Married Life (25) 2010-2011

Category: Married Life (1)
Published: Friday, 10 February 2012 19:04
Written by dave
Hits: 3761

PATSY'S LAST YEAR ON EARTH

My dear wife of 57 married years, Patricia died the morning of March 4, 2011. It has taken me a year to get to the point that I can write about her last year and death.

I am here dictating through my voice to text program what I remember during her last year and all the things that remind me of her now - the little things she did that I now have to do for myself this year since she died. The reason that I am dictating this to create this remembrance is because I can tell it better as a story than I can by pecking it out on my word processor. For I am more a storyteller than a writer.

How It All Started

I was sitting at home sometime in early April 2010 while Patsy was in the dining room in her comfortable chair with a board across her lap playing solitaire - which she frequently did in the evenings as she got older. She was 81 years old that year. I was already 82.

I remember her calling out for me to please come to her. When I got to her chair she looked up at me and said “My right hand isn't working.” She lifted her hand and tried to work her fingers. I could see that her hand was pretty much not functioning. She discovered that while she was trying to pick up her cards.

I immediately knew what those symptoms were about. At least three years before I had what is called a TIA – a minor stroke which disabled my right hand for a time. It also garbled my speech for a briefer period of time. But I also knew that it was very important to get her immediately to the emergency room in a hospital. For I knew that a TIA could be the harbinger of a more serious stroke. Which only doctors could ward off if she got there in time.

So I quickly got her into our car – she was not affected in any other way at that time as I noticed – and I drove her to the emergency room at Memorial Hospital East of downtown Colorado Springs. It was about eight o'clock in the evening. The valet attendant parked my car while I took her into the emergency room. There were a few other patients waiting but soon enough we were ushered into a small room where, first, a nurse attendant asked her questions, followed by a doctor who heard her story and examined her briefly. He then said he wanted her admitted at least overnight. And she was put into a hospital room. I was not concerned too much, having gone through the same kind of a TIA episode followed by medication and physical therapy for my hand which regained its full functioning in about a week. And only later when the Air Force Academy hospital did other tests on me did they determine I would need more extensive treatment related to my heart and circulation.

I filled out her Medicare and Tri-Care insurance data and my own as her sponsor.

I stayed with her for a time, and called Rebecca, David, and Edward from my cell phone to tell them what had happened and she is in the hospital. I later I went home

The next morning doctors ordered up a brain CAT scan which they had done for me also, to see if they could identify what part of her brain malfunctioned.

Then came the bad news.

While the doctors did not detect anything directly related to the TIA they spotted an alien lump on the right side of her brain. It was pretty small but appeared to be possibly cancerous. And as I learned once they found suspected cancer in one part of her body they wanted to check out all the rest of her.

So what started out as a TIA that is not unexpected in people as old as we were, turned out to be a cancer.

But the news following her full body scan was more disturbing. For they found Stage 4 – advanced - cancer in both her lungs. That was much more serious, harder to treat, and much more problematical given her age.

I knew immediately that lung cancer came from her years of smoking. Which she stopped about 13 years before when Edward and Haning asked her not to take care of baby David as long as she was smoking. Rebecca had objected to her smoking around her babies Jennifer and Lindsey even earlier.

Neither I nor my three children ever smoked.

So now even though I knew my Tri-Care for Life insurance - which my 27 year military career earned me and for my dependents - plus Medicare which covered Patsy as well as me also would largely if not completely cover the costs of treatment, my dear Patsy was facing a very uncertain future. My heart sank.

But even Patsy who had managed crises and fears for the future, especially of me, all our 57 married years took the news calmly. In fact she even said she didn't know how she had lived as long as she had already. She was 80. We had both already outlived the life expectancy of Americans. And except for my having to have a defibrillator installed in my chest three years earlier, no life threatening crises had bothered our lives before this.

