

Final Gifts and Grieving

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“Your father is dying,” the voice announced. “You must come at once.”

It was December 1984, and I’d been dreading that phone call since visiting Dad the previous summer in Oaxaca, Mexico. It was my first visit in eight years, so how was I to know he was living in a jam-packed hovel, surviving on little more than two glasses of clear liquid, one labeled “Drink,” the other “Sip”? It would take a book to explain how my father ended up in Oaxaca, and why it fell to me to take care of him; it’s enough to say I’d confined my role to sending money and angry letters.

Caregiving from a distance is stressful, especially if the caregiver is preoccupied, either with job or other essential responsibilities. For the past ten years, I’d been working in Washington D.C. at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. When the phone rang, I was heading the Office of Program Planning. For several years, I had overseen proposals for new research projects; my recommendations were due in early January, so I always found it impossible to fly down to Oaxaca in December.

But 1984 was different. The Reagan administration, intent on defunding the Commission, had recently employed a new staff director who had taken over my planning role. I took a break from job hunting, and arrived in Oaxaca on a Thursday night to begin climbing the steepest learning curve of my life.

With the help of Chris, my Spanish-speaking brother, I located Dad’s doctor who admitted him to hospital late Friday evening while I signed away my financial life. After 14 years in Mexico, Dad still wasn’t a legal resident. Chris and I decided to bring him back to California where Medicare could cover the bills. On Saturday afternoon we asked whether he could make the trip.

“Of course!” his doctor replied, “But not until Tuesday. He needs a blood transfusion first.”

“I won’t go unless it’s in a pine box!” Dad put in, but nobody was listening.

In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross published her ground-breaking book, *On Death and Dying*. Chris and I had never heard of her five steps of grieving. We experienced them anyway.

- **Denial.** It should have been obvious not only to us but also to his doctor that no half-liter of blood was going to make Dad well enough to travel. On Saturday night, Chris’s blood started entering his veins while we went out to eat our first meal in 11 hours. Next morning we discovered blood all over the place.
- **Anger.** We were furious. “Why wasn’t he more careful?” we fumed. “And where were the nurses?” we grumbled. Then we learned he’d stopped paying his Medicare premiums. “I wanted to save money,” he admitted. I was livid: “But I was sending you more than enough to cover them.” Chris was scared: “His California hospital bills will bankrupt

me.” “I never said I’d go,” Dad declared softly. “What about his hospital bills in Mexico?” I snarled. Reality check: he was going to die, so why all the anger? Maybe because we were still in denial.

- **Bargaining.** Chris had to return home, and I had to get a grip. “Before you go, let’s clean up his room,” I suggested. “Then Dad can return there to die in peace.” But deep down, I was sure that if I took care of him, he’d get better. I prepared myself for several months of caregiving. Chris and I found a care facility for when Dad was back on his feet again.
- **Depression.** “Nobody knows the troubles I’ve seen,” Dad had sung into his tape recorder on his 65th birthday. He wanted us to know his 68th, just three days away, was not to be missed. Tears welled; guilt swelled. I reminded Chris that I’d offered to pay Dad’s way to California so he could celebrate with his grandchildren, but he’d said no. Next morning, Chris announced, “I have to split.” Dad said, “I know.” Tearfully, I wondered how I’d carry on alone.
- **Acceptance.** That night diarrhea flowed. As the nurse and I turned him for the 20th time, he announced, “I’m working too, you know.” Next morning (two days early), I organized two of his neighbours to buy balloons and a cake. That night, he said, “That was best birthday party I ever had!”

I buried him on his birthday.

Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley, two hospice nurses, published *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying* in 1993. Too late for Dad’s passing, but now I understand everything better. And I appreciate the extraordinary gifts that quickly followed. For one thing, I met Donald the day I left Oaxaca. He owned property on Salt Spring Island and I’m still here, forever grateful.