

LIFESTYLE

Gifts from My Father

“Even in this most extreme of living states, close to death, he maintained the tough, ironic Texas grit that marked his whole life.”



By William Martin

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About eighteen months ago, my father learned he had a rare kidney disease that would progressively, inevitably so wreck the various organs of his body that one of them—heart, liver, lungs, brain, blood vessels, skin, the kidneys themselves—would fail, and he would die. Intellectually, he accepted the fact he was going to die. He did not rage against the dying of the light—rage is not his style—but neither did he offer to help reduce the wattage. He prepared for death in a way I found completely characteristic. He seemed to take some pleasure in the fact that only two other people in South Texas had his disease, and that the doctors had told him it was completely unrelated to the two packs of cigarettes he had smoked every day for 57 years. The powerful combination of drugs he took every morning made him feel, by his own account, like he had “just drunk a quart of cheap whiskey and was trying to drive uphill on a bad road in an overloaded Model T truck with no muffler.” Still, he kept on driving. By summer he had a little collection of adding-machine tapes indicating how much and how long the payments would be for the sale of his business, how much various men owed him, what the interest ought to be on his certificates of deposit, how much stock he had in the Tri-Country Farmer’s Co-Op, and how much it would be worth when he died.

All his life he had driven modest cars, lest he offend the farmers with whom he had worked. Now, he drove to San Antonio and paid cash for a fully equipped, top-of-the-line maroon Lincoln Continental. A few days later, when I rushed to his hospital bed to be present when he died, wondering what blessing he would bestow upon me, what his last words of advice or caution or love might be, he opened his eyes and said, each word slow, labored, and barely audible, “Did... you... see... my... car?”

I spent much of the next several weeks with him in that hospital room, thinking about what it means to have a parent die. I realized, as I had at the birth of my oldest child, that it was not the first time this had happened, which diminished its importance just a bit. But I also knew I was experiencing the universal, which ennobled the event immeasurably.

I thought about what it had meant to be his son. I don’t know whether our relationship was anything extraordinary or not. I remember wishing he would play with me more, much as I suppose my children wish I had played with them more. He always worked hard, but sometimes in the summer he took me on business trips and, after a day of sitting in a sweltering car of a cluttered, dusty office in a grain mill or a warehouse or a fertilizer plant, he would buy me a hot roast beef sandwich and take me to see a movie starring Francis the Talking Mule or Eddie Bracken or Leo Gorcey and the Bowery Boys. In the fall, we always managed to see several Southwest Conference football games, and at least twice he took me to the Sate Fair. He made me believe it was important to shake hands firmly, to remember names, and to look people in the eye when I talked to them. He tried to make me believe it was important to wear a hat and lace-up shoes. I knew he was smart and honest, and it pleased me that, when it came time to build a new high school or recruit a new doctor for the town, he was always one of the three or four men everybody knew would have to be in on it. Not everything I heard or knew about him was good, but the balance was clearly in that direction.

I was pretty sure he was proud of me, but learned not to expect him to say much about it. I was also pretty sure he thought it was something of a waste of talent for me to become a preacher or a teacher or a writer instead of going

into a field with more substance to it—like the agriculture business. As recently as three years ago he suggested I come to Pearsall for a couple of months and learn about what he did, in case I ever had to take over. When I suggested he come to Houston for a couple of months and explain it to me, he was incredulous; after all, he had a regular job. On the other hand, when I overheard him talking about “that boy of mine that went to Harvard and teaches over at Rice,” or when I met someone whose only impression of me had come through him, I could tell he wasn’t entirely disappointed.

It was not a simple matter to fasten these strands of memory that trailed across my mind to this deteriorating figure in a hospital bed. The legs that had stepped off fields in a strong, measured stride were now white and hairless and thin, except for water-filled knees. The wrinkled feet were like balloons that had been inflated to capacity and allowed to go down. The swollen stomach summoned images of starving children. The organ that had propelled half of me into existence and that had first represented “man genitals” to me was now virtually useless even for its most basic task, unable to contain the involuntary flow. To compound the sense of strangeness, his charts and nametags listed his first name as “Lowell,” and the doctors and nurses called him that, even though an injury he had sustained as a teenage left him a nickname—“Peggie” (short for “peg leg”)—that was as permanent and natural as his slight limp and as unfeminine as his Stetsons.

As I looked at him for days, it became more difficult to remember how he had looked when he was well than to imagine how he would look when he was dead. Still, he was not dead, and even in this most extreme of living states, he maintained the tough, ironic Texas grit that marked his whole life. When the nurse asked if he could roll over to allow her to change his sheets, he said, “I can do anything once and several things twice.” When she complimented him on the good amount of urine he had voiced, he said it was nothing compared to what he could do on a heavy dose of diuretics. When she told him she was going to measure it and pack it in some ice, he said that was fine with him, but he thought they’d have a hard time selling it. Once, a nurse looked at him and declared him comatose. He registered not a flicker of

protest for two hours, then said, in weak indignation, “Comatose!...I’ve...got...as...much...sense...as...I’ve...ever...had!