Now came the difficult year

Immediately Memorial Hospital referred Patsy to both a doctor Mark Hazuka for her head tumor, and another doctor, Dax Kurbegov both of whom worked in the Cancer Annex to Memorial Hospital.

Both doctors separately but with each other, put her through a number of tests to diagnose just how serious and advanced the cancers were. And both of them started counseling her, and prescribe medications. The major medicine was Tarciva. Which the doctor explained would not destroy the cancer but hopefully retard its growth. That it had worked on a variety of his patients. Given her age he just didn’t advise using much stronger treatments.

The Tarciva was very expensive, $4,000 a month for daily doses. When she started taking it she did not seem to have any bad reactions from it.

I started driving her to the hospital for her appointments. Both Rebecca who was not working and David, who had spent years nursing wife Diana after her liver transplant, wanted to attend most of the meetings we had with the doctors and nurses. I was fine with that so we all did that throughout her treatments and consultations.

Another consideration was dealing with her illness at home. Patsy was very independent minded. At our age in our 80s we had long slept in different bedrooms so as not to disturb each other. So I had to start worrying about the stairs to the second floor knowing that at some point she would not be able to negotiate them safely up or down, I was aware that – unlike me - she did not like to walk down the stairs in the dark night to go to the bathroom. She preferred to use a can kept under her bed and the next morning when she got up she carried it downstairs, cleaned it and returned it. I knew that arrangement could not last forever. Or even for long.

Now since she was not in any noticeable pain from her cancer she wanted to continue her independent actions, and drive herself to King Soopers grocery store and to go to frequent estate sales. She loved to go to those sales and bought all kinds of small items both for me and the house and the children and grandchildren. Antiquing was her hobby.

David, since he had spent years nursing and tending Diana from the effects of her liver transplant 15 years before, had become quite knowledgeable in lots of medicines and treatments. So he delivered to her many potions and aides that were not prescriptions but she had come to appreciate and rely on for her various aches and pains.

I saw no reason to try and curb her independent trips so long as she did not complain or seem to be distracted in her driving. So for the first several months after learning of her affliction, she followed her normal routine. She would listen all night to her AM radio, and then of get up around eight o'clock, even though I would frequently be up as early as 5AM. I would sometimes go in to see how she was doing, wake her, turn off the radio turn on the light and she would get up at her own speed to go downstairs. I would have started the coffee earlier that she made the night before and read the newspaper. She would then make our, or my, breakfast. And then she would read the newspaper. That continued to work for at least 6 more months.

When she went to King’s Soopers, she would ride in the battery powered carts. I had only infrequently gone with her in years past. She simply tipped the attendants who put the groceries in the trunk of her car, and I would get them out and carry them in when she got home.

About then I bought a nicer, used Saab, that she started driving. She never liked my run-about, ugly, 1993 yellow Saab that I used. So I bought the nicer one, with even seat warmers, sold the yellow car and started using an older Saab we had. She really liked the ‘new one.’ In all our 57 years of marriage she never had an accident with any of our cars.

Lucy, our dog seemed to take everything in stride since we had little dog steps against both beds, Lucy would just decide who she was going to sleep with that night though Patsy usually called her as she started upstairs and she slept with her. Lucy was always a comfort to Patsy. When her chores were done Patsy would sit in her big chair in the dining room, sometimes put her legs up on a dining room chair and then Lucy would frequently jump up in her lap. Patsy would often brush her hair which would get pretty tangled after a while. At least once during that year I took her to be clipped and bathed but began that year to forgot about it. I had other things to think about.

She continued to faithfully read the Gazette Telegraph paper end to end, every day. And she especially was delighted to run across something I had written, whether in the HUB, or in the weekly Fresh Ink system or in letters to the editor. She would clip them out, and often as not tell me when she saw them that I would have forgotten about.

It was her reading what I wrote, that, as much as anything motivated her to tell me, and our 3 children to tell me, to ‘write,write,write’ after she is gone. Which I have tried to do. And am doing here.

