

‘TILL I BECOME LIGHT

the
Autobiography of a Soul

Robert E. Singleton
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"My life has been the poem I would have written,
but I could not both live and utter it."

H. D. Thoreau

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WHO and WHY

Recently, I was in the process of updating my résumé when it occurred to me that a résumé is as impersonal as the paper it is written on. It is a lot of dates and events. These events, however, are the results of dreams, desires, and passions, which, in reality, is a more accurate portrait of whom this person is. In recent years, the who and why has become far more important than the what.

As we become older and more accepting of our selves on this journey called life the need to prove or validate our existence through other people is no longer consequential. All that matters is the truth of who we are and loving that person along with our fellow human beings unconditionally. I personally feel the single motivation of life centers upon the spirit of the connections we share with our fellow humans.

Because of our own incompleteness, we daily fall short of this aspiration. The unconditional begins with self, by forgiving and accepting your weaknesses, loving your unfinished being. If I cannot accept myself as I am, I cannot emerge to the full potential as a human being. The lack of self-acceptance and forgiving will transpose to lack of forgiveness of others. It is a vicious circle. That which you will not forgive in others, you have not forgiven of yourself. For every judgment of fault, the "wrong" I find in others, there is a direct correlation with my own personal, unresolved self. "Judge not, that you may not be judged."

When we can love our self with no judgments, positively,
only then have we unconditionally accepted all of humankind.

PROLOGUE

Up on that Hill

As we stood before each of the small head stones, I revealed to George my connection with those whose remains had been put to rest on that remote mountain, under a spreading Hickory tree. I was introducing him to living inhabitants of this earthly journey, but all that was before us were cold Granite stones commemorating lives so prematurely lost. He did not say much as we walked from stone to stone. When we approached the place I thought appropriate, I felt a bit awkward, not certain what to say. “How do you feel about this spot? We could put Al’s ashes here with a stone marker, just like all the others.” George put my awkwardness at ease. “This is such a peaceful place. Yes, I want Al here, but will you promise to put me right next to him?” “Of course, anything you want.” “Robert, I know what I want put on each of the stones. Would you see to it that both say, *Together in Spirit . . . We will . . . I know Al and I will be together again.*”

As we started the walk back down the hill, George took hold of my arm and pulled me close. “I have to tell you something.” He pulled on my arm as we slowed down and then stopped. “I’m terrified of dying alone. Al is already gone, now there is no one to be with me . . . when that time comes.” I understood. “I will make a pledge to you, right now. I promise . . . I will be with you, at your side, holding your hand.” We looked at each other and connected with the truth of the inevitability of George’s fate, another battle to be fought, another untimely loss.

Al had died the previous October. His final illness was sudden and short. In only four months he went from being totally healthy to death. George had to care for Al with no help, not even Al’s family or friends. In the months since Al’s passing, George had been totally alone with his anguish. There was no one to share his grief with, no one to talk to. I was outraged. How could this happen, how could this be. To compound this great tragedy, George is now ill.

I vowed to George that this would never happen to him. I told him that I knew enough loving and caring people that he would not be alone anymore. In the weeks that followed, I introduced George to his new surrogate family, Father “Dick” Reece, a retired Episcopal priest, Linda his wife and my closest friend, Annee. Annee is the owner/chef of a remarkable little restaurant called what else but, *Annee’s Cottage*. All in their unique way joined in loving support of George.

On November 11, 1995, this surrogate family gave George, Al’s last wish. Al had requested an Episcopalian funeral service. Fr. Reece officiated, as we, once again, closed the life of a cherished soul, up on the hill. Once again, at the conclusion of the service, George sought from me assurance that when his time came, he would not be alone and would we have the same service for him. So be it.

The evening after the service for Al, Fr. Reece wrote the following letter to the local newspaper, which published it in the next edition.

