HEALING ARTS

Materia Medica

Carrying My Father

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I never felt like a dutiful son. My parents separated weeks after I left for college, and my father eventually married five times. As I learned to be a husband and father, I was guided by an example I did not wish to repeat. Although we lived in the same city, my father and I spoke only when he initiated the call. When we did talk, I deflected our conversations to neutral topics to avoid issues I could not discuss with him.

I did bring the duties I learned as a physician to my role as a physician-son. I chose the physicians I most admired to care for my father, and answered his health questions when they arose. As he aged, my duties expanded. Since he was between marriages when he needed coronary bypass surgery, I nursed him as he recuperated in my home. I began to check up on him more often, although I objectified it as “making rounds”. When he prefaced a new ache by saying, “You’ll be interested in this...”, I came to recognize that, like so many patients, he was offering me his symptoms as a way to build a relationship.

As his medical decisions became more complex, I became comfortable with my hybrid role. Although I still maintained my mental grudge list, I began to appreciate all that he still did: how he supported his last wife through her dementia and death; how he used his skills as an accountant to help settle her estate; how he delighted in instigating political debates in his assisted living facility; how, nearly blind from macular degeneration, he sat raptly two feet from the television screen to watch his college football team.

At 95, my father was hospitalized for syncope from malignant ventricular arrhythmias. His cardiologist offered him a pacemaker/defibrillator. He declined the procedure after we all agreed that he had the chance to die as physicians so often wish to die—of a sudden cardiac event at an advanced age, cognitively intact, and free of pain. The evening my father came home from the hospital, I cut his pills in half to use up medications that his physicians had tapered. The next day, he paid his bills and balanced his checkbook. The following day he stopped breathing during a haircut. The barber eased him to the ground as he died. The facility nurse called me rather than the paramedics. I spent our last hour together holding his hand on the barbershop floor.

As I have grieved my father’s death, I have sought stories from old friends about their relationships with their fathers. I also reread, for the first time since college, one of the great stories about a son and his father.

AENEAS AND ANCHISES

Virgil’s epic *The Aeneid*, written in the first century BCE, recounts the fall of Troy and the founding of Rome by Aeneas, a Trojan lord. Throughout the story, Aeneas made the choices that duty required—first to Troy, then to the refugees he led from the Middle East to found a settlement that became an empire.

Aeneas is not an exemplary hero. He subordinated most relationships to his duty to the state—losing contact with his first wife during the sack of Troy, spurning the love of a queen on his voyages, and brokering a politically expedient marriage in Italy. Only with his father Anchises did Aeneas temper duty with love. As the Greeks rampaged through Troy, Aeneas tried to evacuate his family, but his feeble father refused to leave.

“I looked for him at once,
My first wish being to take him to the mountains;
But with Troy gone he set his face against it,
Not to prolong his life or live in exile.”
(Aeneid, Book II)¹

To overcome his father’s resistance, Aeneas proposed to carry him out of the burning city on his back, an image memorialized in painting and sculpture.

“Then come, dear father, arms around my neck:
I’ll take you on my shoulders, no great weight.”
(Aeneid, Book II)²

As the Trojan refugees sailed the Mediterranean looking for a new homeland, Anchises died and was buried in exile. A year later, Aeneas’ wanderings led him back to his father’s burial site, where he hosted elaborate funeral games.

"The months are spent, the rounding year fulfilled
 Since we interred my godlike father's bones
 And mourned and blessed his altars. And if I
 Am not mistaken, now that day has come
 Which I shall hold in bitterness and honor
 All my life..."
 (Aeneid, Book V)³

Like so many mythical heroes, Aeneas journeyed to the Underworld, where he met his father's soul and took his leave.

"And there he tried three times
 To throw his arms around his father's neck,
 Three times the shade untouched slipped through his
 hands,
 Weightless as wind and fugitive as dream."
 (Aeneid, Book VI)⁴

Three images from the *Aeneid* have been particularly meaningful to me since my father's death.

FUNERARY RITES

My father prepared me to conduct his funerary rites as best he could. He made his will and disposed of his possessions. At a lunch we scheduled to plan his funeral service several years before he died, he said that he wanted quartet music. Thinking sluggishly, I asked him, "a string quartet?" With a look that said, "Son, you're not nearly as smart as you think you are", he responded, "No, a barbershop quartet". We honored his wish, singing "Harvest Moon" at his funeral service.

Despite these preparations, I found little solace in performing the conventional rituals of my father's death. While Aeneas mourned his father with sacrifices, feasting, and contests of athletic skill, we feasted on cheese plates, cookies, and vegetables with dip. No smoke from roasting heifers rose to appease the gods. Our libations were coffee and lemonade. Rather than honoring his memory, I erased his memory by closing accounts and cancelling subscriptions. For me, writing this narrative has been a better way to memorialize him—to publicly explore my grief, sift my memories, and share our tale.

OUR MEETING IN THE UNDERWORLD

Six weeks after my father died, I had a dream. I was supine on a bed, comforting an infant girl on my chest. The girl, who resembled my daughter, had a mild respiratory infection. I comforted her by rubbing her back, and watched her periodic breathing as she calmed. Then my father was resting on my chest, and I rubbed his back and watched his periodic breathing. With surprising clinical detachment, I concluded that his respiratory pattern was due to age and heart failure. As the dream ended, I stood beside the bed and watched him sleep, now breathing calmly, much as I had watched my children in bed after they fell asleep in my arms. For all his grandeur, Aeneas could not grasp his father again. At least in dream, I was able to carry my father no less gently than I carried my infant child.

CARRYING MY FATHER

Aeneas's offer to carry his father was an inspired decision at a time of emergency. In contrast, I required many years to learn how to carry my father. During our long estrangement, I had always assumed that I would not be able to act dutifully toward him until we reconciled. The reverse was true. My father's medical concerns helped recall me to the duties I learned as a physician. His long life gave me the time I needed to transmute duty into love. My knowledge of medicine and my understanding of how life ends were fundamental to that reconciliation. I now conclude, with Aeneas, that carrying my father was no great weight.

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