

ONE FINAL GIFT

**MY DAD'S LAST GIFT-TEN YEARS LATER
THE WINTER AND SPRING OF 2007**

At my father's memorial on the last day of May in 1997 a family secret was unexpectedly revealed. It happened innocently enough. A few years before my father died, a friend had given him a bound blank book. My dad filled it with twenty-five short essays, written in long hand, about life and living. I was so impressed I asked my dad if I could borrow it. Because my dad had the handwriting of a physician, I wondered if anyone could decipher what he wrote if they weren't a family member or a pharmacist. With the hope of giving his philosophy on life a broader audience, I typed out the essays, wrote a short introduction, had copies bound, and, with my dad's permission, shared them with family and a few close friends.

Preparing for the memorial after my dad died my mother gave a copy of those writings to the minister who was also a family friend. My mother remembered inviting him to read anything he chose from the book. He chose a chapter about my father's time in a mental institution.

I got depressed—I didn't recognize that I was ill... I just could not sleep, lost my appetite, couldn't concentrate. I knew something was wrong but since I had never been depressed I couldn't figure out what was happening—it finally got bad enough that I was hospitalized (in the psychiatric floor in the same hospital where I had been in charge of the medical ward.) This made me even more depressed. At that time—1946—they didn't know much about depression—or how to treat it. No medication was available—and instead of reassurance and getting me out of the pressure—I was kept hospitalized—and when my son was born my depression lifted. I felt I had a reason for living and was soon allowed to go home.

Nothing is important if it makes you ill or unhappy—don't force yourself to do anything you shouldn't—recognize your limitations—don't do something just to please someone else—please yourself, your family, and your God. Don't push yourself beyond your comfort level. Be happy with your limitations!

So a secret was shared in a most public place in my father's own words, without any foreknowledge of any of the secret keepers. Perhaps the minister simply saw my father's silver lining and wanted to share it. What the minister did not know was that some in the family suspected my grandfather had similar issues, that my dad's older brother had died in a mental institution, and that fear had continued to define a lot of our family's relationship with mental illness.



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Perhaps most importantly our family history of mental illness came to be defined by silence that, over time, became a shameful unspeakable secret.

In the months after my father's memorial it became clear that I no longer needed to remain a secret keeper. I was free at last to shine a light into the darkness and to give voice to the silence. It was my father's last gift to me.

What I thought would take a year or two has taken ten. What I thought at first might be answers often turned into more questions. For me, it meant looking at life, my family, and especially myself in a new light. It demanded I challenge long held assumptions. It called on me to find, face, and free fears that I had lived so fully and freely in the dark. I became terrified when those fears began to run roughshod over my formerly ordered world. I've tried to articulate a lot of that in previous Campfires.

Perhaps I could best describe my life as having lived captive to those fears. And then, my father gave me his last gift. It took me a decade to unravel and unwrap and untangle and untie the many strands that had thrived in the darkness and silence. And then, as I approached the ten year anniversary of my father's death, of being free from being a secret keeper, something dawned on me: I could spend the rest of my life obsessed with the tangles and the knots or I could begin to live my life as a free man.

Fortunately freedom thrilled me just a little bit more than it terrified me. And in the spring of 2007, what I began referring to as three "peak moments," stopped me in my tracks and set me on my way.

The first moment came at a Brothers Four concert in Tokyo, the first in the city since Mike McCoy had joined the group. For McCoy and me, it was the equivalent of singing together at Carnegie Hall in New York City. There was a solo concert at Benaroya Hall in downtown Seattle. I had never attempted anything quite that ambitious. The event became a combination family reunion, career retrospective, and 60th birthday party. The third moment came as I placed red roses at my father's grave ten years after he died. With tears in my eyes I thanked him.

For everything.



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