This afternoon, Veterans' Day 1995, I officiated at a memorial service of a Vietnam veteran. This included the distribution of his ashes over holy ground in the mountains of Baker, West Virginia. There were only seven of us there in the wind and the rain at the beginning of that violent weather front which came through our area this afternoon and evening. There were just two who knew him, yet he is from a large family who have lived in this area for his entire life. My stepdaughter played that haunting melody of "Taps" from another knoll nearby, as the wind flavored that lonesome sound.

After we scattered his ashes and offered our prayers for his soul and our Thanksgiving for his having been amongst us, I looked out over the mountains as the blowing rains and lightening began to pick up. I thought of the irony of this service. Here again, a Vietnam veteran, is laid in his final resting place with just a few present.

When he returned from his service in Vietnam, he received vilification from his fellow citizens for having fought in that war. He was then further rejected by family, church and friends because he was homosexual. He was not killed on the battlefield of Vietnam but died here from AIDS. He was nursed in his final days by his partner. And without the surrounding support of community of family, childhood friends or brothers and sisters of the faith.

I became involved because of his partner, who now also lives alone and who also is a Vietnam veteran [two tours] and now also suffers from AIDS. He too is being rejected by the very people he fought to defend. Yet, because of him we have begun a ministry of support and advocacy for those who must live alone in these rural areas. It is a ministry of Russell House. And today, at this memorial service, on Veterans' Day, at the beginning of a violent storm, this ministry was blessed and launched. It has begun so that in this rural community those who are HIV/AIDS will not have to be alone.

*Father Reece
November 11, 1995*

From that very day, George's health began to plummet at a noticeable and alarming rate. He had been holding on just long enough to take care of his and Al's last wishes.

Excerpts from a Care givers Journal.

December 12, 1995

Memo to the Veterans Administration Hospital
Martinsburg, West Virginia

Re: George D. Clayton

Out of concern for George's continued deterioration I feel the following are in need of being addressed:

1. George is no longer understanding of what medications he is currently taking or the prescribed times.
2. His short term memory is all but gone. The grasp of his daily reality is totally disoriented. He is confused about what day and month it is. He does not remember from minute to minute what he was last doing. His speech has become fragmented. He has difficulty expressing himself or completing a sentence. As such there should be concern for his personal well-being and safety.
3. He is hallucinating. On a number of occasions he claims his sister has been to see him and spent the night. This has not happened. Just today, upon my arrival he asked me if I saw his father outside. He told me his father was supposed to be washing the car. George's father is deceased.
4. I know that he is not eating properly.
5. He is no longer concerned with his personal hygiene.
6. He no longer can maintain his home or handle the responsibilities of his dog and cat.

As a result of the above, I feel George is urgently in need of outside care and support. What options can the VA offer him? Should he be hospitalized?
I personally feel that it is time for Hospice to be called for support.

At George's request, I will be handling his final arrangements. He has requested to be cremated, an Episcopal service and to have his ashes scattered on a hill here at my home.

George has also expressed his fear of dying alone. At his request, he would like for that to happen at his home. I personally pledged to him that I, [we] will be at his side.

Sincerely,

Robert Singleton

December 13, 1995

Yesterday was eventful and emotional for me. In the morning I wrote the aforementioned memo. At noon I picked up George and took him to the attorney's office. This was done in order to have George sign a Medical Power of Attorney. In this document Fr. Reece and I are named as George's representatives.

This was painful to watch, as it became even more evident that George has become seriously ill. He had great difficulty writing and seeing. He was only able to accomplish the signing by means of guiding his hand with mine.

After the business at the lawyers, I took George to the Cottage to see Annee and have lunch. He adored Annee and her food. Annee had personally invited him to the restaurant as her guest, anytime, for whatever he wanted to eat.

He became confused about what or how to order. With my help ordering we both had Annee's Black bean and rice soup, salad and a large order of french fries for George. He had no problem with the salad. However, when the soup was served, he did not know how to eat it. He held his fork in his left hand staring first at the bowl, then at me. He did not know how to eat the soup. I gave him a spoon, he smiled and started to eat, but did not eat much of the soup. Yet, almost like a kid, he ate all of the French Fries with his fingers. When it came time for desert, the waitress described Annee's Magnificent Seven Cake, seven different kinds of chocolate. I suggested he order it. Much to George's delight, he loved it. He said, "If I'd known about this cake I would not have ordered all that cheese cake in the past."

