

"Speaking the Same Language"

Running red lights, I raced to University Hospital hoping to arrive in time to tell my Dad the one thing that he needed to know - that I loved him. His prognosis was not good, and according to the doctor the end could come within 72 hours. At that moment, it did not matter that I felt I was right to walk away from our rather impassive relationship last year, when I witnessed him betraying my sister by allowing his new wife to mistreat her. It did not matter that for years I felt he was emotionally void, unwilling to understand the woman I had become, that I was not the little girl he once knew. None of that mattered right then, as I swerved into the parking lot and raced to get to his bedside.

As I entered his room, I braced myself for the worst. With a newly shaved head and a complete loss of verbal skills, he was screaming inaudible phrases as a team of nurses restrained him. Bucking like an animal, he twisted and pulled to free himself from the bed and the immobilized life brought on suddenly by his brain injury. I sat alongside him for hours before he was wheeled to surgery, overwhelmed by my selfish thoughts and the angst that I would never forgive myself if he died on that operating table. How could he go before I had the chance to tell him how I really felt?

Considering our history of poor communication, I never imagined that once my father survived the operation talking with each other would become any easier. Standing outside of his room waiting for the nurses to change his bedding, our twenty-nine year relationship reeled in my mind. I knew that the heart-to-heart talks were rare, and had always stemmed from a crisis – like the ending of my parent's marriage two decades earlier, or the scare years ago as my Dad learned of his chemical imbalance. Never before had I realized that I stopped trying to talk with him, as it never came naturally as it does with my mother. He received the facts of my life, not the emotion that had surrounded the trials of my entrance into adulthood. I truly believe

I held back because he was not a good listener, a complaint I heard my mother lodge during their divorce.

The next four weeks, following his surgery, I visited on weekends often only to receive a cold stare and a warm, limp hand. His blank gaze was seldom broken, although he frequently mustered the energy to retaliate against the nurses. As he refused to eat, he began biting the nurses that struggled to pry open his mouth to fill it with "enticing" foods, like hospital Jell-O. "Hey Mikey. He likes it!" he once exclaimed in a clear distinct voice as he pushed away yet another dinner, as if to mock the nurses and inform the world that his inability to speak does not make him an invalid.

While I was not certain my Dad could understand my words, I believed these visits were my opportunity to tell him stories about my new life in New York City, the writing class I was enjoying and how my relationship with a man we both loved, and had hoped would become my husband, had finally ended. But, somehow I knew that he heard me. I felt he could understand what I was saying, as I saw him muster a smile when I assured him that I would wait for him to gather his strength to walk me down the aisle, and to name my first daughter after his mother Cordelia. When he finally did find the strength to form words, I intently stared at his mouth. "...priorities, forgetting...me" was all I could decipher. He could say only a few words clearly, but as I continued to listen to the ones that he could muster, I knew that the rest of his sentence did not matter. I heard what he wanted to say. I listened to him tell me things he wanted to years ago but had held back. Like me, he felt it had been easier to relate from a distance. Like me, he wished he had realized the importance of our relationship. Like me, he wanted to forget our misgivings of the past, and begin to confide in one another, as we had always wanted.

Overwhelmed by my emotions, I climbed over the protective bed railing to hug my Dad harder and stronger than I ever had. His fragile arms struggled and he let out a sigh as he held onto me with all of his strength. I knew that somewhere inside of his scrambled brain was the man that brought me into the world, and who loved me the best way that he knew how. As we

cried, my Dad and I realized we were not shedding tears of pain, but of joy knowing that we got a second chance, our encore to express the love and care we'd always had but were too proud and stubborn to reveal.

While his brain trauma ensues, my Dad and I have created a way to communicate – and really hear one another. I am confident that his newfound energy to focus on improving his speech is driven by the fact that he has so much more to tell me. Leaving his bedside, I look into his striking blue eyes, as they convey his emotions best these days. I see them shine as he chuckles and tugs on his feeding tubes, as if he's going to make a break for it. I am ready for that day when, or if, he fully recovers so that we can spend time talking in whatever language necessary, to express how much we love and cherish one another.

Note: The author regrets to say that her father passed away five days following the completion of this essay.