you end your life?" I asked. "Probably," was the reply. "So in the daily keeping going, who is that for?" I asked. Alan nodded over to where Catherine was perched, surveying us from her chair. "She's over there," he rasped. Catherine sat quietly. She seemed to somehow know this even though it had never been voiced before.

"What is it about staying alive that you think is important for Catherine?" I asked him softly. "It's not just for Catherine," he corrected me, "for the children as well. Then again I've got no energy; I'm not much use. . . ." Alan's tiredness was very apparent. I anxiously watched for a sign that talking was proving too much.

"How are you going in terms of the talking?" I probed. "It's fine," he said. "Please let me know if the talking becomes too much," I requested. "Catherine, will you

help me with that too?" She nodded in assent, and then stood up to attend to the children in another room.

I looked to return to the thread of our conversation, but Alan added, "It's tough, the fatigue. You're no longer a man." I was distracted by this thought, and before I could properly think, my surprise spilled out. "How are you no longer a man?" Alan seemed to collapse in on himself, his body folding into a smaller space. "I can't do the everyday things," he explained. "Mow the lawn, fix things like I used to, work. I have no purpose in life." My heart went out to him as I listened. There was so much loss. "What else makes up being a man?" I wanted to know, reaching for other roles that could provide purpose. "Taking care of Catherine and the children," responded Alan. "What is it about staying alive that you think is important to Catherine and the children?" I asked, returning to the earlier thread. In feeling robbed of his masculinity Alan seemed to underestimate the emotional value of his presence in the family. "There are still things to do, and it wouldn't be fair to leave them with it all. Staying alive just seems the right thing to do," he said looking up at Catherine, who returned to sit beside him on the chair. "If I was to ask Sarah, Amy, and Robbie what would they say?" I asked. "They'd want me around because I'm their dad," he answered. "If you were moving, even in this fatigued state, where so much has been taken away, towards having some purpose, could being a dad contribute?" I asked tentatively. "Yes," he answered me, though doubt lingered in his voice. "I want you to be here," Catherine added quietly and lovingly reached for his hand.

Alan went on, "But it's hard. I feel so bad . . . and what's there to look forward to tomorrow? Another shower. . . . I just can't face it, though Sarah did help . . .," he trailed off. I looked quizzically at Catherine. "Sarah, our eldest daughter, has started helping Alan wash his hair by doing it over the basin. She's only 12." Pride crept into her voice, "But she loves doing it for him, and he lets her know."

"When you let Sarah wash your hair at the basin what does it tell Sarah about your regard for her as your daughter?" I asked. Alan considered, "Well, that I trust her and it tells her I know she respects me. It was good, so good. She got a chair for me and did everything. It was nice. It was after I'd been into work."

Catherine added, "Alan went into the lab to say goodbye to his workmates a couple of days ago. I pushed him in a wheelchair."

I couldn't help expressing my surprise. Many people return to work and those places that hold meaning for them, to say goodbye. For Alan to do so when he was unwell and when he had been so determined to fight death, seemed to signal something new. I asked Alan what had brought about the decision to go and say goodbye. This question drew from Alan another story of the generosity that had been hidden from him until recently. Tearfully, Alan explained, "I wanted to say goodbye. I have worked for them for many years, and they've always cared about me. I felt it was my turn to give back to them." The tears were uncomfortably new to him, and Catherine quickly leaned over and with a tissue wiped them from his face.

"What did you awaken in their hearts that they might take away with them, when they saw you come in and say goodbye?" I asked.

“It meant a lot to them. I think they realized they were important,” Alan replied. Catherine picked up the thread, “A lot of them had tears in their eyes. They hugged Alan. I’ve never heard of them doing anything like that before,” she commented.

“How do they see you, Alan, that you stir this emotion in them that is out of the ordinary?” I inquired.

In spite of his weakened state, Alan straightened a little. Hesitantly, in his unpre-
sumptuous manner, came the reply, “They respect me, I guess. I think they knew
it was hard for me coming in.”

Alan started to reflect on his work at the lab. I was able to draw out some of the
successes of his working life, with Catherine joining in.

I then asked Alan, aware that I was drawing attention to his mortality, “Alan, as
you say goodbye to aspects of your life, what are your hopes?”

“I want to remember my life. It’s tough going . . .,” he said and added, “for
everyone. . . . I made jokes to lighten it for them but it didn’t stop some of them
crying.” I asked him then, with as much care as I could put into my tone, “What
do you think they were crying about?” “Me dying?” he replied with a questioning
tone that seemed to seek my reassurance. I was aware of the preciousness of this
moment. He appeared to embrace the inevitable that had been resisted for so long.
“You dying,” I reflected back sitting in the moment. Unhurried I asked, “What did
your going into work touch in them that made them cry?” Alan pondered, taking his
time, as he needed to with the fatigue ever present. “The fact that I thought enough
of them to go in.” Alan reflected on his words quietly. They hung around him, then
settled. “It meant something to them.” The words carried the understated weight of
generosity that comes with giving graciously when life is difficult.