As we finished and the luncheon crowd left the restaurant, Stanley, Annee's husband came out from the kitchen and sat with us. Then came Nancy from the kitchen, she too sat with us. And finally, Annee arrived. George had difficulty speaking, but he absolutely lit up with a big grin when he saw her. She immediately went to him, gave him a big hug and kiss as she sat down in the chair next to him. She was her customary, wonderful, bubbly self as George just beamed at her with delight.

It was heart warming to see George, almost holding court, as all were totally focused on him with affection.

It was getting late in the afternoon, I could tell George was growing tired, it was time to take him home. It had become apparent that George loved Annee's Magnificent Seven Cake, so she boxed up a large piece for him to take home.

At his home, I fed the animals as George started to prepare the cake that Annee gave him. He was wanting to share it with me. I insisted that the cake was just for him. As I started to leave, George asked where I was going. I said, "Home, you know I can't see well after dark." He seemed to be confused, "Am I supposed to go with you." - "No, you just stay here and enjoy the cake." I stood by the front door and looked at George as he sat at the kitchen table and began to eat his cake. He did not seem to be aware that I was about to open the door and leave. I said, "Good night, see ya."

On the drive home, I had many heart pangs. I did not feel comfortable leaving George alone. As I stood at his front door, and looked at him, I saw a lonesome picture, George at the table alone, no one to sit with him, no one in the house. How many months has this man sat at that table alone? How many more? This should not be. Am I being all that I can be for George? I wanted him to trust me in order to better care for him. Now he trusts me. What are you going to do with that trust, Robert?

December 14,1995

Today is the day I take George to the VA Hospital. His appointment was changed to this afternoon because of the weather, ice and freezing rain. I am and have been anxious about today. One, the weather, it is imperative that George is seen by his Doctor today. I am hoping that the weather will not prevent this from happening. Second, I am anxious for George. I feel the outcome of his appointment will determine his immediate future. Will he be hospitalized? This decision will also determine my future, as I have plagued my full support.

11:30 a.m., I arrived at George's, after traversing the ice all the way. The roads were really in bad shape, but I was determined to get George to the VA Hospital.

Poor George, as usual, did not know anything. There he was wondering around in his bath robe, starting to make coffee, cook, and do the laundry. I tried to intervene, telling him that he had to dress so we could leave for the VA Hospital. Finley, after much coaxing, he was dressed and we left.

The drive to the VA was horrific, ice, slush and chemicals, all being splashed at the windshield by cars and trucks, on coming and in front of us. It was slow and messy.

There was not a lot of conversation, I guess both of us had our eyes glued to the road. In any event we arrived, after two hours, safe.

As we parked in front of the VA, I asked George if he knew where he was, he said, "No." I told him where we were. When I started to get out of the car, he said, "Do you won't me to wait here." I answered as tenderly as possible. "No, sweetheart . . . George, this is the VA, this is where you have an appointment." He still did not understand, with more coaxing he got out of the car and we walked into the hospital.

The next few hours were spent finding the White team, verifying George's appointment and the inevitable waiting and waiting.

Finally, George's name was called. He knew what to do, as he followed the doctor, Dr. Tran, to her office, I followed right behind George. In Dr. Tran's office, I introduced myself as George's primary care person, at which point I gave the doctor the memo I had prepared. There was silence as, with great intensity, she read the memo. The silence was broken with, "He must be hospitalized immediately." I looked at George. There was no reaction. He did not understand. The doctor and I began to explain to him that entering the hospital would be the best thing for him. He just seemed to go along with whatever we said. I truly do not believe he knew what was happening, he was just being agreeable.

