

Jack Hendrickson - The Last Chapter

Dear Family

I realize that I'm in the middle of a most crucial time in my family's life. My father's own life is hanging in the balances. Prostate cancer has caused death to come knocking on his door. The knocking is intensifying these last several days. Dad is sometimes using hilarious choices of words and making disconnected comments; and physically he has deteriorated significantly, which indicate that something very ominous is taking place in his normal bodily processes. We are on a serious threshold in his life. Although we are still wanting and praying for a miracle from Heaven, we're also nearing a place of releasing him from this life to be with his Heavenly Father. And since this time is so crucial, the following will be a journal of noteworthy things. From them, we may be able to glean a few insights and "gold nuggets" for right living. Hopefully their memory will serve us well in the future. Mark (Jack's son)

Update on Dad #1 (1 of 5)

Jan 7, 2003

After sensing the urgency to rally to Dad and Mom's side, I arrived in Quincy at their house later in the afternoon. He was sleeping and had an oxygen tube under his nose. He had bouts of shortness of breath so the ever-helpful Hospice had provided an oxygen machine. It provided solace for him when something so valuable as breath itself was in short supply. Soon after arriving he didn't seem to need that aid.

Dad, Mom and I ate supper at the table. Dad was gracious and grateful to have me there again. His disorientation was evident occasionally – by the strange words that came up in his short sentences.

We talked and retired for the evening rather early as he indicated that he was ready for bed at about 9:30 PM. Mom and I talked late into the night about the obvious trend of Dad's health and what decisions it may require of us make.

Jan 8

He fell last night. I was abruptly awakened by the rattling of showers doors and the bumping of knees and elbows. I was out of bed before the last rattle stopped. It was quite a sight to behold. Dad draped over the bathtub. It was terrible and hilarious. Fortunately, he didn't hurt himself except for a few skinned places. We bathed him, I gave him a shave and then we put him back to bed. He slept pretty well then.

Dad isn't doing very well now. Very weak. Very disoriented at times. And very uncomfortable. I asked him how he was doing this afternoon. He said, "A little less awful!" We had to laugh, even though it's terrible.

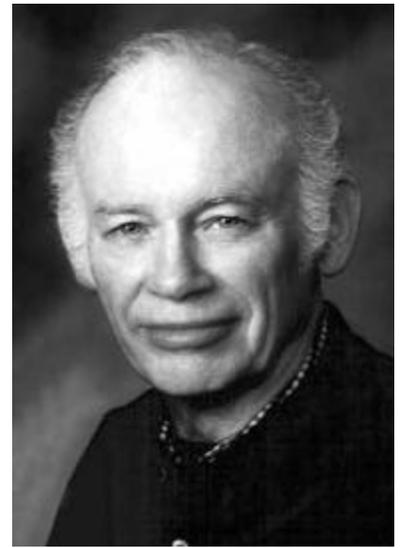
In the afternoon he woke and made his way to the bathroom. Then as I helped him change out of his PJ's and into his pants, he noticed that his underwear were wet and then immediately pronounced that it was, "Just the dew of heaven!" I had to laugh and just agreed.

We burned the sofa that used to sit in the living room, tonight. Dad wanted to go out to see it, so I walked him out to the burn barrel and sat him in the wheel chair. He liked being out of doors for a while. About 15 minutes later he was ready to walk back in. Made it all the way, although he was "puffing" some when we got to the house. He gladly sat down in his new chair.

He said that sometimes he hears gunshots going off in his head. Said it sounds like, "Pooing Bong!" Things get kind of jumbled up in his thinking because of the medication and cancer.

Tonight, I helped him into bed and he asked, "Mark, would you tell me a story". (Tender moment) I recounted my time of building the motorized ice sled with my steel runner sled and the garden rotor-tiller motor and riding several miles up the Mississippi River to Dallas City. I reminded him of our family riding my homemade raft down river to Pontoosuc, one early spring afternoon. The water was still very cold and the raft wanted to tip occasionally - for "unexplainable" reasons. Josie, our dog, looked for the highest point of the raft when that happened, even if he had to crawl over us. The memory began filtering back into his mind and he smiled, knowingly. I told him the story of the willow hut Leann and I built down at the river's edge, one late fall. Snow was in the air and as we were gathering more fuel for the fire, that hut "mysteriously" caught fire from the makeshift barrel stove we were using. Upon hearing that story, we had to laugh, together. Dad could be a little mischievous at times.

I prayed for him, that the Lord would give him dreams and glimpses into the Spirit realm. And he prayed that he would hear and not miss it when God spoke.



He slept all night (nearly 12 hours). But just in case he tried to get out of bed during the night, I placed a brass bell at the end of the bed and tied it to a string, which was also attached to the chair near his head. That string extended along the side of the bed and about a foot off of the floor. My plan was that when he put his feet on the floor, he would pull that string and upset the bell into a metal pan, which would make a loud ruckus, then Mom or I would hear it so that we could help him. The "alarm" never got tested tonight. We'll have to try it again, next time.

Jan 9

This morning Dad was very slow getting around (mobile and mental). He complied very well with the Hospice lady who gave him a shower. At the breakfast table he ate fairly well - some applesauce and bananas and he took his pills.

When asked if he wanted some tea, he asked what meal this was. I told him, breakfast. He wanted to know if we were going to have lunch at lunchtime and that if this was breakfast then he wanted tea. (Sounded like a programmed pattern of thinking more than real desire ... just my musing as I'm trying to understand what's happening inside his mind.) So I made him tea but he only drank one sip.

As the day wore on he seemed to feel better and got more lucid. At the evening meal he ate more than he had eaten in 3 or 4 days - pretty coherent but still just enough detached to be funny at times.

