

January 31, 2017
(January Letter)

Dear Samantha,

It looks like I might be able to squeeze in a letter before the end of January. I presume that you have been very busy since I not only didn't get a letter but we haven't had any text messages from you either. I hope that it hasn't been all stressful-busy but that there are plenty of fun activities as well.

I received a link from your mother yesterday that got me thinking about dying (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/08/02/letting-go-2>). It's not the cheeriest topic, but I realized that there are some important aspects of it that relate to both your professional life as a recreation administrator and your personal life. Did your recreation program spend any time dealing with death and dying? It sounds like a topic that should be part of the curriculum.

As I got thinking about it I realized that my experience with the matter is largely informed by Fran and my parents' deaths. Probably the most important was my father.

For many years, Dad had suffered with significant back pain and the slow deterioration of his mid-range memory. All his life, he was a problem-solver. He could fix most anything and if there was something that was a mystery to him he would take a course or find someone who could teach him. I remember when he was preparing to open the "Marpole Fix-it Shop" that he took a correspondence course on electricity, fixing radios, and TVs. Those were the days without the internet so it meant receiving the lessons by snail mail, filling out the assignments and mailing them back to the teacher. It obviously took a long time.

I benefitted greatly from his skills and related equipment. Not only did he love it when we kids took on projects related to his many skills, but he was quick to help out – which often meant showing us how to use his equipment and encouraging us to explore broken items. "After all", he would say, "if you can't fix it, at least you will learn something by taking it apart."

When he was about 62 he suffered a heart attack while on one of his many beloved Westy trips. This was in the days when heart surgery was just being developed (1977 or so). Although the bypass surgery went okay, he suffered a mild stroke that created problems for his mid-term memory later in his life.

The biggest disappointment for him was when he became interested in the exciting new technology of computers. Those were the days when home computers were just being sold, so it wasn't a surprise to find that a new Commodore 64 arrived in Dad's apartment (The "64" stood for 64 kilobytes – the size of its memory). It was fun for me as well because I was the go-to person when questions arose. It was another example of how much fun I had with Dad. I presume it was fun for him.

Unfortunately, as his mid-term memory got worse (many years later) it made working with computers very difficult. I turned to writing out "cookbook" style instructions so he could do the things he wanted, but he became frustrated because he could not understand each step and what they meant. One of the last things he did was to scan family photos and documents. I am very pleased that he did, since we now have a wonderful record of our family's history.

By the time he turned 90 (2005) he was suffering from the constant pain of a very old back injury, severely limited in his mobility, and constantly frustrated by his memory loss. For someone who justified his existence by solving problems, he had all his skills and abilities removed. He was totally dependent on Mum and had nothing to offer her in return. To top it off, he was diagnosed with bladder cancer in the spring of 2007. He had assisted his brother Dick suffer through cancer treatment so was adamant that he would not do the same at this point in his life.

When we went to see him in 2006, he told me that he had decided to end it all. He asked me if I could help. Mum immediately reprimanded him for putting me in such a position! I felt incredibly conflicted. These were the days before assisted suicide was lawful so if I helped him I could be charged.

A few years before, Mum's sister Rose Emily had decided to stop eating as a way to end her misery. She had suffered a few strokes and was finding it very difficult to function – especially since her incapacitation was limiting her husband Frank. Although he was in his 90s, he still went horseback riding on a regular basis and continued to enjoy a life of action and exploration.

This was the strategy that Dad eventually chose to take back control of his life.

When he reported his decision to the social worker they were impressive in their response. The first thing they did was arrange for a psychological consultation to determine whether he was depressed from a clinical point of view. When the diagnosis came back that he was not depressed but reasonable and cognitively sound, they shifted into a supportive mode that was very encouraging.

A social worker that specialized in end-of-life issues regularly met with Dad and Mum, explained to them what would likely happen, and arranged for various medical and nutrition supports to be provided. He was extremely supportive: advised Dad and Mum how he might deal with “backsliding” on his intention to stop eating, made preparations for equipment to be provided in the suite, and arranged for his movement to a hospice.

The decision to move to a hospice was made by Dad's doctor when he decided that Dad had less than 6 weeks to live (I think it was 6 weeks that is the official condition for entry). My first visit to the hospice was delightful. It was in a beautiful small converted house-like institution in the middle of a large park. It had room for 10 patients, a bathing room with elaborate equipment, kitchen, reading and music room, and meeting room. The nicest part was the large skylight-lit sitting room looking out over Second Narrows to the North Shore mountains featuring the Lions. It was a beautiful and constantly changing site—from children and adults in the park, the comings and goings of the ships and trains in the narrows below to the spectacular mountains above.

I enjoyed hearing the cook's comments about her job. She said that she loves cooking at the hospice since she didn't have to worry about cholesterol, sugar, salt, or fat—all she had to do was focus on cooking comfort food. The only down-side, she added, was that she had put on weight!

In addition to the regular staff, every few days, a social worker would drop into the hospice. She would bake cookies, play her guitar, or just sit and talk with the residents or their families. She said that her objective was to make the place feel as home-like as possible.

They didn't have a room with two beds, so they set up an Easy-Boy type chair in Dad's room so that Mum could stay with him day and night. There were some nice times visiting during the 13 days that Dad was there. You can see a record of the time via the booklet I produced from the blog I set up during that period. The link is <http://billreimer.ca/personal/documents/MumDadJournal20070916.pdf>. It will give you a good idea of the location (including some photos) and the events that led to his death. There are also some lovely e-mails and comments from family and friends throughout the booklet.

The booklet blog also provides a nice account of the ways in which Dad's final days were filled with visits, engaging views, surprises, and the ups and downs of a body shutting down (he was even able to taste a little bit of his favorite food a day or so before the end!). For me, it also provides a record of the wonderful person that Dad was. Even in the end, he was able to keep some control over his life, remain engaged with the people and activities around him, and feel comforted that his beloved Lil would be taken care of after he was gone. A lot of this was due to the wonderful hospice situation provided by the government, of course: a perfect illustration of well-designed and organized Recreation Administration. I will forever be grateful.

Love, Bill