The doctor began to fill out the admission papers and while discussing what, if any, treatment George should have. It was agreed that there would be none. No invasive testing. His medications would be reduced to a minimum of preventive drugs and pain management, if needed. I stressed to the doctor that the one absolute care that I wanted for George was comfort. Fortunately, George to this point has had no pain or discomfort. This has been a blessing. His diagnosis, AIDS related dementia, comparable to Alzheimers. The AIDS virus had invaded his brain.

As the afternoon progressed, there was more waiting, more forms to be filled out and questions, as the great wheels of the VA went into motion. Throughout all this George was amenable. However, in one of the offices he found a prize. While sitting beside the desk in this office, as the secretary was asking him questions, I said, "Look George, there's a box of chocolates." Without asking he reached for the box, opened it and looked while making contented sounds. He selected a piece and began to eat the candy making more sounds of enjoyment. Later, if I could not find George, I knew where to look. There he would be, in that office eating chocolates.

I must confess that I was impressed with the VA and its personnel. I had heard many stories about getting the runaround, the lack of efficiency and an impersonal attitude. This was never the case.

The ward George was assigned 3C, appeared to be a critical care unit. I spent some time at the nurse's station, discussing with the charge nurse George's inability to understand or speak coherently. I knew that I would soon be leaving him in their care. I wanted assurance that the

nurses truly understood his condition. Perhaps this was for my own peace of mind, as internally I was still battling with the decision to put George in the hospital. Was this decision in his best interest? As a result would he be more confused and frightened being in an unfamiliar environment? -- My heart was aching -- The reality of the inevitability of George's fate.

When I left George, he was sitting on the side of his bed eating his dinner, which pleased him. One blessing, he still enjoys food and most of all chocolate. Once again, I stopped at the door and looked back at him and a lonely scene. Although George was surrounded by hospital staff, he was alone. Not unlike him sitting at his kitchen table, alone. I did not want to leave him.

The drive home was emotionality and physically darning. In my head I reran the events of the day. Asking if the right thing was done. Besides what was going on in my head, it was late and dark when I left the hospital, as a result I could not see well. A heavy and dense fog had set in. I even became lost in Winchester. I could not see the road signs. By the time I reached home it was very late and I was exhausted. One last thought. Who is being inconvenienced, certainly not I, I don't have AIDS? My life is not being cut short. It is George that is being inconvenienced. There is not enough that I would do for him. I just want to know if I am doing the right thing.

December 18, 1995

5:30 a.m. 29°, Calm, freezing rain and sleet

Again the weather is interfering with my plans to see George. According to this mornings report, there will be a mixed bag, freezing rain, sleet and snow predicted for today, tonight and tomorrow.

My sense of responsibility to George is being foiled by elements beyond my control. This is very frustrating. I feel as if I have just dropped George off at the VA and he is no longer my concern. I know this is not the case. However, not being able to get to him, to assure him, to know, first hand, that he is not in need, all of this is very disconcerting.

7:00 a.m., 30°, There is now a significant amount of ice and sleet outside.

I just spoke to the VA. The nurse said George is not complaining, his confusion continues. She said they had to close all the doors on the ward because George was wandering the halls and going into patients' rooms. She also added that they caught George smoking four times.

I'm sorry George, if you were at home you could smoke to your hearts content.

February 4, 1996

This morning there was a message on the answering machine. It was the VA calling to let me know there had been a change in George's condition. They wanted me to return the call ASAP. I waited until 6:00 a.m. and called Dick and gave him the news. He called the VA and called me back. George had been running a temperature, which spiked at 103°. This morning they will run some blood work to see if it's pneumonia [PCP]. One of the other reasons for the call was to confirm the notice in George's *file*. *There would be no treatment*. This was George's wish. I feel so absolutely frustrated not being able to get off this mountain. Under the current circumstances, I just want to be with George right now!

About noon George's doctor called with the result of the blood test. He has an upper respiratory infection, not PCP. The doctor wanted to know if George should be treated with antibiotics. The following is odd, not the way we have been taught to think about life and death. I asked the doctor if the infection was life threatening, she said, "No." My answer was, "Yes, you should treat him if it will help him to be comfortable, that is our primary concern." I then made this peculiar statement. "You do understand, if it were PCP, there would be no treatment." In other words, if George develops a life threatening illness, there will be no treatment. If George develops a non-life threatening illness, there will be treatment. To put it succinctly, treatment for comfort, no treatment for death.