At one point we told him he was pretty sick the previous several days. He said, "Where was I - I mean physically?" I think he had been so sick that his brain just couldn't remember.

At the end of the dinner meal, I fixed him a bowl of bananas and soymilk. He thought that sounded good and then wanted oranges in it. We thought it might curdle the milk but I peeled an orange anyway and set it beside the bowl. He then took a knife and cut the orange into pieces. The bowl was getting pretty full, so we commented about how much that was to eat. He just stared at it while I then put some "shoot em' up" (Dad's name for whipped cream in an aerosol can) on top. Looked like a banana split, at that point. He immediately set it aside and said that he wanted it all put in the blender. Surprised, we said, "OK". He drank the whole thing and asked if there was more. We couldn't believe that he had eaten that much.

Later, I told him he had to take his vitamins for the evening. I then sprayed a huge helping of "shoot em' up" on a spoon and handed it to him. That made him smile as he ate it and swished it around in his mouth. And then I had him take one more helping of "vitamins" -- doctor's orders! :-). No resistance here.

He asked if I heard that banging. He said it sounded like someone was pounding on the outside of the trailer with a rug. It sounded like, "Ka womp!" then about 5 seconds later, "Ka womp!" and so on. He said it didn't really bother him, but it was loud.

Leann called and he wanted to know who was on the phone. I told him that Leann was coming to see him. "Today?!?!" he exclaimed with a big smile. A little later he wanted to know when I was leaving. I told him that I would probably be here a couple more days, since Leann was coming. He smiled again and said, "That's good".

His eyes are closed most of the time and it is very laborious for him to concentrate on comprehending what you say and what he wants to say. His very poor hearing obviously compounds the struggle to comprehend. Many times the squeal of feedback in the hearing aid will resound unchecked for long periods of time. I think that specific frequency of hearing is so diminished that he hardly hears the feedback noise. Speaking is jumbled - both, as he stammers to get out the right words and when he inserts disconnected words that don't have relative meaning to the sentence. One has to make the easy judgment call as to whether to ask him to clarify what he means or just understand that this is "normal" for him, at this time.

He's retiring now, mostly asleep, on an electric recliner chair in the living room. He seems to like the new chair and activates the button, sometimes indiscriminately. The wood stove is cranked up and the room is very warm. And the sun is shining brightly in through the window near him, bringing light and warmth, which adds to his comfort.

Hospice told us today that Dad's vitals (blood pressure and heart rate) indicate that barring a miracle from Heaven, he has shorter than longer to live. One thing we know is that one of two things will happen soon - he will be healed or he will see the face of Jesus. Both of those will be very good. More later

I love you

Mark

Update on Dad #2 (2 of 5)

Jan 9, 2003

The day started out with Dad responding slowly - not nearly as lucidly as yesterday afternoon. I thought that he might revive more as the day wore on. But he slept most of the day except for maybe an hour and a half. His few sentences have been very labored and deliberate and mixed with non-contextual words. Mostly he has responded with single words or by shaking or nodding his head. Yesterday he initiated several trips to the kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. But today only one trip to the bathroom was initiated by him.

After some pretty confused exchange, he agreed to come to the table at lunchtime. Mom was gone most of the day, so I had warmed up some soup beans, pulled out some left over side dishes, and of course poured his currently favorite drink - butter milk. He ate the beans and wanted some more. Drank the buttermilk and wanted more. Each lifting of the spoon or glass is difficult and greatly aided by automatic reflex, I think. With eyes closed and rallying intense concentration, he musters the strength to conquer each monumental motion. Sometimes you wonder if he'll hit his mouth but each time he succeeds with only a few minor spillovers.

I had to gently remind him several times that he had to take his meds. As he held them in his hand he asked me, "Mark, do you think these are good for you?" I said, "O, I imagine, what do you think?" He responded after a lengthy pause, "I imagine they are." He was confused about the pills and how to get them from his hand and into his mouth. I used a little trick. I said, "Dad, you can have more buttermilk if you take these pills". There was no problem at that point. :-)

After the meal, I helped him back to his temporary throne in the living room - the electric recliner. Very laboriously he sat down and let out a lengthy sigh. And soon fell into sleep. In the middle of the afternoon, I woke him up to ask if he wanted something to drink. He said he had been dreaming of trying to save a buck on the purchase of a ticket for a trip that he was about to take. I ask him if he was going to leave on an airplane. He said, "Yes".

I wonder if and when he'll be experiencing spiritual things, that some people make reference of right before they pass from this life into the next; e.g. sights, sounds, experiences. And will he be able to relate any of them to us? Several of us have expressed our interest to each other to know what a man this sick may be able to glimpse of the heavenly realm. Maybe his ticket purchase was a symbol of a "trip" in the near future.

Leann will arrive soon. I am certain that his spirits will rally and he'll enjoy the love and company of his only daughter. When she finally arrived, Dad exclaimed, "O, it's Leann!!!", when he saw her. And then when he arose from the chair to come to dinner he said, "I've got to hug my girl first" and warmly embraced her before going to the table. He was truly delighted to see her back home.

Dinner was very sad and very funny. Dad spoke more disconnectedly than ever, but didn't seem to be bothered when we laughed at his funny attempts to express his thoughts. In fact he seemed amused that we were laughing.

I'll share a few funny things he said:

"Did you see that catfish just float by on a log?" and "Are those catfish eatin' you up too!?"

At one point he had struggled to put a couple pieces of dinner on his spoon. With exasperation and finality he dropped his fork and said, "O, I'm done with this!" We laughed and laughed until our sides hurt. He seemed to understand and made his usual "Jack" comment, "Now, you be careful", as he patted me on the leg.

