



What They Said at the Very End

Seven writers
share their
loved ones'
final words

FROM *THE UNITED CHURCH OBSERVER*
ILLUSTRATION BY JULIA BRECKENREID

Time Well Spent

What if? Those two little words can hold a lot of regret. What if I'd said I loved her? What if I'd told him I admired him? What if I'd had time to say goodbye? But the phrase isn't always bad.

My story comes from the days when I was a book editor. At my company, I had a reputation as a wanderer. I didn't so much work in the office as motor through it, bouncing along the halls and up and down the stairs from the third floor to the basement — wherever my nervous energy took me. Helped me think, I said, but good luck ever reaching me on the phone.

That Tuesday morning was different. Just around 11, I'd put the finishing touches on a children's book that I'd been busy with for three months. Now it was gone—the proofed pages, the diagrams, the original artwork. I was at my desk in the post-book stage I often called my “internal holiday” (the day or two before getting started on the next project, when I didn't really do anything).

The phone rang. My mother. For once she had connected with me, and for once I had time to talk. And so we did. About the book, life at home and how she was fitting in at her new retirement residence in Ottawa. Just one more instalment in a long conversation she and I had been having since before I was able to speak. The next day, she went into hospital. By Thursday, she was in intensive care. She died Friday.

And so, what if? What if I hadn't just finished that book? What if I hadn't been at my desk? What if I hadn't had the time to talk? A minute either way, and who knows? Then maybe we never would have had that final conversation. What was said wasn't terribly profound—it was the connection, not the content, that mattered. And I am grateful.

IAN COUTTS *is a writer
in Kingston, Ont.*

Actions Speak Louder

I like thinking about my uncle Len's fondness for red turtlenecks and his penchant for bold gestures—the urn that holds his ashes is an ornately carved eagle perched on a rock, just his style. What I don't like is recalling my last words, which felt inadequate during our final visits and seem painfully more so now: “How's the ice-fishing this year?”; “We'll see you at Christmas!?”; “Thanks for having us.”

Even when faced with the knowledge we were going to lose Uncle Len to cancer, I tricked myself into believing that niceties were the best way to handle it. In the moment, they lightened the weight of the unbearable, but it's sad to have mostly banalities to remember as our last conversations. So instead of words, I reflect on actions.

The last time we saw him, just as we were about to put on our coats to head home, Uncle Len decided his

hair was too long and that my husband, Robb, and I would be the ones to cut it. No one in the room knew what to do with such a request except comply. So we did—with some kitchen shears and a yellow plastic cup to catch the trimmings.

The haircut itself was fine, at best. But it made my uncle so happy that our leaving his house that day wasn't quite so horrible.

CHANTAL BRAGANZA
is a writer in Toronto.

Caring Gesture

Strands of white-blond hair poked out from under my teenage son's ball cap. We were standing on the front porch debating our usual topic—that his clothing wasn't appropriate for the weather. It was March 27, 1998, and Ryan was wearing a T-shirt that hung over his baggy jeans.

"Please put your sweatshirt on," I said to him. Ryan smirked to let me know I was overreacting. He had a way of saying so much with a simple look.

I couldn't stand the thought of Ryan being cold and often worried he might get sick. It was a fear that may have come from the nine weeks I cared for him through the portholes of an incubator. He was born weighing three and a half pounds, his bony little legs looking like a baby bird. Eighteen years later, he'd hit six-foot-one, with thick hair and size-11 feet.

Ryan could see I wasn't giving in and he finally relented. He came back out wearing his navy Wind River sweatshirt, which, like most of his clothes, could have fit two of him.

"Thank you," I said, reaching up to kiss his cheek. He turned and headed down the driveway, his jeans rustling as he walked. "Love ya," I said. He glanced back at me. His ball cap partially hid his eyes, but I could see his shy smile. I watched him until he was halfway down the street, walking into the night.

A few hours later, two police officers came to my door and told me my son had been killed in an accident. He was wearing a navy Wind River sweatshirt, they said.

DENISE DAVY *is a writer in Hamilton.*

Lifelong Lesson

It was February, 1990, when the phone rang in our house in Calgary. My dad was on the line. He opened with the phrase, "Now, there is nothing to worry about," which in Dad-speak meant there was something major to worry about.