February 8, 1996

I had a dream about George last night. This occurred after being awakened at midnight by a phone call from a nurse at the VA. The nurse was concerned, George's temperature was up to 104°, she thought his eyes were set. She felt George might not make it through the night. I thanked her for calling and asked her to call me at six in the morning, if there were no changes. I

then called Dick and Linda to give them the news. I ask that their thoughts and prayers be with George.

I agonized over not having been able to see George in the last week.
I had pledged to be with him when this time came.
I had failed him with his last wish.
I promised I would be with him.

I prayed for him.
“Thy Will be done.”

Then I asked Al and the others on the hill to surround George with LOVE.

Some time in the wee hours of the night I feel back asleep. The dream was, as usual, bazaar. I was some how able to make it to the VA hospital and went immediately to George’s room.

There he was . . . standing next to his bed, fully dressed. Magically transformed, not the frail, mute person I had grown accustomed to seeing over the last months. His blond hair was radiant. He was full of strength. On seeing me, he spoke to me with such joy. “I’m no longer sick!”

Our rolls had reversed, I was the confused one, not George. He was so happy he wanted to dance, a dance of Joy. He grabbed me and with such ecstasy on his face, he spun me around and around the room. He was talking the entire time. He had made many plans, “I’ve found a job.” He went on and on telling me about his future life.

As all of this was happening, spinning around the room with George, I glanced at the door of his room. There stood Dick and Linda. They to had come to be with George at the time of his passing.

I said to them, “Look, Look at George . . . it’s a miracle . . . he’s well . . . he’s not sick.” The expression on their faces was that of total amazement and disbelief.

I asked them to join the celebration. All four of us took hands and we danced, the dance of Joy!

As dreams go, the beginning was clear and wonderful. However, a dream cannot pass without some strange and indecipherable event, causing one to ponder its significance.

As we were happily celebrating with our dance, I noticed that there was a very young male child, in the room with us. This child was happily watching the adults be children. I wanted to include this child in the dance. I broke the circle of joined hands to reach down and pick up the child. As I pick him up, and holding him directly between George and me. . . . In an instant George was gone. His face was replaced by that of the child. As I held the child, at arms length, it struck me that the child was weightless, as if holding an apparition.

6:00 a.m. - The nurse from the VA just called. George’s temperature is down to 101°. She said, “Oh he’s better, he was just fighting with me, he did not want to take the Motrin for his fever control.” I was greatly relieved that dear George made it through the night. In the a.m. I went to the VA to be with George. After the events of the night before, I was determined to get off this hill and be at George’s bed side.

When I walked into his room, there was no miracle, George was not standing or dancing a dance. Instead, his skeletal body was lying on its side, in a fetal position, motionless. As I walked closer, I could see he was breathing . . . a sign of life, but not life. There was no joy on his gaunt face, just drool sliding from the corner of his open mouth. The television in the room was blaring, “The desires of beautiful people wanting to date other beautiful people,” the subject of some inane talk show. How ironic, what I was seeing and what I was hearing were separate realities.

I pulled a chair close to the bed, never taking my eyes off George’s face. I sat and leaned in close to him, reaching out and gently laying my hand on his bony shoulder. “George, it’s Robert.” There was no response.

I looked into his face and began to smile.

Here was a beautiful soul, sleeping like an innocent child.

I saw beyond the superficial.

February 10, 1996

4:00 a.m., A nurse from the VA called to give me an up date on George. His temperature is 104°, his breathing shallow. Again the nurse was not certain how long George might last. I asked if someone would call again this morning, when the day shift comes on duty. She said that would be around 7:30 a.m. So I'm sitting here thinking about George . . . and waiting.