Yesterday, he asked Mom, "When are they going to build the filling station on Long Island?"

All during dinner he heard other people talking around him. Several times he asked if we heard those men talking about "the operation", "They'll be finished talking about that pretty soon." At one point he said, "Those guys are still raising the fat over there." At another point he told Leann as he gestured out the window, "That guy out there said you can spend the night." And yet another time, "Every time I shut my eyes I can't see.... (pause) and I can't understand."

Dad's influence in people's lives has increased over the many years of love and relationships. His seeds of love and care were sown liberally into the many "fields" of precious lives. He eagerly and nobly carried his responsibility for those relationships. Just how far that influence fully extended at his greatest capacity, only heaven knows. But now his ability to care and express that care is severely diminished. No longer can he reach out to those he's loved. His world has been reduced to the most basic of struggles - the thin thread of life itself.

But his world of friends is now rallying to his aid - even to his side. The reciprocal expressions of love are now rising from grateful hearts and wishing in a deepest heartfelt way to say, "You mean so much to me -- I'm with you on this leg of your 'journey'". Some of those who loved him most, gathered around last night to pray. He recognized each of them, even the young men, and called them by name. He rallied to

an extended time of prayer and voiced his weak "Amen" or "Uh-uh" from time to time. Dear hearts poured out their love and pathos for a man who had indelibly affected their lives. After all, when it's all said and done, what is there in life, except to love and be loved - by those around us and our Heavenly Father? The evening was momentous. For that, quite possibly, will be the last time, my father, Jack Hendrickson, will entertain guests, eat at his kitchen table, walk to his own bed and sleep with his life companion of 51 ½ years. His physical and mental condition deteriorated significantly during the night.

Jan 10

As we met the first rays of daylight on this Jan 10, gentle snowflakes lazily fell in a cold and harsh world outside. Inside, our little world was filled with the heartfelt giving of urgently needed care. Dad's body had begun rapidly shutting down the processes of normal function. His "tent" that had tried faithfully and valiantly to house the real Jack for over 72 years, was giving way to the ravages of an insidious disease - cancer.

Today was a day of mostly unresponsive lying on the hospital bed that had replaced his living room "throne" of yesterday. He labored for breaths between uncomfortably long periods of apnea. Only 4 or 5 times today did he positively respond with a solid pleasant greeting to someone. Those greetings were a direct smile or uh-uh or calling us by name.

My wife, Debbie and our four children came this evening to give Dad quite possibly their last expressions of love and appreciation that he'll be able to respond to. Much had been poured into their lives from Dad, now what can they say on an occasion like this to adequately convey all that they would want to say. They touch him, hold his hand and stroke his cheek while speaking soft affirming words close to his ear. He mumbled a couple of times, which we believe was a strong indication that he was receiving their love and attention.

Leann took Dad's watch off of his arm today. Mom felt the moment was profound and significant and said, "Time will probably never again be important to Dad." Leann mused, "I guess Dad is now entering into timelessness." If he happens to slip past the bounds of this life and into an eternity where light, life and love will never end, time will not even be relevant.

Today I mused on the Psalm that says, "Precious in the eyes of the Lord are the deaths of His saints". God's perspective is so much more grand and comprehensive than ours. It has to be, because He calls this, "precious". The world of us humans is mainly centered around our comforts and our wishes. Rarely do we see our worlds as being much bigger than our own needs and death seems like a robbery of all that we still want to do or be. But God sees the time of the passing of a saint as precious in His sight. He knows that the struggle to conquer the "fallen-ness" of man is nearing its completion. The graduation is close at hand. The "Welcome home!" is almost audible. Even Apostle Paul said, "For me to die is gain...." The portion of God's spirit that the Father placed in us at conception, has run its race here on earth and will soon be rejoined back into the presence of the Father. The Father's joy will be poured out at that grand reception. An unbelievably happy reunion. This will be a joy the likes of which we haven't experienced here on earth. Father calls it "Precious"!

Jan 11

My wife, Debbie, and I slept on the floor in front of the wood stove and next to Dad's hospital bed. It was our pleasure to administer the meds every 4 hours and keep an ear on his stirring during the night. It was a short night with the scheduled times and a couple unscheduled ones. Dad seemed to rally a little during the night. His cognitive and verbal skills jumped up a notch. I really hoped they would be sustained until my children would have time to have a meaningful exchange with their grandfather.

He was actually pretty lucid when the four children walked into the house on Saturday morning. He actually either called them by name or made acknowledgement that was personal to them. He called my wife, Debbie, "Debra". Dad is one of the few people who call her that. She has always liked for him to use that name for her. I was really grateful that God allowed such an encounter.

Later in the morning Dad wanted to sit on the edge of the bed so we all gathered around and had a time of sharing communion using Mogen David wine, olive wood goblets from Israel and a wooden goblet that I had made in my high school years. I shared about Jesus' broken body and sufferings, which provide for our wholeness and healing in place of our brokenness and sickness. I also shared about the shedding of Jesus blood, which redeems us from our fallen-ness and sin. We all drank and ate together, even Dad. It was a very tender moment - a few tears flowed. We then sang, 'Here We Are', a song that Dad has sung at many a family gathering over the years. A few more tears flowed.