It should be no surprise that a man who claims to have lived just about every day of his life the way he wanted did not take well to life in a single bed. He despised his oxygen mask and sought constantly to pull it off; finally, he had to be restrained by cuffs tied to the side bars of the bed. It is not easy to tie one’s father to a bed, but I got better at it. Dozens, no, hundreds of times, he begged me to untie him. When he saw that begging would not help, he resorted to a technique he had practiced all his life: making a deal. “There’s a pocketknife in my trousers,” he said. “If you’ll get it and cut me loose, I’ll give you the knife.”

“I can’t do that,” I told him. “If I cut you loose, you’ll take off the oxygen mask and you’ll have a heart attack and die. I can’t do that.”

He thought about it, then looked at me and said, “It’s a seven-dollar-and-fifty-cent knife.”

Like Jacob with the angel, I wanted to wrestle with that old man’s soul and not let go until he promised me a blessing. But my determination to concentrate as closely as possible on that spark that refused to go out was consistently thwarted by a great cloud of witnesses. People I had not seen in years or, worse, had never seen came to pay their respects. My mother not only appreciated the company, but kept score. I suffered moderate ambivalence. My father was terminally exhausted and did not need or want visitors. One Saturday afternoon, when no fewer than twelve people crowded into the room, chattering and watching the ball game and using the telephone and nibbling on a cake roll filled with Cool Whip, I noticed he was trying to say something and moved to the edge of his bed. He forced out only two words, but they were apt: “Ringling Brothers.” At times like that—and there were others—I wanted everybody to clear out and leave us alone, but eventually I realized my possessiveness was inappropriate. I was there because about forty years and nine months earlier my number came up in the ultimate roulette game. Most of them had earned the right to be there,

and the kind of love and respect they showed extended my understanding of family.

Brother and Sister Harrell and Brother and Sister Caddell and Brother and Sister Danchak, church folk from Devine and Pearsall, came by several times and said they'd be glad to do anything they could. Brother Swim, who used to drive down from San Antonio to preach for us, stopped by nearly every day to check up and lead us in "a word of prayer for Brother Peggie." Temo Hernandez, one of my dad's most valued employees in recent years, apologized for breaking into tears but explained that "Mr. Martin was like a second father." Temo's wife left a long letter thanking him for helping them get through some difficult times and told how their children thought of him as a grandfather. Odis Doyal, who worked for him thirty years, said, "You know, your dad is like an older brother to me." To Elmer Stehle, a thin, leather-faced workingman I have known all my life, he was more like an uncle. Henry Brigman, who has, according to my mother, "made a good little preacher," said, "You all are sort of like kinfolks." Anaceto Cortez, a small wrinkled man in khaki trousers and purple shirt, put his hand on my shoulder and said, "He's my good, good amigo. I know him for a long time. He's sure a good man." Jesse Alvarado, a former employee and old friend, said through tears, "He always called me 'Mexican,' but he treated me like a white man." One banker gave my mother a check for several thousand dollars and told her there would be no interest. Another made sure she knew where to come in case she needed any more. And an apparently endless procession of men in Western pants and boots and short-sleeved shirts, with creases in their oiled hair that fairly pled to have the respectfully removed hats returned to their natural places, stood around and said things like, "Your dad did us a lot of favors." I was beginning to see that he had done me some, too.

As he sank lower and lower, our lives organized themselves around death. I flew back and forth between Houston and San Antonio every few days and held reservations on a lot of flights I didn't take. In addition to his primary ailment and long-standing emphysema, he developed pneumonia and tuberculosis, his liver multiplied in size, his heart and kidneys began to fail, his skin leaked water and blood, and—what we had all dreaded most—he lost

his mind, except for rare lucid moments. As every vital sign got worse, the doctors said they did not recommend “heroic measures,” since the only kind of life these might sustain would be so severely reduced as to be worse than death for such a man as this. I had seen a television program about Karen Ann Quinlan a few nights before and found it ironic that my mother and sister and I had just stood in the hall and agreed to let a life end with as much dignity as was still possible. No controversy, no trial, no headlines. We just talked about it and cried a little bit and that was that.

Mama told me who would speak at the funeral and who would be the pallbearers, and explained that, even though she and Daddy had always said they weren’t going to spend a lot of money on a casket, she had changed her mind, because Pearsall is a high-class town and people would remember it if she put him away in something cheap. I drove over to the Wonderland Mall and bought a new white shirt to bury him in and thanked the salesgirl when she told me to have a nice day.