7:45 a.m. The nurse from the VA called. Status, there was no change in George's condition. I told her I was on my way out the door, and I should be there in about an hour and a half. I asked her, if George should pass away in the mean time, would they please keep him in his room until I arrived. She kindly answered, "We always do that."

6:00 p.m., I have been at George's bedside since nine this morning. It is indeed his time, but George is a fighter. He will not or is not ready to let go.

Immediately after my arrival this morning, I called his sister, Doris, to let her know that George might not make it through the day. I even put the phone to his ear in order for Doris to say she loved him. Doris wanted assurance that George was not suffering. I assured her that he was not.

I then lit the votive candle I brought with me and placed it next to George on the bedside table. With great reverence, I removed the silver cross from around my neck and gently lifted George's head and placed the chain and cross on him. For the last nineteen years, this silver cross has never been taken off, except under the same circumstances for Steven, Butch and Jack. All my dearest friends. All were wearing this cross when they passed away . . . and now George.

The nurses have been very kind. They are all so efficient in their work, doing what they have been so well trained to do . . .

But, what makes them exemplary, they are feeling and compassionate . . . stopping their work, to give a kind word, "Is there anything I can do for you. Would you like a cup of coffee or something to eat . . . if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask." They gave me hugs and talked to George and me as humans in a life, death crises. Yet, their focus, their work, was to keep George as comfortable as possible.

Just now they brought me a large comfortable chair. We placed it close to George's bedside. This chair is of great comfort for me, as I begin the vigil.

I found myself closing my eyes and listing to George.

The rhythm of life-giving breath . . . in . . . out . . . constant . . . almost mechanical, but life is passion, not a machine.

I focused with my hearing, on the rhythm . . . of life,

it was hypnotic,

causing me to slip into a light sleep,

but not losing the sound of George's struggle.

I thought of him, as an infant, when he was first born,

that first breath, he struggled to gain it.

Once he caught it, his breath became instinctive, purring with life.

Now he was fighting to keep it.

As the day passed, there were subtle changes to the sound.

By early evening, I began to hear "the rattle". . .

the machine was beginning to fail.

I laid my hand on his chest.

I could feel a frantic heart, disparately fighting for life-giving oxygen.

At times pounding so hard,

George's head and torso slightly jarred to the rhythm of a deprived heart.

His temperature has been consistently 104° all day with a great deal of perspiration.

I have been keeping cold compresses on his forehead and toweling his face.
7:30 p.m., George's labored breathing is letting up.
He is starting to cool, hands and feet.
There is modeling in the legs.

I listen to the sound.
In . . . a quick shallow gasps.
Out . . . Slow . . .
The sound of life slipping away,
Soon . . . it will stop . . .

8:08 p.m., Alone with George, he drew his last breath.
God keep his soul safe.

I sat quietly with George, listing to the silence.
I gently lifted his head, removing
the cross and chain.
"George, this was just between you and me."
The sweat of George's labor was on it.
I thought . . . It should be washed . . . NO . . .
I replaced it around my neck.

I left George and found Tula the head nurse. I touched her on the shoulder, "He's gone." I then hugged her. Tula and two other nurses went straight to George's room. He was examined. Tula said, "I have to call the doctor."

I asked the nurses if I could use the telephone in order to call George's sister. I also wanted to call Dick and Linda and the Funeral Home. I was given a place to sit and showed how to call out long distance. I called Doris first and gave her the sad news of her brothers passing. I described it to her as quiet and peaceful, she said she was glad that George was not suffering any more. I repeated to her that all the arrangements had been taken care of and that she did not have to be concerned. She thanked me for all that had been done for George. I told her that I would call her in a few days, after we all had time to cope with George's passing.

After calling Dick and Linda, I called Pete Hornbeck, the funeral director, and as prearranged, I told him he could pick up the body at his convenience. He said he needed to speak to a nurse for more information. I gave the phone to the nurse, she gave Mr. Hornbeck the information he wanted and hung up the phone. The nurse then explained to me that normally the office of AOD handles all the phone calls to the family and the funeral home. However, she understood me wanting to do it. I personally felt I should be the one to call Doris, not a stranger. As for the funeral home, as I said, this had been prearranged. All of the nurses agreed.