We wondered which songs we should sing and Dad said, "They're all good". So we sang a few of his grand old favorites, Tis So Sweet To Trust In Jesus, How Great Thou Art, and Amazing Grace. He even tried to sing with us with very feeble attempts. No dry eyes now, except Dad (he was just not "connected" enough or he would have been also) It was a very solemn moment in the room - a kind of holy hush - a sense that our Father and the angels had orchestrated this melting of hearts to the most basic element of relationships - love. We were all drawn into this intimacy by the feeling that this kind of tender sharing may never happen again. Kleenexes were ruined by each of us. We tried to remember the words to the song 'One Day At A Time'. After butchering it and we had all stopped singing, Dad suddenly said, "Yes, I'll take another day!" We all burst out laughing and crying at his level of comprehension and humor.

Later in the day, my children had to return to our home in Kansas City to take care of personal and ministry obligations. They began to file past Dad to say their goodbyes. Dad wasn't responding well at that point. I had deeply hoped for something memorable. John leaned over and kissed his grandpa on the cheek. Dad immediately revived and gave an acknowledgment that was very rewarding to John. Dad picked up Lydia's hand and kissed it - and used her pet name - "Lydia Gracer". To Luke - "Luke buddy, I love you". Very touching. He gave, "I love you too's" to each of them. I'm blessed to have my father and my children love each other.

The hospital bed is pretty much the extent of his traveling these days, although I did escort him to the bathroom one more time, only because he was insisting. Probably won't do that again. Too hard on him (and me) - lots of pain. His will and his body aren't functioning together now. We're trying to use finesse as to how much to comply with his wishes and trying to decide how much is practically possible for him. A very different dynamic than our relationship is use to.

So many people are calling and coming by to bring food, pray for Dad, relieve us from caring for him for a while and offering to run errands. Each time they give, their hearts are made vulnerable to God and someone they love so much. Thank the Good Lord for their kindness and may He bless them all.

God guide us, give us strength and bless us all on this leg of life's journey.

Thank you, everyone, for your love and prayers.

Mark

Update on Dad #3 (3 of 5)

Jan 11 - 14

Carl Albrecht, Dad's only son-in-law, arrived the evening of Jan 11 and stayed until this morning. His heart of love for his Hendrickson in-laws and his desire to walk through this event with Leann, his wife, compelled him to leave his pressing engagements in Tennessee and come to this little but intense "world", we're now in. He has a gracious and gentle way with people -- and certainly with this family. It was good to see him. He is a huge help with the many impromptu needs that always seem to demand immediate attention.

One morning Carl, Deb and I sang a few hymns to Dad. That revived him for a little while. He even tried to sing with us, but soon he tired. We laid him down on his bed and he fell asleep. Carl continued to play the guitar and sing over Dad for quite some time. I know that it soothed Dad's heart and soul to hear the melodies and harmonies. Later when Carl asked if he remembered the playing, Dad said, "I remember you playing."

The next day we sang some more hymns and choruses. Dad always revives when he hears music - especially from his family. When we finished, Dad interjected, "Let's pray". And so he began, "Thank you Father for Your kindness and Your goodness. You're faithful. Your love. Your goodness and mercy.. Thank you for the little children - those who want children - what a blessing it is to have each other... we're on the same team.. Now, Mark you pray and we'll go around the circle." Everyone prayed and then we ended up singing, "Give Thanks", at the end of which he said, "Amen - eat with thanksgiving!" We all laughed and figured that he was getting hungry.

Debbie is Dad's only daughter-in-law. She and I continue to sleep in the living room on the floor in front of the wood stove and his hospital bed. Debbie is quite a trooper. She has always had an unusually winsome way with Dad and he has "taken a likin'" to her. She scurries around fixing Dad's favorite drink - buttermilk - and washing dishes, setting the table or cleaning it up, and a myriad of other necessities. She has a deep affection for Dad that compels her to lay her life down (literally on the floor beside him) during this time. There have never been in-law problems in our family - thank the Lord.

During the night, his restless stirring and mumbling awakened me. He had taken off his shirt and needed his next dose of pain medication. I asked him how he was doing and was answered by his, "Father, I just want out of here?" I'm sure there are times when his wrestling to conquer this ma lady has just reached its limit. As I'm so closely related to this most basic struggle, I'm brought face to face with the mysterious force that is found in each of us -- the drive to survive. Even the most mature believers are caught between whether to strive to survive or to embrace eternal life in the next world. In Philippians 1:21, Apostle Paul said, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Later he went on to explain, "...having a desire to depart and to be with Christ; which is far better: nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you." What a tension!! May the Lord help Dad (and us) come to Heaven's terms in this matter.

His mental and physical condition has deteriorated considerably since Saturday. There have been only 6 or 8 times of conversation in the last 4 days. Even those times are filled with long pauses as he processes sentences he has heard or words he wants to say. And then sometimes he'll just "check out" - Mom calls it "a little birdie nap". You have to just wait until he "comes back"; then try to proceed. He can't take his medication in pill form anymore. We make a solution of the medication by dissolving the tablets in water and then use a needle-less syringe to squirt it into his mouth. Works pretty well. Medication is pretty low dosages of Lorazepam and Morphine.

He continues to amuse us with his strangely constructed thoughts and answers. We wonder where we would have to go to get such an entertainment and we don't even have to pay for it – well.. sort of.

Some humorous and notable occasions follow:

Mom was giving him a drink of water when he complained somewhat humorously, "There's got to be something better than that!" Boy, we hopped right to it and got him his buttermilk - no further questions asked.

After a good time of sharing together as a family, things were quiet and Dad said, "Thank you for your favoritism (he meant "love") "Very pleasurable", he added.

We told him that Carl, Leann's husband was coming soon. He said, "Well we better get on the ball". What made it so funny is that he is in no condition to get anything "on the ball". His pace, these days, is more like the snail than the hare.