It was my mom. The doctors had found something they were sure wasn't "significant." But knowing about her 25-year journey with breast cancer, I wasn't convinced. Sadly, I was proven right. The cancer had returned and this time metastasized in her liver.

My wife, young daughter and I travelled back to Toronto from Calgary as often as we could and saw my mother slowly disappear. One day that June, we'd just arrived home when we received a call. We had to go right back—the end was coming.

At the hospital, my mom grabbed my hand as I sat at her bedside. She spoke to me with an urgency and strength I thought she no longer possessed: "I gave you life to live, now go live it." She died later that night.

Her final words have shaped all that I've done as a minister, a writer, an activist and a father. I have passed them on to my two daughters, encouraging them to pursue their vocations with passion and energy. Twenty-eight years later, I believe I've been faithful to my mom's final request.

REV. CHRISTOPHER WHITE
is a minister in Toronto.

A Touching Toast

My husband was dying. The mind that made him what he was and the spirit that had nurtured our love for almost 60 years were struggling to rise free of his body. Some days there were openings to reach him. I tested for them when I greeted him each morning by asking his name. Sometimes he replied.

One morning, when he told me, I added, "And what's my name?"

"Mmm. I can't quite remember."

"It's Pat Clarke," I said.

"Oh, same as mine."

"Yes," I said. "That's because I'm your wife."

"Well! I'll drink to that!"

He died two weeks later. I don't remember that he ever spoke again. The nurse encouraged us to talk to him. Hearing is the last sense to go, she said.

So we poured out our love and our thankfulness for his life. As his breathing grew laboured, our daughter urged, "It's all right, Daddy. You can let go." And he did.

Those, I suppose, were the last words, but not the ones I treasure. "I'm your wife," I had said. And his response: "I'll drink to that."

PATRICIA CLARKE *is a writer and editor in Toronto.*

Closeness and Care

My father was self-sufficient and authoritarian for most of his life, and I had a complicated relationship with him for most of mine. He came from a modest family, put himself through school and literally built an empire as one of Morocco's first architects after the French left in 1956.

In 2011, following a prolonged struggle with colon cancer and other related ailments, he passed away. Near the end, my sister and I had to assist him with his basic physical needs—getting dressed, eating, using the washroom. He always apologized when we did, ashamed of how dependent he'd become on others.

One of the last memories I have of him is of a time just hours before he died, while my sister and I were helping him clean himself. He could no longer really speak and was in so much pain that he bit my left shoulder for some relief.

Days after he died, I'd look at the bruise, shaped by his teeth, watching it change colours, almost wishing it wouldn't fade because it was all that was left. The physical closeness we experienced at the end gave us the chance to express the love we weren't able to when he was a healthy man.

SHEIMA BENEMBAREK *is a writer in Toronto.*

Stay Smiling

You had to remind yourself that Mom had ever lost anything. She reacted to loss by dancing—not as conscious defiance but as a reflex.

During the war years, Mom and her friends would cut it up at Montreal's Victoria Hall to a sensational young pianist named Oscar Peterson. Then, she met a returning soldier, Gerry Mahoney. They married against the

echoes of two atomic bombs. The kids came—a boy, a girl, a second boy, Keith. Keith got sick. At 10 months, he died of pneumonia. Then came four more kids, including me.

In 1966, my grandfather died—that was the first time I saw Mom cry. But what I recall more was her face on the rides at La Ronde during Expo 67. She took us to the amusement park every day.

In the early 1970s, my dad, a psychologist, experienced early onset dementia at age 60, as a result of Parkinson's. Ten hard years followed, but they also brought weddings, grandchildren, careers and burning the mortgage on the house we grew up in. Mom was always dancing. Then Dad died in 1983.

A few years ago, Mom fell. A seizure, then unconsciousness. In hospital, she came to for a short time. We six kids and several grandchildren took turns at her bedside.

My last words to her: "How do you feel, Mom?" She smiled. Her eyes seemed lively. She answered, "I... feel ... greeaatt." Soon after, she was gone.

JEFF MAHONEY *is a journalist in Hamilton.*

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WHAT A HOOT

Barn owls must have been stoked when the barn was invented.

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