A few days later, about two in the morning, a nurse said, “He’s going. His eyes have begun to set. He probably won’t last more than an hour now.” My mother, whose life had been bound up with this man for nearly half a century, squeezed his hand and said, “Don’t leave me, Honey.” Somehow, he heard her and had strength enough to answer. He said, “I’m not.”

And he didn’t. From that moment, he began to get better—just a little, but better. After a couple of weeks, the doctors said maybe he could die at home if he could survive the seventy-mile trip in an automobile. He survived, but his mind was still gone and we were apprehensive of my mother’s ability to care for this wasted but familiar body now inhabited by a demented, sometimes irascible stranger. For two weeks, he said little that made sense. Then one night my mother heard a loud bump and woke up to find him sitting on the floor. Neither of them can figure out how he got out of bed, but they don’t ponder that mystery too much. More significant is that he began then, and has continued, to think and speak in a completely normal manner. His explanation is probably as good as any: “I fell flat on my butt and I’ve been fine ever since. I just gave myself a good chiropractic adjustment.”

As I am writing this, eight months after his fall, he is still alive and interested in reading what I might have to say about him. He walks with a cane and he drives his new Lincoln. As a matter of fact, he had a wreck trying to gun it out of a parking lot in front of a lesser vehicle. He enjoys having people tell him what a fine car it is, and he likes for you to notice how good it rides out on the highway. He stays in touch with the doctors, but has worked out his own regimen, taking pills in the dosages that make him feel better rather than those prescribed. When his skin began to itch terribly, an apparent side effect of the medicine, he cured it by rubbing himself with Pine-O-Pine for a couple of weeks. And to make sure he doesn't lose his mind again, he goes to the chiropractor every so often.

It seems to be working. He looks bad and he knows it. He laughs about the time he saw an old man coming out of the post office and thought he'd rather died than be that feeble, then he realized he was seeing his own reflection in the mirrored door and changed his mind, on the spot. When I first see him, I am always taken aback at how worn and small and bent he looks, but then he starts talking—about the church's new bus ministry or some article he had read or some story he thinks I might like to hear. I may be wrong, but I think he is making a conscious effort to pass on the oral tradition. In the last few months, he has told me wonderful stories I had never heard before, stories about driving a wagon to the gin when he was six or selling watermelons in Waco when he was twenty, stories filled with every detail that is pertinent and a good many that aren't. And when he talks a while, he seems to straighten up and fill out and his skin gets smooth and he is young and strong again, like a man about forty.

He spends most of his time nowadays working in his yard, an avocation to which he turned only in retirement. He putters and plants and pulls nut grass for several hours a day, sometimes sitting so long on a low stool that he can barely get up. He's had a fence put up and a sprinkler system installed, and the last time I saw him he had ordered some cuttings that were supposed to grow into giant shade trees in less than two years. When he opened the package and found three or four little pieces of root that looked like rotted grapevine, I think he suspected it had not been one of his wisest purchases.

But, as I have indicated, he doesn't give up easily. He looked them over, twirled them between his fingers, then said, "Better to get me a ladder. I'd hate to get trapped up in one of these things in case I don't get out of the way fast enough."

I finally got up the nerve to tell him how much I appreciated the way he had maintained the integrity of his personality all the way to what I had thought was the end. He said, "I'm glad that's the way it was and I'm glad you noticed. Some people are full of fear. They are afraid to live and afraid to die. As long as you have that attitude, you are half whipped to start with. I heard people saying I was going to die, but I never really thought I would. I felt sort of like I was falling off a tall building and somebody was going to come along and put a mattress out for me. I wasn't ready, but if it was time, I wasn't going to panic. I guess I inherited that from Mama and Papa."

He explained how matter-of-factly both his parents had faced death and how he had admired that. I understood what he was saying. I told him, "It's hard to give your children a greater gift than that." He said something like "Wellsir," and, typical of the way he has always dealt with conversations that get too close to the core, started talking about a helicopter that was flying over the house. Later, as I prepared to leave—knowing then, knowing now, that any such leave-taking might be the last—he said, "I'm glad we had that little talk." I told him I wished I could do something to make him well. Since I couldn't, I would try to be the best man I knew how to be. He squeezed my hand. I think he understood what I was saying. I hope I did.

L. C. "Peggie" Martin died August 13, 1978, after a brief period of hospitalization. He was 73 years old. At his well-attended funeral, his grandsons served as pallbearers, his friends sang "Amazing Grace" and "I Come to the Garden Alone," and, in keeping with his precise instructions, no one read the 23rd Psalm. Five men who had known him well spoke with reasonable accuracy of his work, his character, and his personality. More than once, the burden of sorrow was lightened by laughter at the memory of an uncommon man. Adapting the words of the Apostle Paul to the audience and the occasion,

the last speaker closed his remarks by saying, “Peggie Martin fought the good fight; he finished the course; he kept the faith; and he hoed his row to the end.