We had him sitting in the wheel chair for 30 minutes or so when he suddenly exclaimed, "I think I'd like to get off the ladder now". I told him that I'd get him to his bed very shortly. He continued, "When you're ready to come down off this ladder, we'll see what kind of firecrackers can take us into town." We nearly fell off of our chairs, laughing. Now how much would you have to pay for this kind of entertainment?! He seems to be a little amused at times, that we find him so funny. Yet, never has he responded as though he was offended or put-out at our laughter. He has even chuckled himself, a few times.

On one occasion we had him sitting on the edge of the bed and he seemed eager to get up. We asked him, "Where're you gonna go Dad?" He replied, "Where ever the Lord takes us, He'll take us to the right place".

Carl asked, "Anything you want to tell us Jack"? "No", Dad responded, "Just let me relax". He may have wearied of our desire for more entertainment.

We were feeding him mashed bananas and some coffee. He probably realized that it wasn't really a gourmet meal by most standards, so he said, "Taste better than you think. Probably not to everybody, but it does to me."

Leann was giving Dad buttermilk to drink when his 'father heart' was moved to say tenderly, "Thank you for being so precious to me" (Tender moment)

After drinking his, still favorite drink - buttermilk, we asked him if he wanted some more. With concern, he said very slowly and purposefully "Do you have A LOT of buttermilk?" We answered, "Yes, do you want more?" He responded again very sincerely, "Only if you have A LOT of buttermilk". You can be sure that he got his buttermilk - one pleasure still enjoyable to him.

Leann asked, "Are you in pain?" "Yes", Dad answered. Leann continued, "I'll get you a 'hot shot'" - the nickname we have for the current pain reliever. With raised hands and sincerity he pleaded, "Would you pleeaasse help me to understand." She tried to explain, "I'm going to get you a hotshot Dad, to help take away your pain."

He drank a cup of water so fast that he choked, coughed and exclaimed, "If you only knew how thirsty I was! It's so wonderful!"

He ate quite a bit in one sitting. Debbie asked, "Do you want more applesauce?" He waited and then said, "I'm fatiside." (he meant, "satisfied") We chuckled. We're learning a new language these days. Having the wording accurate is not as important as it used to be.

A young couple came to see him one afternoon. They were a couple that Dad had spent much time with and they were very fond of him. After some rather long periods of silence, they were getting ready to leave. I felt prompted to try something because I felt the Lord impress me that they wanted and needed a patriarchal blessing from an aging man that had meant so much to them. I asked for their hands, put the couple's hands together and then took Dad's hand and put it on top of their clasped hands. I then asked Dad to say, "May the Lord bless you". He immediately said, "May the Lord bless you ..(pause) both now and forever..(pause) both now and forever...(pause) both now and forever." Three times the patriarch had spoken. The blessing had been given. Tears welled up from grateful hearts. Their hearts had touched the one they loved and his heart had touched theirs. Love was fulfilled.

We've initiated Dad's giving this patriarchal blessing over couples and youngsters, on several occasions. This very simple but profound blessing will not soon be forgotten - maybe never. Heaven only knows, but time may tell, what righteous and powerful forces are released in the spirit realm when an older saint pronounces heaven's favor.

In spite of his dire straights and very limited freedoms Dad has remained extremely polite and gracious. Here are some of his common phrases: "Thank you, sir". "Thank you, Ma'am.".. "Thank you very much".. "Has everyone else had every thing they want?".. "Please".. "I appreciate you coming."

the other day Dad seemed to speak some sense of release to Mom. He was talking to the Hospice nurse when he said, "Whatever Mary does, it'll be alright". This impacted Mom with a sense of blessing and validation by her husband.

Mom has been doing pretty well throughout these last weeks. This stage that Dad is going through, has not come as a surprise, though. Dad has soundly trounced the Dr's original prognosis given to them nearly 7 years ago, when he told Mom that Dad had only 6 - 9 months to live. Much concerted prayer by many friends and churches and Dad's serious diligence to a strict healthy diet, gave him a generous reprieve - time to nearly finish his book, "True Tales from the Land of Mark Twain" and give attention to some relationships that needed shoring up. He has conscientiously attended to these matters.

At times, He and Mom knowingly commented that they were in a race against this disease. They both knew that unless God miraculously intervened, there would be a certain reckoning with the grim reaper. They have spent much time in research to try to withstand the ultimate mission of this cancer. They even traveled across the Midwest to visit cancer treatments centers and listened to the many suggestions of well-intentioned friends. Some methods helped and some seemed more like wishful but misguided thinking.

So Mom is doing quite well under the circumstances. During one time of intense decision making when nothing seemed to be gelling, she said, "Well one thing we've got to do - is keep on eating!" We all laughed the intensity of the moment away and have used that line many times as a pressure relief valve and an excuse to do what we like to do - eat. Having the family here has helped to alleviate her of much stress and strain. We field phone calls for her and do most of the care giving to Dad. I'm trying to encourage her to have some places to 'anchor to' in her mind and emotions - some ways that she can "dial down" to a place of peace and quietness inside. And she's doing very well, although there are times when an eruption of emotion and deep sobs causes her diminutive frame to quake for a short time. She'll lean on an available shoulder for a minute or two and then seem to be renewed with strength and peace. She has a strong support base of friends who call her and pray for her, both in their prayer closet and by her side. Proverbs 17:17 says, "A friend loves at all times, and is born, as a brother, for adversity." Amp. Bible Thank the Lord for the strength that comes from loyal and true friends.