I went back to George's room, feeling a little lost, to see if there was any thing more I could do. About this time Tula and a Doctor arrived to examine George to legally declare him dead. The doctor with a stethoscope listened to George's heart, there was no life. George's life was officially over.

I went to the closet in the room and began to pack the cloths that George wore, weeks before, the day I brought him to the hospital. There were his shoes that I recognized, his favorite jacket, that I help him put on so often. The impact of the last hour was beginning to come to the surface. I was beginning to tear. Tula was in the room. I asked what I should do with George's cloths? "I'll be happy to take them back to his home," Tula said that AOD would normally handle that. However, as George's primary care person, she felt I could take them after checking with AOD.

I asked if I might participate in the preparation of the body for removal. I explained that in the past I had done this and there would be no surprises for me, I knew what had to be done.

Again her response to me was caring and understanding, "Of course you can, if it will help you with closure."

I did participate and commented to the others that I only wanted the utmost dignity for George in death. They understood, allowing me to help wrap George in the body shroud and place him on the Gurney to be taken to the morgue. They even asked if I would like to accompany the body to the morgue. I thanked them, but said no.

I stood in the hall outside George's room, as he was wheeled away. I thought, Well, my dear friend I have tried to give you all the quality and dignity you deserve. Now, for you, they're no more indignities. This foul virus and the prejudice that comes with it, is no longer consuming you.

I felt that my mission was complete, fulfilled all the promises I had made, particularly to George.

I gathered up all my things, including George's cloths and stopped at the nurses station on my way out. I asked Tula if there was anything else I could do. She said not to forget to stop by AOD, they needed to see me. I was given directions on how to find the office.

I carried with me the bag of George's cloths and my file with all the documents pertaining to my participation in his care.

When I found the office of AOD, there was a glass service window on the hall. As I stood at this window, I could see a woman sitting at a desk typing. I made no sound, I figured she will get to me when she can, at which point she glanced at me. OK, she knows I'm here. She continued to type, pulled out a manual, put the manual away, and proceeded to tidy her desk, etc. The time, I was waiting, became awkward. I still said nothing, but not certain if I was being ignored.

Finally this woman came to the window, "May I help you." "I'm here about Mr. Clayton." She responded, "I thought so." At that she opened the door to the office and I followed to her desk. I said, "I'm not exactly certain why I'm here, I was told by the nurse on the ward that I should come here." - "If you don't know why you're here, then why don't you leave and we will be that much ahead." I said, "I don't understand, they said I needed to see you, I do have Mr. Clayton's cloths with me, maybe that's what I needed to see you about." She said, "Let me have them." I gave her the bag, at which point she took the bag to the rear of the office. I said, out of concern, "What's going to happen to them." "I don't know, but it's none of your concern. You can leave."

At this point my memory becomes a little blurred. I know this woman was upsetting me internally. What I do remember are certain things that were said.

I told this woman that I had with me documents to show that I was Mr. Clayton Medical Power of Attorney and that, "his sister trusted me to handle all of the arrangements for the funeral, which I have done." She said, "No you haven't, you may have had authority be for he died, he's dead now, you have no authority." I said, "I have his sisters phone number, why don't you call her to verify what I'm telling you." She said, "I don't need yours, I have it my self." My response, "Then I want you to call her right now, with me sitting here." She did, telling George's sister that there was some confusion about who had the authority to make the funeral arrangements. I can only surmise the other side of the conversation. Miss Clayton, must have told this woman that I was to handle the arrangements, because there followed detailed instructions from this person to Miss. Clayton.

She began by telling Miss. Clayton that she needed to send a telegram to the VA. She then began to give the account number for the VA, laboriously reciting the number repeatedly, saying, "Read it back to me, no that's not right."

Once Miss Clayton had the number right, this woman preceded to dictate the contents of the telegram. "I Doris Clayton, sister of George Clayton, does here by give to Robert Singleton, authority to handle the arrangements for Mr. Clayton's funeral."