 I repeatedly took her to both the regular Cancer hospital wing of Memorial, and the hospital close to the Printer's home which had more advanced screening facilities. She had to be scanned several times, and even a plastic mask made for her – to keep her face absolutely still during scanning. It was an ugly thing that, when we took it home after that kind of scan was stopper looked like a ‘death mask.”

We still had some faint hope she would be alright, but the march of lung cancer never stopped. The Tarciva arrived on schedule and she took it, faithfully.

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I took over paying the household bills after she asked me to do so.

By then it became obvious we needed to take her bed downstairs so she could use only the downstairs bathroom off my office, and stop using the stairs. So the other men in the family carried it down and set it up right next to the door in my office.

She was able to navigate in and out of the bigger bathroom by herself, where her clothes closet was.

She had to have a type of colostomy to see if any cancer had spread. It hadn’t. We had a hard time finding that hospital across town.

I can't exactly remember what month the tests proved that she wasn't getting any better, but I remember well the day we went in, David and Rebecca were there, when Doctor Kerbegov explained that the Tarciva had not worked in her lungs. But that the radiation treatment on her head had worked and her small tumor had shrunk. He said that there was nothing else that could be done, and that she and her family should consider her treatment being stopped, and only palliative treatment should be given and that by a Hospice facility. That he would prescribe the Hospice and recommended Rocky Mountain Hospice. He let us react. We didn't.

That was the death sentence day. He left and another nurse, trained to discuss with the patient and family what that all would mean, came in and amplified things. That nurse talked to us all, and said that the end would be a matter, not of years, but of months.

When we left, David and Rebecca having left first, she said she wanted to go back and see that nurse again, alone. So I waited around until she emerged again in about 15 minutes. She showed no visible emotion then, or at any time in this last year. I am sure she just wanted to be sure that she was at her end.

We were then visited by the hospice staff administrators at the house to insure that I, David and Rebecca knew about all the decisions which had to be made – such as “do not resuscitate” instructions. The end of the year or just after it we all accepted the inevitable. The hospice staff was very professional. They provided excellent service. The priority then was to comfort her last days and not try and treat her.

I ordered a hospital bed put into our living room in lieu of the smaller bed that we had in the other room which did not have the ability to be raised or lowered.

I had gotten a wheelchair for her. She only used the wheelchair one time. I was given quite an honor by Coronado high school students for my work on the westside - to be the grand marshal at their homecoming parade in September. They were going to march down Colorado Avenue, then gather in Bancroft Park for their festivities. I was made an honored guest and rode in a car. Tom and Rebecca rolled her over to be on the south side of Colorado Avenue when I rolled by. That was the last time she was out. When the parade ended I came back to where she was and wheeled her back to the house. She enjoyed the outing and the event. She was always so proud me when I got recognition for my westside work.

I had cable television routed into her room, with the screen sitting on top of the piano that she could see easily.

Fortunately in our 1900 house there were large sliding wooden doors into that room so which gave her privacy when she wanted it. Edward and Tom worked on the doors, cutting away the heavy rug, making sure the doors rolled smoothly. I set her up with her favorite radio and station, KVOR she wanted to listen to at night. David mounted the 'Frame' - automaticic large scrolling computer screen on the wall, full of pictures of our earlier family years.

We started into a routine where, approaching nine o'clock she would still be in her dining room chair, watching television after I had fed her whatever she would eat, usually soups. She sometimes would watch the first part of nine o'clock Fox news and then want to go to bed.

To the end, she did not believe Obama was native born. And she wanted me to change her voting registration from Democrat to Republican. She voted by mail, with my help that November.