During our recent family Christmas time, Dad had told Mom, "I will love you forever". Last night, Jan 13, she crawled into the hospital bed with Dad and laid down beside him. She wanted to hear him say it one more time. "Jack", she said, "You told me that you would love me forever. Would you tell me again?" He responded, "I'll love you forever." Those simple words washed Mom's heart and soul to hear her soul mate of over 51 years reaffirm his love and devotion to her. She began to hum to Dad and found herself following the melody of the song, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross". She called me over and asked me to get a hymnal. She sang the whole song to him and over him - and in so doing - over his life. Her singing was a kind of returning to the central truth that redeems our lives and it also was a washing of Dad's soul with these simple yet profound truths. She cried, then sang, then cried, then sang some more. We quietly watched and even dared to take a picture of this intimate occasion, then stepped out of the room so she could be alone - just her,.. her still loving but weakened companion.. and Jesus.

Prayers from an unbelievable amount of people are still mounting – even an intensification of prayers. Nearly every day we're hearing of people who we don't even know and they don't even know us, who are being constrained to extended and unusual regimens of prayer. "Why is such a thing happening", we continue to ask ourselves? Prayers have mounted towards heaven for literally many years over this one issue. Even precious people from other countries (Taiwan and Cuba and others) have been daily lifting Dad's cancerous condition to God in prayer. Why has the answer been delayed? And why at this late hour, is there another fresh assault on heaven from deeply burdened souls? I only know this one thing and again I'll say - a wonderful thing is going to happen soon - Dad's miracle ..or he'll see Jesus face to face.

Dad said a couple of days ago, "Have we purchased the airplane tickets yet"? I wonder if he was referring to his "trip" that he mentioned a few days earlier. May the Lord's will be done ...and His will only!

The Lord bless us every one,

Mark

Update on Dad #4 (4 of 5)

Jan 14 - 16

I'm finding that writing this journal is very therapeutic to me. I'm getting to process some of the deep and meaningful occurrences that pop up each day in a way that even my mother may not be getting to do. Because I'm interested in writing this journal for my family and friends, it helps me to keep my "antennae" up. Not only am I looking to catch the major events but even the small nuances that really give meaning. My heart and my mind are working together to come to terms with the dynamics and emotions in each situation. I'm slicing and dicing the event and then piecing it together, then typing it out, then I'm reading it to myself and then reading it to my family. I hope this will not only encourage others as they get to walk through the journey with us, but I hope that it will have prepared my heart for whatever lies ahead

Have I told you yet that buttermilk is Dad's favorite? ☺ Actually I think that it may have become the center of his world. If it were possible to know the chemical analysis of Dad's body, it would probably be at least 97% buttermilk. He seems to be able to say that word even when he can't say anything else. It's possible that when he is trying to talk to us and can't get the words out, he just says the default word, "buttermilk". All roads lead to Rome they say, well in Dad's mind all roads probably lead to buttermilk. When we all get to heaven Dad may tell us that he didn't really like it all that much but it was just the only thing he could say.

When I first came to Dad's house, Dad was still "dad" and I was the "son" - the same roles that we've known for 47 years. But in less than a week the roles have reversed. Now, I am the "dad" and Dad is the "son". Dad's decline in physical and practical areas of function started diminishing seriously last year. But even up until recently, the "dad" and "son" roles were still very much intact - if not in our deeds they still were in effect in our conversation. We both knew what areas of behavior and conversation were respectful to the ethics of each other's role. Now, we function almost completely opposite to what we have called normal and right for nearly a half a century. We have exchanged our functions towards each other. I am the caregiver and he is the receiver. Respect will always remain fixed - as it should -- for he will always deserve and receive the respect of being my dad, but now he clings to me when I move him and I make decisions that I think will be good for him.

The real Jack only shows occasionally, now. You never know when the real Jack will surface and you get to touch and feel and hear him. Most of the time it is just a shell of a man I once knew. Even his physical features are marred by the ravages of disease - very lean and gaunt, down from his normal 175 lbs to a bony 125 lbs. Face sunken and arms sinewy. Strength diminished. Voice mostly unintelligible. Eyes closed most of the time. False teeth removed for convenience. Mouth gaping open while sleeping. Mental faculties very impaired.

I'm pretty sure that the real Jack can still hear and can still feel. I just think the real Jack is incapable of pushing up through the barriers of disorientation and dementia that have been brought on by the damage of this sickness. It makes me have deeper feelings for his struggle as he tries to resist the downward spiral into weakness. He has done so well for nearly 7 years, daily fighting a valiant warfare with healthy diet and prayer and as righteous living as he could muster. Now, he must know that he is in the grip of a menacing force. What must go through the soul of a man as he looks from the inside out - through his outer shell? What frustration does he feel? I don't have the answers for those questions. I only ask the Good Lord for His mercies - the ones that are new every morning - to be poured out upon and over Dad.

We had company today - Dave and Karen Sims (Mom's only brother). They brought a meal and a carload of love. Everybody was congregating around the dining room table. Mom remained in the living room with Dad and sat down next to him to just say a few gentle words. Inspiration rose in her and lucidness arose in Dad. A heavenly breeze was blowing upon the embers of friendship and love in each of them. At this stage of the journey, opportunity strikes infrequently and then the window closes all too soon. You must be ready to do what it takes to make the most of the moment. She began rubbing her face close to his. In just a moment he said, "Mary, let's take a walk so we can talk - walk and talk as we often do - as good friends do." He was speaking more lucidly than normal, now. Mom felt that he was probably indicating that he needed to talk and be talked to, in order to better process what's happening. Obviously, they weren't going to take a walk now, but it meant so much to Mom to hear him refer to some of their finer times of intimate fellowship and hear of his desire to do it again - at least in his mind. The spark of love was still alive!

