

PAMPHLET 85

GOODBYE DAD

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@March 2005



Allan Dale (Scoop) Heuerman at 90

The party was a year in the making. Dad turned 90 on December 24, 2004, and our family celebrated his life on January 2, 2005 at the Minnesota Masonic Home in Bloomington, Minnesota--home for 14 years.

Our mother passed away in 2000 (Pamphlet 59) and dad, at age 85, embarked on a journey of renewal. He charmed and engaged with his many friends among the staff and residents of the Masonic Home. He moved to a new room, he traveled to see his children, he wrote several manuscripts telling the stories of his long life, and he learned email and deepened his relationships with his large extended family in person and via the internet. He continued a life

time of growth as a human being despite the loneliness of life without his wife of 63 years. We wanted to celebrate his life, and the legacy dad gave us by his example: he taught us how to live and was a true inspiration in his later years.

The party was a grand and somewhat bittersweet experience. Seventy people from seven states gathered for two days of renewed relationships. Children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren posed for photos with Scoop along with nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends. My big brother Allan served as master of ceremonies and gave a great tribute to our father. Scoop gave a thoughtful speech and offered a little senior citizen sexual humor the rest of us could not get away with.

I also felt a sense of sorrow. I knew we might not celebrate together again. Dad was 90; surely he would not live forever. I had grieved his anticipated death for a long time. Those of us who so few years ago were the youngest generation have become the oldest generation. We are the next to lead the family, and the next generation who will pass on.

The celebration fulfilled us. We felt grateful for our families and for our history together. The celebration put an exclamation point on a life well lived; a life and a man worthy of acknowledgement. We left grateful for our time together.

The days flew by as the new year began. Dad took down old photos and put new photos of his extended family on the walls of his room—photos taken at the party. He told his daughter he was ready to die. He predicted a stroke and quick death.

It was Valentine's Day—our mother Harriet's birthday. Dad had a chest cold and was congested. He went to bed and felt strange. He lay down and tried to call for help. He could not get up, and no one heard him. He lay alone for 8 hours until he was found in the morning. He had, months ago, told the staff not to check on him at night as they woke him up.

The dreaded call, anticipated for years, came at 7:00AM on February 15, 2005. A nurse from the Masonic Home was on the other end of the line. She said dad had suffered a stroke. Dad was conscious and coherent. His speech was garbled, and he had some paralysis on his right side. The ambulance was on the way. Had our mother called him on her birthday?

Dad was alert and in high spirits at the hospital. He joked with the staff and bragged of his advanced age (he never imagined he would live so long) although his speech was slurred and not understandable most of the time. The early prognosis was good: he would make a full recovery and return to independent life. A day later everything changed.

Tests revealed that what he swallowed went into his lungs, not his stomach. He would require a feeding tube. Everyone said he was a good candidate for the procedure and might still make a full recovery. Then again he might not regain full use of his ability to swallow, and there could be other problems.

My dad was a proud, dignified, and independent man who still lived on his own. His mind was active and engaged and he wanted to die knowing who he was. He was mostly wheel-chair bound and his sight was slipping away. He had lived in a nursing home long enough to see what his future was. He had watched his wife fade away slowly as the medical profession tried to fix her for too long. He wanted to go out on top.

He listened to the doctor's advice—pro and con--and said “No” to the feeding tube. He then changed the subject and talked of his great-grandchildren. He was ready to leave this world. We respected his decision and admired dad for his courage and deep sense of dignity.

Dad returned to the Masonic Home and was put on “comfort care.” Family came from near and far to be with him. His mind was sharp and he recognized family and friends although communications were difficult. A great-grandson visited. Dad reached out to him, pulled him close, wrestled his watch from his arm and slipped it on the boy's wrist. The room wept.

I cried as I watched the Masonic Home resident's pilgrimage to his room to say their final goodbyes. Their aged and broken bodies traveled by walker, scooter, and wheel chair. With full spirits they shared their stories of our father with his family. I could tell they were experienced with death. His dinner companion of three years told how he had to be interviewed to sit with dad. He said, “Your dad wanted a dinner companion who could carry on a conversation.”

Dad seemed to be in the place between this and the next life. He drifted in and out of each world. He felt no pain. He did not suffer.

Once he looked upward and said, “Harriet, Harriet,” paused and said, “Open the door.”

My wife Melanie felt compelled to express her emotions. She said, “Scoop, I love Tom and will take good care of him for the rest of his life. He is a good man although from the stories I hear he was not always a good boy.” Dad managed to say clearly, “Good man, good boy.” His final approval of me will strengthen me always.

A son said a last goodbye. Dad spoke. His words were mostly incomprehensible but the word “son” was clear. Dad raised a fist and encouraged his oldest son to go forward.

I went to my father for my final private moments with him. I expressed my love and gratitude for him. I thanked him. I said he should not have any regrets. He had lived a good life with a powerful legacy. He had taught us well. His work was done. I loved him.

Finally the last son arrived from a world away. He went in and spoke to his dying father who responded to his presence. The goodbyes were done. Everyone had their own moments with dad and have their own personal stories and memories they will cherish. Everyone was ready.

My brother later recalled the end of the movie “Saving Private Ryan” when an aged Ryan visited the grave of the soldier played by Tom Hanks, who had saved Ryan. Ryan was an average man who worked, raised a family, and lived an everyday life. Ryan knelt at the grave and said to his wife: “Tell me I’m a good man. Tell me I’ve led a good life.” My dad lived a good life and was a good man. And we told him so.

Dad drifted off to a peaceful sleep never to awake again. My sister spent dad’s last night with him and comforted her peaceful father in her arms.

The next morning the hospice nurse said the time was near. Children and grandchildren gathered around dad who was at peace. We spoke to him, wept together, kissed and touched our beloved father and held his hands as he gasped twice and took his last breath.

And then he was gone. His was a good death.

We buried our father's ashes with our mothers two days later. My dad loved sports, especially baseball as it was "a thinking man's game." At the end of the brief interment service, we put on baseball hats, passed out Cracker Jacks, and sang "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." A family member reached over and dropped a baseball into the hole. Dad had hit a home run in the game of life. We dropped our roses into the hole with dad and went home with our memories and the exquisite pain and love of a powerful 11 days together.

Dad's energy now flows free, his consciousness encompasses all, and he is connected to all of life. Our sorrow is joined by gratitude for our time together and pride in dad's leadership.

I feel a deep alchemy taking place in my soul. I feel a churning of many strong emotions as I redefine myself without him here for the first time in my 59 years. My dad's nobility inspires within me greater courage, greater passion, and deeper authenticity. This is the greatest of dad's many gifts to me. I thank him for it. I wish it for everyone.

So long dad.