I would assist her in to the bed, or get her started toward the bathroom where she put on her pajamas. For a time she used the walker to get from her bedroom to the bathroom and back. She would go in and clean herself up and do her normal ablutions in the bathroom before she got dressed or undressed. But one day she looked at me while she was in bed, and said “My legs won’t work any more!” And stopped using the walker. She had insisted also upon using her can rather than going to the bathroom in the night until one day she fell while using the can, and complained that that was the first time ever she had fallen.

She was bed ridden from that time on.

David and Diana brought many meals to us. I set my smartphone's alarms to wake me every few hours so I could go down and check up on her.

She just never complained except for sometimes feeling a pain in her side, or back. And her eyes began to hurt, and were dry. She was prescribed eye drops of some type.

In spite of all these things, everybody, including Patsy decided to have – as we had for over 35 years – Thanksgiving and Christmas at our house. The other women doing all the cooking. Over 15 children, their spouses, and grandchildren attended.

She never left the house locally after that time. Except she wanted to sit in the sun on the front porch a couple of times to get some ‘Vitamin D.’

Then she had to have a somewhat painful procedure that put tiny camera down her throat and snipped some samples, to see could be determined.

The news was not good.

This 2010 year it made no sense to put up the large Christmas Tree we always had. I went out with Rebecca and Tom, and bought a small, table top tree to put it on the piano top in the room where her bed was. And presents for the grandkids would be there on the piano. as not good. But I still, as I always had, put lights up across the porch. And decorated, as she would have, the chandelier with all – perhaps 10 – ‘White House’ hanging decorations she bought every year from the White House designers. And added the small red glass balls.

Nurses checked her vital signs every two to three days.

She begin to be uncomfortable and was prescribed some pain medicines more frequently.

While Rebecca’s husband Tom took it on himself to do all it outside yardwork snow removal and otherwise supported us. And faithful German cleaning woman Anita, kept cheerfully cleaning the house, first weekly, then bi weekly.

Tom would sit and chat with ‘Grandmother’ in her bedroom each time he came by.

And of course David showed up frequently and Ed and Haning stopped by. The grandkids started showing up more frequently, and young David and Justin played the grand piano next to her bed several times. She liked that.

While this next video is hard for me to watch, the day Haning brought her two boys, David and Justin over, and they wanted to play for her, on our family Baldwin grand piano which my Aunt Arleen had owned, I tape recorded their playing right next to her in bed, with two glimpses of her lying there, and once short glimpse of Haning tending to here. As I say it is painful to watch, but you can do so by clicking on PATSY'S LAST CONCERT. Young David plays Mozart's Concerto in C Major. Justin plays a shorter piece.

Her general Constitution was getting weaker. Her oxygenator was as high as it could get.

From that time on we has turned to her much more than nurses continue to come they knew that she would simply weaker and weaker over time though every night of course I would go in by this time oxygen was being strong oxygen system was being provided her and I would start checking up on her several times a night and she was beginning to take two or three medicines I can't remember various times we had little box that had the everyday's pills to give her. The nurses would come and fill out the boxes.

I would fix her breakfast usually simply boiled eggs in the bed could lift up she would take that nourishment and then at lunch time from that point on grandchildren Rebecca Tom Diana who course was still partly crippled from her difficulties with her knees and ankles. But everything was around their Patsy take care of her and I was there 24 x 7

By February it was clear she was sinking quite a bit and while I can't remember the exact sequence, first nurses and then me and of course Rebecca was helpful because she had been administrator to nursing homes would administer to her everything including under her tongue medicines and finally morphine.

Into February it was clear that was just a matter of time and I intensified my paying attention to her but also calling Hospice on the phone as necessary to be exactly how I should do certain things. It got to the point in her that Rebecca and I or a nurse and aI would have to lift her body up and move her forwarded in the bed and lowered the back at night so she could sleep. We had nurses come in and made her bed completely and bath her in bed. I helped out and with Becky sometimes but unfortunately from my age and fading strength the constant lifting apparently tore my rotator cuff in my right shoulder. After she was gone it took me almost a year of therapy before that improved. I did not notice it at the time. I just wanted her to be as comfortable as possible.