I lean over him occasionally and whisper in his ear, "I love you Dad. I'm proud of you." Most of the time he responds with, "I love you too, Mark". Our hearts are further melted together each time. I tell him, "Don't you worry about a thing. We're happy to take good care of you".

We've gone funeral home shopping. Wow! We checked out their services and wares. What a shock! After some chaffing and uneasiness we've settled on living with the system that mortuaries use and simply trusting the Lord for Him to cover all the needs with His provision. Our funeral research will be useful sooner or later, as all human bodies must return to dust someday.

Tonight we got the guitar out and resurrected some of the ancient songs that our family used to sing when my sister and I were just youngsters. Dad held the guitar a couple times when I put it under his arms and he even plucked a string or two. He used to play guitar in the early and middle years of his life. A love and desire emerged up out of the depths for just a few fleeting moments. Later, as we were singing one of the upbeat classics, he began to play "air guitar". It is always fascinating to me to watch the effect of music on the soul of a person. A person doesn't even have to like the music for it to impose its "life" upon you. Music is alive and constantly hunting for entrances into the soul. From there, it begins to manipulate the mind and will and even the body. For example: When I hear a strong beat in a song my toe starts tapping. Why is that - when I may not even like the music? Dad's severely handicapped body "resurrected" for a few minutes this evening, because the power of music awakened slumbering feelings within him. It felt good to dust off some of the golden oldies just for Dad -- if for no one else.

An amusing thing happened yesterday when Leann had a tender desire to wash Dad's hair. Although we have been regularly bathing him, his hair was a little stale. She used a special green tea fragrance shampoo. His hair was beginning to smell fine. The aroma filled the room. Now it is time for a spray from a spritz bottle she had found under the sink to keep down the "fly aways". After squeezing the trigger of the spray bottle a couple of times, a strange smell arose. "What's that smell!?!?!?" O my goodness! It was a vinegar and water cleaner. We all laughed heartily. Someone joked that we were pickling him and getting him ready for the canning jar. Bad joke, but we laughed anyway.

The fire in the wood stove went out a couple nights ago. It was in the early morning hours when I was awakened by the rattling of the hospital bed - "Clink, clink, clink" I pulled my blankets back to get up from the floor so that I could check on Dad. I could immediately feel an icy chill in the air. As I checked the bed I realized that the rattling was because Dad was shaking from the cold. I felt so badly. It had been my responsibility to load the stove before I went to bed and to keep the "home fires burning". But I overlooked stoking it before lying down to sleep. Well, Deb and I quickly covered him with blankets. Mom, Carl and Leann rallied from the bedrooms to help get the fire started and give him his meds. We joked that when Dad sees Jesus, he may ask Jesus, "What did I die of"? Jesus would say, "Well, it wasn't your disease, it was over exposure - you froze to death." We laughed and joked for quite sometime. Pretty soon Dad had enough of the noise when he said, "Would someone turn off the TV so I can get some sleep!" Dad doesn't seem to be any worse for the wear - I hope.

Food - there's plenty of it now. We went from famine to feast. We keep telling ourselves, "There's one thing we have to do - we have to keep eating", as Mom once commented. Isn't eating is a funny thing? Why do we make so much fuss out of putting something into that hole in the front of our face? Why is so much fascination and fulfillment found in eating? Sure, one does it for physiological reasons, but beyond I suppose that, it's a "comfort thing" for most humans and a great place to rally friendships and foster love. Some of our best times are centered around eating together with our family and friends. Well, there's a lot of it going on here in this home, thanks to the many gracious friends whose labors have turned out some culinary masterpieces. Loved ones bring food because they want to give something that is meaningful and touches the focus of their affections - the ones they love. God bless them one and all. We're getting very little cardiovascular exercise these last few days, so I suppose our waistlines will tell the tale of how much "comfort" we've enjoyed - then comes the day of reckoning.

Debbie and I are leaving today. We will relinquish our care of Dad into Mom and Leann's hands and other 'capable hands' who are coming to stand their watch and lend their care. Dad's nephew, Jonathan Lewis, will come today to take the night-watch tonight and help where brawn is needed.

Tomorrow, all Dad's sister siblings will arrive - Dorothy, Mildred and Wandnetta (and Wandnetta's husband - Keith Sigler). Wandnetta and Keith will assume the sentinel post beside Dad's bed for a couple nights. I expect Dad's spirits to revive some as he hears familiar voices and sees beloved faces that have meant so much to his heart and soul for nearly 72 years. They're coming with eager hearts laden with gifts of love to pour out upon their compatriot - a brother who has loved them and stabilized them even up to these recent years. They do have a special - can we call it "reverence" - for their brother. I'm fairly certain that some tender tears will moisten their cheeks when they see their beloved brother. Their longing to see their brother will be fulfilled, but distress over his suffering will weigh heavily. Love is a many splendored thing, they say, and sometimes it's very painful. If his sister's could do anything to make him feel better, they would undoubtedly do it.

An irony is happening among the Hendrickson siblings. Dad's brother, Raymond is in nearly the same condition. Parkinson's disease has debilitated him for a much longer time than Dad's cancer has, but at this stage they both look strikingly the same. Life and age and sickness are funny how they take their toll indiscriminately and render these frail bodies helpless against our wills. Who can understand these things? Psalms 90:12, "Teach me to number my days that I may gain a heart of wisdom." And in Psalms 90:10, "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their (added) strength only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." God, Your ways are much higher than ours, so we yield ourselves to You, afresh. Even though we don't understand "why", we still say, "You do all things well!"