Wanting to deepen the meaning of what he had done, I asked, “When people
are moved by the actions of someone like you who shows valuing them by saying
goodbye, do you think they could be changed in what they are prepared to do in
their own lives?”

Alan meditated on the question as if it wasn’t something he had ever considered.
“I hope so. I think they may have learned some things. They’ve done a lot for me.
I wanted to do something for them in return.”

“What was the cost of that giving?” I asked him, knowing that the gift may
have been beyond what his workmates could imagine. “Fatigue,” Catherine
stated in a matter-of-fact tone. “Yes, fatigue,” said Alan. “How much energy
did it take to put on a brave face?” I asked, wanting to give a fuller context for
the difficult time Alan was having today. “A lot,” he answered. “Yeah, it was
hard, a huge effort.”

I had been wondering about the context for the despair that Alan had been
experiencing. As he hadn’t had any explanation for it himself, I asked, “In your
experience of yourself, if you’ve made an enormous emotional effort, such as
you’ve described going into work and seeing your workmates, do you think there’s
a consequence that happens in the days that follow?” Catherine cut in, “Oh gosh!
Yes, there is! It catches up with him.”

“How do you think that emotional and physical effort is contributing to the way you experience today?” I asked Alan.

“Sasha, I’ve had enough,” he pronounced. “You’ve had enough,” I reflected back slowly, and then paused to acknowledge the depth of what he was saying. I went on, careful to stay with him. “Today you’ve had enough. So much has been taken away. The fatigue is so on top of you, it seems even the purpose of you being here is hard to reach. Can I ask you, Alan, if I had asked you 2 days ago when you went into work, if you’d had enough, what would you have said?” “Probably the opposite,” he admitted, though sounding lighter. I summarized, not wanting to move us out of the moment too quickly, “So today you feel like dying.” “Yep,” Alan agreed. “But 2 days ago you didn’t feel like dying.” “I had some purpose, I guess,” Alan answered. He seemed to muse a moment. “All I thought was ‘I’m just down, down again.’” “Could there have been a sinking in of the goodbye?” I asked him. “Yes,” he said. “That is what happened. It has been sinking in.”

Robbie and Amy came into the room. Robbie trotted over to where his father was and sat down, leaning into his legs. A smile danced on Alan’s tired face.

“It makes sense now,” Alan concluded. He sounded relieved. Catherine asked if I would come back at our prearranged time in a few days. Alan looked expectantly at me. The weariness seeped out of him, and I said my goodbyes, having agreed to a quick return. I wondered if it would be our last conversation. Gratitude for what Alan and Catherine had shared stayed with me as I drove away. I knew that one day my own death would be shaped by stories like theirs.

DEATH COMES TO US ALL

I was keen to know how they both were when I drove up 5 days later. The door was ajar. I called out. Catherine returned my call with “Come in” from the living room. I saw Alan before they saw me. His skin was yellow and his legs so swollen they looked as if they didn’t belong to the thin body to which they were attached. I walked towards Alan to grasp his hand. He moved somehow in his weakness, trying to stand up. His arms reached around my neck and he raised his body towards standing. He clung to me like a lost child might. I stood still and offered him the steadiness I could give, as unspoken between us was the knowledge he was dying. He relaxed. Catherine’s voice was in the background. “He is thanking you,” she said. Touched beyond words I helped him back into his chair. His energy spent, Alan closed his eyes. “He was waiting for you,” Catherine explained. She smiled at me and her face looked relaxed. “He’s been good. Sick but good,” was her next comment. “I think he is at peace,” she added, conveying to me her own calm resignation.

Alan slept while Catherine and I talked. She told me the children were coping well. Catherine sighed. “He can’t do anything now. It’s not fair on Alan to expect him to keep going like this.” I left that day having said a goodbye that could be the last one. I didn’t know.

The days passed. I heard that Alan had gone into a coma. The nurses told me he was comfortable. It was reassuring to know their expertise and kindness were supporting Alan and Catherine. One morning I received a phone call. Catherine asked if I could come to the house.

On a sunny peaceful day while Catherine was attending to visitors, I found myself sitting, at her request, alone with Alan. The bedroom was slightly darkened with Alan lying in a hospital bed in the center. The sounds of the house were distant, with Alan's sometimes noisy breathing filling the room. I sat there quietly beside him, speaking only occasionally, so he knew I was there.

It was the last time I saw Alan. He died peacefully some hours later with his family around him. Alan's family, and those of us who knew him, carry the threads of his story now. As I met with Catherine over later months he seemed to sit with us, another voice in the conversation.

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