I put a pair of Baby Monitors in her room which were connected to a television in my bedroom upstairs. And I checked almost every hour. And went down to turn her on her side as she was too weak to do it herself.

I was using my smartphone and its alarm capabilities to wake me every couple hours to go downstairs and give her medicine, especially morphine. Finally I started sleeping on the couch at the foot of her bed and at the very end I was putting morphine under her tongue continuously. One thing she never got used to were the outlets to the Oxygen hose that went into her nose. Repeatedly she would brush it to the side for it irritated her nose which is understandable. I would put it back.

Even young David about almost a week earlier when I needed to go out of the house for half an hour and called for Haning to help. But David wanted to do it and his mother said okay. And he showed up and made and he fed her soup by the spoonful while I was gone. That was really important for he and Patsy, his beloved grandmother.

We warned all the children the end was coming the first day of March. I went out of my way to call both Patsy relatives in Georgia (Lucille Simpson, Scott Simpson) and I held up the phone to her ear. She was very weak but she listened and mumbled thanks. I think she appreciated that. I also notified her close friends Ruthie Gorman, Ann Berry and Cindy Adams that she was the end of her life. Cindy especially called back and I tried to let her tell Patsy she loved her and hear her mumble back. It was very hard on Cindy, for she was older than Patsy, very hard of hearing, in a retirement home, Patsy had been her VERY closest friend for 56 years, Charlie had severed dementia and it really tore her up to know her greatest friend was dying. Cindy wrote which I received after Patsy was gone, two stories of them in Hawaii and in Haddonfield, which I put on the legacy site.

Becky noted that Patsy seemed to be fighting back at the end. Both the hospice Dying literature we had, and Rebecca from her experience in retirement homes said she was probably trying hard to stay behind for me – that I should tell her its ok to let go. So I did, telling her how much I loved her, but it was ok to let go, and I would join her some day. Becky says she, relieved that I said it was ok, went down much faster after that, several days before she died.

We began to gather on Friday, 3 March coming and going. We called all the immediate family in for Saturday morning. Rebecca and I we were able to test her blood pressure, which was very low. And I used the finger oxygen meter to check her oxygen and pulse. We were told near the end her legs would begin to get cold as her organs shut down and up until Friday that had not happened but by the next morning it was clear she was very cold. I was sitting next beside her while Becky was there in the room. We invited all the grandchildren to come in privately and see and kiss her. They were all able to do their goodbyes.

My sister Betty had come down also from Boulder and the mountains. She was here she was actually out walking our dog Lucy when I realized there was no more oxygen reading and Patsy had taken her that last breaths. She died while Bette was outside. I was sitting next to her and Rebecca was in the room. The finger pulse and oxygen meter showed nothing there. She finally died about 10 o'clock that morning March 4, 2011. After I said my own goodbye, I first of all let the three kids to spend a moment with her privately. Then all gathered in her room and Prayed over her and read the 98 Psalm over her, from a very old small leather covered pocket Bible my father had 75 years ago.

We had had a Hospice Chaplain come in being a Saturday he was not available last hours so I performed what rights I could

Then I called Hospice so they could come and certify her death. Having warned them in advance we called Blunt mortuary which quietly appeared and took her remains away out on a gurney through the front door.

Patsy had made clear she didn't care how she was buried, she just didn't want to know in advance. So I said she was to be cremated. And that was done, while we planned her graveside burial service, where the Hospice Chaplain – who had been an Army Chaplain – presided. A suprisingly large crowd gathered.

We played her favorite piece of music at the graveside Service – Claire de Lune

After 57 years of marriage Patsy passed on to the ages and into the hands of God. And I was alone.

Our 'Married Life' ended with this posting. But this Family Biography continues with branches for each of our three adult children, and their lives. I continue under 'Other Careers'

Final Survey of our Home's Memorabilia