We woke this morning to a winter wonderland outside. During the night a gentle snow had fallen, covering the ground with nearly 6 inches of snow. The limbs of the trees are occasionally shedding the weight of the snow and it comes cascading down through stark bony branches adding mystery to the woodland scenery. Squirrels are plowing through the white powder trying to locate the buried treasure from earlier harvests. And birds are foraging for their daily bread on the snow-covered feeder. All living things are struggling to survive. Life is pristinely beautiful outside today, but very harsh. Isn't it interesting how life comes in those kinds of packages sometimes?

We will return on Sunday, if all goes as planned, to be by my father's side and help escort him on the journey the Lord has for him. His outward physical appearances are indicating a further decline this afternoon. I feel badly that I have to be away these crucial days. I really want to be there when he passes from this life into the next. "Lord, give him strength, nevertheless, Your will be done".
Love and blessings to all, Mark

Update on Dad #5 (5 of 5)

Jan 16 - 22

I left on Thursday morning with the understanding that I may miss the moment of Dad's passing into eternity. But I had weighed the consequences and the circumstances - including his vitals and my commitments and decided to return home after being with Dad for about 1-1/2 weeks. Those experiences have been very rich with many unforgettable events, feelings and pictures that will remain in my mind.

On Saturday Jan 18, I was to officiate the wedding of one of my spiritual sons. This was a momentous occasion for him. I felt the responsibility of wanting to be there to "write" upon this climactic event in his life. Even though I wanted to be at my father's passing, Dad wouldn't care if I wasn't. On the other hand my involvement on my "son's" wedding day would make a memory for the rest of his life. I chose the latter.

This would prove to be an historic day for me. The day had a mixture of ethereal and surrealness. It was a day of mystery and irony. A day of great joy and a day of sadness. On one hand I was handing the hand of my "son" into the hand of his bride.. and on the other, I was handing the hand of my father into the hand of his Bridegroom - Jesus. Both would be entering into a season of new life. But Ooo..... the strain it put on my soul to reach for a perspective that would give me gladness for both.

The wedding went exceptionally well - so glad to be there. The reception went late into the evening, and then afterwards Deb and I headed back to be with Dad. This was the 4th time I had made the 4-hour trip in the last 48 hours. As we were entering Kingdom City, MO, we received a call that Dad had passed away. I was pretty unfeeling at that point. Mom said she wouldn't inform the authorities until after we arrived so everything hung in limbo for the next two hours. About 1:30 AM we walked into the house. I was tired and exhausted ... and Dad was dead. It was numbing. I really didn't know what I felt. I knew what I was supposed to feel; yet a volcanic eruption of emotion was rumbling beneath my countenance. We did the necessary things to help Hospice and the funeral attendants gather Dad's body and we gave them the pertinent information for documentation. I was so troubled inside that I wasn't comfortable talking about anything else at that point. The darkest hours of the night were upon us, so I finally excused myself to the bedroom. As I lay in the dark stillness, emotion wouldn't be stopped now and it found its way to the surface. Tears flowed unstoppable and were collected in my pillow. Deb tenderly held me as I silently cried myself into an exhausted sleep.

The few minutes before Dad had breathed his last, Leann was overcome with the pain of his departure. He was struggling for breath. At that time Leann had a vision of the brilliant and massive gates of heaven opening for Dad to enter. He was dwarfed by the size of the gates. As far as you could see the very atmosphere of heaven was filled with beings (whether angelic or saints she wasn't sure - they were faceless) and they began a raucous cheering and clapping at his entrance, the same way that a crowd would welcome home a war hero. There, Leann's pain was replaced with peace-filled joy at his heavenly arrival. She had a sense that Dad's spirit had already left his body and he was at that very moment, entering "glory". Leann felt like the Lord told her that his natural body would be shutting down very soon now. And sure enough, only about a minute later he stopped taking his short shallow breaths. There was a long suspense filled pause... then he breathed in one last deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. That was the last earthly thing Jack Hendrickson ever did.

Jack Hendrickson has graduated!!!! Saturday, Jan 18, 2003 is the conclusion of his race here on earth. At 11:22 PM all his earthly pursuits, struggles and ambitions had come to an end. All battles in the soul and body had been finalized. It was graduation time. One moment he was still occupying his physical body - complete with all the fears, pains and constraints that come with mortality - and the next moment he was transported into a realm humans eyes, hearts and minds can only imagine. All Dad's desires, inspirations and reaching for God began to be actualized and unfolded in dazzling sights and experiences for which the human heart has no words or comprehension. Even the Ancients of Holy Scripture tried their best to put description to what they saw when they were privileged to peer through the curtains that separate time and eternity. Their attempts still leave us with ambiguity. There simply are no words in our finite understanding to explain the ecstasy, completeness and joy that come with being in the presence of Light, Life and Love, Himself.

"Dad, we're going to celebrate your life and your God on Wednesday morning. You've run a good race, and set a good pace for us to follow. Lots of lives are a little shell shocked at your absence, because you meant so much more to all of us than you ever really knew. Just your life was a standard of uprightness that inspired and required others to follow suit. How many lives have you affected, Dad? Well.... you can see now, from a much better vantage point. Maybe you'll be able to view us from over the banister of heaven. I'm sure you'll be cheering us on along with all the rest of the great "cloud" of heavenly onlookers. Maybe we'll hear your cheers."

"I know that you're in a much better place now, Dad. By now you've heard, "Well done, enter into the Joy of the Lord", from your Lord, Master and Friend. All that you've believed in, is now yours. We wouldn't want it any other way. We're all going to be OK..... after a little time of transition. There are some things we have yet to accomplish here on this side, but you can be sure that we're living with our "sights" set on being reunited with you again, one day. I love you, Dad."