

My father found his own best way to die

When my father was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis, he was told he could expect to gradually suffocate to death. Instead, his own end-of-life choices gave him a surprising level of well-being, both mentally and physically.

My father was 87 years old. Full of vigour, in love, witty and quick off the mark. The disease developed rapidly, and his breathing became more and more laboured. Father accepted that his illness would run its course but wanted to defy the predictions of an agonising death. He believed that he could sort this out himself, if he could stay at home. He did not want to be in a hospital or a nursing home.

Father navigated his way through his final weeks – with his closest ones by his side. He listened to his body's signals. He did not take any medication. We were typical next of kin, acting with the best of intentions, trying to get food into him. The food gave him violent coughing fits. In addition, his body was so debilitated by the disease that it could not digest food. Consequently, he decided to stop eating and drinking as soon as he became confined to bed. This would protect him from unnecessary pain and let nature take its own course. This worked very well for my father.

The day Father became bedridden, he stopped eating. He continued to shave and wash himself, brush his teeth, put on clean clothes and comb his hair. He did all of this himself, every day. He had also used the toilet for the last time. His body felt light and good afterwards. There were no more visits to the toilet, he only used a bottle for urine.

The second day he stopped drinking. Father coughed much less, and his breathing was easy when he was lying still in bed. He wondered when his brain functioning would decline after he stopped drinking. He performed some research on himself and behaved much like his old self. He followed with interest the amount of urine in the bottle and what it looked like. And he wondered how his kidneys were tolerating it.

On this day he said goodbye to his girlfriend. They lay together, looked at pictures on their mobile phones and talked about the good times they had spent together – and they were happy for it.

On the third day he responded to text messages from his grandchildren. Happy and grateful for all the declarations of love, he wondered if he should postpone his passing.

The fourth morning he exclaimed with a twinkle in his eye, «Darn it! I'm still alive. Am in such good shape. This is going in the wrong direction!» He thought it was exciting. Father was not a religious man and

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believed there was blackness before we are born and blackness again after death. He was not afraid of dying and joked about finding out soon whether there was anything on the other side.

Father believed that individuals, when possible, should get to choose for themselves how to live their final days and that this could make death easier. He wanted to do this – not only for himself – but for everyone else in the same situation. And he wanted me to write about it.

The fifth night was cold and miserable. He coughed a lot. I massaged his feet. It helped. We had a couple of spoonfuls of vodka and Sprite. Our spirits were good, and Father told me about his boat trips along the Norwegian coast. In the evening he lost consciousness a couple of times, but came to himself quickly. He fell asleep and was comfortable. He was very grateful that the family were by his side through this period, in order for him to stay at home.

The sixth morning, Father exclaimed with delight: «It's been a marvellous night. Slept very well. Had a feeling of waking up in slow-motion and felt good in my entire body. No coughing.»

That evening he grew more tired, but his spirits were still good. He thought he had used the last days well. He said his final farewell to his girlfriend on the phone: «Goodbye, my love». He hoped he would fall asleep for good this evening.

On the seventh day, I was awakened by the hum of the electric shaver. Father was doing his morning routine as usual.

He was lying in bed, all nice and clean, all freshened up, when I got up.

After one week without food and six days without anything to drink, Dad became weaker and weaker. He lost consciousness, had blurred vision and thought he was going to die. He barely managed to speak, but often looked at me with a smile. Said it was calming that I was sitting there crocheting. Used a cloth to moisten his mouth himself and felt fine and was satisfied.

Suddenly Father grabbed his mobile phone and put on the music he and his girlfriend had danced to in Gran Canaria two months earlier. He looked at me slyly, smiled happily and placed his mobile phone on the shelf above the bed – for good.

On the eighth day we thought he would die. He had visual disturbances. He fantasised a bit and wanted to hold my hand. He struggled to breathe a few times. Breathing exercises helped, and he slept peacefully, but kept opening his eyes and smiling, clearly happy that I was there. He even wanted to hear the headlines from the local newspaper, and signalled to me when he wanted the pages turned.

Later in the evening he became restless. The end was near. His feet became mottled. I asked if he wanted a suppository to calm down. He did. Stesolid 5 mg did wonders. My father slept peacefully.

On the ninth morning I was awakened by Father's irregular breathing. My sister and I managed to reach his bedside just before he died. He died peacefully and quietly – a totally natural death – just as he had hoped for.

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