

The Death of Roy Kuhn

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As I sit writing this, my father-in-law is 3 feet away, lying in bed in a coma, in his last hours of life. He is 81 years old and has widespread cancer. It was diagnosed less than a month ago, and less than 3½ weeks ago, he was still driving around in his car that he just made his last payment on. He was a crusty guy of German descent, a war-era man whose life was shaped by the Depression, by World War II in which he served in General Patton's tank corps, and then by years of factory work, keeping equipment operating in a large steel mill. He hung on through layoffs and stuck with his family. For 46 years he was married to Rita, a nurse, who died a quick and peaceful death of pneumonia, 5½ years ago. He has two children, both nurses, one of whom is my wife, Roxie. He has seven grandchildren.

Roy is now passing on right in front of my eyes. His spirit and self are in the process of leaving the house that is his earthly body, soon to inherit a heavenly body unencumbered by poor lungs, oxygen tubes, morphine drip pump, and Foley catheter. I am honored to be part of his passing and delivery into eternal life. Rarely do family members get to experience death with their loved ones these days. Many are afraid; many cannot let go; many do not know they can, or how rich and good and deep an experience it can be. But here is Roy in our house, in a room given up by one of my sons for his grandfather's last days, surrounded by pictures of his loved ones, and the real presence of his family.

Roy was characteristic of his time. Straightforward, even blunt, not full of self-examination, not touchy-feely. He was a worker who had great dedication and commitment to his wife and great pride (if not effusive praise) for his children. He gave acknowledgment to God but didn't make any big deal over religion.

Two days ago, I was talking to Roy as he lay in bed, eyes closed, and I asked him if he would do anything different if he could do it over, and he mumbled out, in

his midwestern way, "Well, sure!" I said, "Well, Dad, what would you do different?" He thought a minute and said, "Goldarn, you ask too many damn hard questions!" I smiled and backed off a little. "OK, what are you most proud of in your life?" I asked. He answered immediately, "My family," keeping his eyes closed. That was all. No pondering, no brain-racking. Just an expression of what had been the center and highest priority of his life. The answer most of us would want to give.

Roy was not a man who had great material success in life, nor someone of whom people would say, "He made a great mark in this world," but by the measure of his family relationships, he stayed the course. His main purpose for 46 years was Rita, and his last 5½ years of life were dedicated to his kids, his grandchildren, and his big-screen TV.

I was recently asked to write an article on child-rearing for the parents' section of our local Virginia newspaper. While reflecting on this and reviewing my own experience as a parent and my 13 years as a physician, I reaffirmed my belief that *healthy adult relationships* are the currency of successful child-rearing. Unfortunately, there is a pervasive sense in the work world that we are more responsible to our *tasks* than to our *people*, that our *jobs* take precedence over our *relationships*, and that our *achievements* rather than our *character* measure our worth.

The example of my father-in-law is in peaceful contrast to the tyranny of life's urgencies. His death in our house, while not acknowledged beyond a small circle, was a celebration of relationship. He was aided by a few friends, family members, medical professionals, and Hospice personnel. With pain, struggle, and success, it all fit together. When the hour of his death came, we were rewarded rather than shattered.

My wife felt anxious at her father's side as he breathed heavily. Although unconscious, he seemed to be laboring. She left the room for a while. Three of Roxie's best friends were in the room with me, helping us, supporting him, touching him. Roy suddenly opened his eyes wide. One of our friends let out a gasp, and we all had a sense of great awe and anticipation. There was a murmur,

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"He sees something!" He was very peaceful. Even the perennial furrow was gone from his brow. I brought Roxie back to the room, and her tender heart opened wide, no longer anxious or afraid. Roxie spoke through tears as a loving daughter, "I know it's Mom you see, Dad . . . and Jesus is welcoming you . . . I love you . . . I love you . . . I'll be all right . . . I'll miss you. . . ." All of us in the room were sobbing with loss, joy, love, and hope. All in community with "the saints." Roy seemed to relax, and after a few minutes of speaking to him, Roxie quietly and firmly wiped her eyes, pulled out a song from her music book and began to sing in a strong, beautiful voice this song called "You Are Mine."^{*}

*I will come to you in the silence,
I will lift you from all your fear.
You will hear My voice,
I claim you as My choice, be still and know I am here.
I am hope for all who are hope-less,
I am eyes for all who long to see.
In the shadows of the night, I will be your light, come and rest
in Me.*

(Refrain)

*Do not be afraid, I am with you.
I have called you each by name.
Come and follow Me, I will bring you home;
I love you and you are Mine.*

*I am strength for all the despairing,
healing for the ones who dwell in shame.
All the blind will see, the lame will all run free,
and all will know My Name.*

*I am the Word that leads all to freedom,
I am the peace the world cannot give.
I will call your name, embracing all your pain,
stand up, now walk, and live.*

(Refrain)

*Do not be afraid, I am with you.
I have called you each by name.
Come and follow Me, I will bring you home;
I love you and you are Mine.*

—David Haas

Jacob's ladder seemed to descend from the Heavens as the veil between the material and spiritual worlds parted in our presence. There was light in Roxie's song, and it was escorting Roy. We were in a holy place, and we all knew it. Roy's eyes gradually closed and his breathing slowed to a stop as he "walked home" into eternal life. He was gone from here; the shell of his body clearly no longer housed *him*. We all sobbed gently in sadness, in relief for him and in celebration of his life.

One of our close friends, Barb, a mother of three and now a nurse-in-training, looked over at me and, through bright sparkling wet eyes and tear-washed cheeks, whispered, "Look what Kevorkian is stealing from people. . . ." She spoke from the experience of losing one of her own children in infancy to a slowly progressive fatal illness.

We had all experienced something more than we could have ever planned for, yet we knew it was not unique. Roy's death, awfully wonderful, was a foreshadowing that all humans could experience. The elements that helped make this death such a deeply fulfilling human experience are available to everyone: faith, forgiveness, family, friends, and the help of professionals, especially Hospice.

These things didn't take away the real, daily details of pain, fear, loneliness, blocked bowels, sleepless nights, yelling out, bedpans, crying fits, fighting kids, medication, side effects, or exhaustion. But they did help make them manageable and meaningful, and they have the potential to make death a blessing rather than a curse. We had all experienced the blessing.

After he died, several of us took care of Roy's body respectfully. Tubes were removed, hair was combed, and the bed was arranged. The kids continued to run in and out of the house and play with neighbors in the yard. Our close friends ordered dinner, and four couples sat around our kitchen table, over Chinese food, sharing stories and feelings about Roy's life and death. He would have really liked that.

The funeral home helpers came, and, as we were all packed in the front hallway, moving Roy's body out to the hearse, my 12-year-old son said, "Do you guys *like* your job?" Yes, they did, and they, too, were good at helping.

The body was flown to Illinois and buried on a beautiful summer day, in a cemetery nestled between expansive cornfields. He was accorded military honors and a 21-gun salute. His body rests in the ground next to the body of his wife, Rita. His spirit is free to meet the Lord face to face, and his life here is carried on in us and in all those he touched. This is the way it was meant to be.

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