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Finding and losing dad

Tan Seow Hon For The Sunday Times

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This Father's Day, I am reminded of the father I lost in January. He is also the father I found in the last decade as we grew closer.

Dad passed away days short of his 68th birthday.

He was first diagnosed with nasopharyngeal carcinoma, or nose cancer, 26 years ago. His last battle during 26 days of hospitalisation, traversing Christmas and New Year's Day, was not with cancer but with pneumonia, possibly resulting from aspiration due to dysphagia, a side effect of neck radiation for cancer.

Although he fed himself through a percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy tube and had not taken food or water by mouth for nearly three years, a person suffering from dysphagia can aspirate on saliva.

The intubation he had undergone during several days in the intensive care unit (ICU), due to the need for mechanical ventilation, worsened his prognosis.

Nose cancer is rare, but relatively common in men from southern China. Dad was born in Swatow in Guangdong before his parents settled in Singapore. He was raised in a traditional Taoist family, but was a freethinker for most of his life until he became a Christian. He was also a traditional Chinese father - not very verbally expressive, although he cared for us in many ways. For example, I recall him washing my tiny school shoes. He was also surprisingly supportive of his children going to church from a young age.

As Dad suffered more side effects of neck radiation, he became more expressive and openly loving. He was especially inspiring in the last few years.

Not being able to ingest by mouth changes life significantly. No longer is one able to attend social gatherings, which often revolve around food, unless one explains to others that one cannot eat or drink. When we did so, people did not understand, sometimes asking insensitive questions that suggested they could not believe the condition was permanent.

We could no longer celebrate Dad's birthdays with cakes. Instead of grumbling or making us feel bad for eating, Dad insisted that we celebrate our own birthdays as usual with meals and cakes.

Dad's generosity of spirit was off the charts. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, he distributed mooncakes to relatives; during Chinese New Year, he delivered crates of oranges. He acquired the latest Korean pots and slow juicers, cooking and juicing for us. Instead of avoiding foods he fancied, he bought them for us to enjoy on his behalf.

Dad had discovered the secret to joyful living - giving generously in his area of greatest lack, he found incredible grace to handle each day. Every morning, he greeted me with the most cheerful smile.

If traditional Chinese fathers are distant, Dad bucked the trend, particularly in the last decade. He searched for nice birthday cards and meaningful Chinese red packets, even buying me Snoopy stickers because I was a Peanuts fan. Once, after lecturing me, he hugged me.

We had recently moved to a new home when Dad, who was active daily, was suddenly taken ill.



A card written by Professor Tan's brother to their father that he was meant to read on his 68th birthday. It dwells on his strength, kindness and wisdom. PHOTOS: TAN SEOW HON

He had gone for his morning walk and driven out for groceries. Having meticulously taken his temperature, blood pressure, heart rate and pulse oximetry readings about twice daily for years, we had no warning of the infection, as is sometimes the case with the elderly.

There were no signs until the afternoon of the hospital admission, when he suffered visibly from delirium upon waking up from a nap - a sign of infection in otherwise-lucid elderly persons.

It was painful to lose Dad when the home was renovated with him in mind. But friends remind me that, as a responsible father, he would have been comforted to know he played a significant role in setting it up.

Dad's final month was a bittersweet time for the family.

He was physically deconditioned from the stay in the ICU. He suffered a heart attack there, and was unable to speak because of trauma to his vocal cords from intubation. Hugging him was immensely difficult as he could only lie on the hospital bed.

He had no voice but, whenever I told him I loved him, he mouthed the same three words in return. He held my face and my mother's face in his hands, gave the thumbs-up sign to my brother, smiled and, with every ounce of strength left, shook the hand of almost every visitor. When others prayed for him, he mouthed "amen" in agreement.

Ironically, despite severe limitations because of his deconditioned state, we were closer than ever.

I realised how much we had taken for granted in the 26 years since the cancer diagnosis. A profound restoration of familial ties happened in the last 26 days. I understood Dad as I never had before, through revelatory words of relatives and friends.

Dad was a simple family man who delighted in having his family together and in serving us. He had taken good care of his health so we would not be burdened. From visitors at the hospital and the wake, we heard anecdotes that painted a consistent picture of a man with a generous and joyful spirit.

What proved especially poignant was a birthday card my brother bought in Minnesota last October, well in advance of Dad's birthday - which turned out to be the day after the day he would be buried.

Like Dad, my brother had a habit of getting birthday cards ready early. The words on the card were unintentionally and comfortingly apt, we realised when we took the card out during the wake.

"Dad, I'm asking God to bless you in a special way this year. I'm asking Him to let you see how much you mean to your family and your friends. I'm asking Him to remind you of all the laughter and strength, kindness and wisdom you've shared, and to realise what a difference your unique life has made to so many."

That birthday, the day after his burial, only God could have conveyed to Dad how much his life meant to all of us.

This Father's Day, I understand in a new way how much Dad means to me.

• **The writer is an associate professor at the Singapore Management University.**