While all of this was going on, I had, in my mind, a picture of this poor elderly woman, who, just forty-five minuets earlier, had been told that her brother had died, trying to write long numbers and talking dictation. I felt very sorry for Doris. For me, it was awkward even to listen to.

Then came something I am not accustomed to. This woman made eye contact with me, and with the most contemptuous expression on her face, as she spoke to Miss. Clayton. "On behalf of the VA, I would like to offer my condolences in the death of your brother." I know exactly what was meant by this expression. From my very arrival, at this office, this woman was trying, with arrogance and rudeness, to exclude me.

When the conversation with Miss Clayton was over, this woman said to me, "I'm finished with you." I was being dismissed like some child.

I said one more time, "All of the arrangements have been taken care of."

Response, "No they haven't, a funeral home will have to come here, pick up the body and take it back to the funeral home."

Robert, No, that's not right. Mr. Clayton will be cremated, the funeral director will come here, pick up the body and take it directly to the crematorium.

Response, "You don't know what you are talking about, they have to take it to the funeral home, you obviously don't know anything."

Until this point, I had been patient and courteous. Enough is enough, I stood up and said, "Do you have any idea how rude you have been to me. I am the one that has been with Mr. Clayton for the last nine hours, holding his hand when he died. Other wise he would have been alone. There has been no one from his family here to see to his needs."

Response, "What do you mean rude." My response, "I want you to think, just think about the way you have treated me. I'm no dummy; I want you to think about what you've said to me."

I admit at this point I was ready to leave. I was angry.

In no way do I question the legality of the questions raised here. I have no problem with the legal issues. However, this entire event did not have to happen the way it did, if this woman was more professional and possessed compassion.

As I walked the long halls back to the ward, I was trembling from the confutation. I felt this woman rudely stole the dignity of George's death, robbed my dignity, by lowering this human tragedy to a petty, self serving, power issue. I thought of George's Passing. I hurt. I had not the time to begin to grieve. Now, this unfortunate woman broke my focused caring by lowering it to her homophobia.

By the time I returned to the ward to pick up my things, Doris, George's sister had called and was talking to one of the nurses. The nurse handed me the phone. Doris was very upset. She thought all the arrangements had been taken care of. Why was the hospital calling her? She could not find a Western Union and thought there was "an emergency." As I was trying to console her, explaining that there was no emergency, I saw Tula and another nurse. I called to then saying, "I needed a witness." I explained to the nurses and Doris at the same time. I wanted Doris to tell the nurses, with one on an extension, that she gave, gives me authority to handle all of George's arrangements. This was done. Tula then called AOD and explained what had just happened. No, that was not good enough. AOD then told Tula that [she AOD] would call Doris back and get the consent on a tape recording. [Why Was Not this Done at the Beginning of this Night Mare?]

I was then told that while I was on my way back to the ward, AOD called and wanted to know if I was George Clayton's lover. The nurse told AOD that it was none of their business.

Again, I gathered up my things and thanked the nurses for their support. I departed the hospital for the last time and made the two-hour trip home.

Once home, there were two messages on the answering machine from Loy Funeral Home wanting me to return the call as soon as possible. I returned the call and found out that Mr. Hornbeck had encountered AOD. I was told that this woman at the VA was being rude and would not release the body to Mr. Hornbeck. I ask that Mr. Hornbeck call me in the morning.

There was another message. My Steven's sister Peggy, had died last night. His family had been trying to reach me all day.

Midnight, Good night sweet George, till we meet again.

February 11, 1996

Pete Hornbeck just called. He wanted to know what in the world happened last night. He explained that when he arrived at the VA and went to the office of AOD. This woman was very rude to him. He said that she told him, "Mr. Singleton was rude and obnoxious, he just got up and walked out, he did not sign the papers." Pete said that at the time, when he heard this, he thought, "that's not right."

It would seem that this woman is now covering her butt and making me the scapegoat.

February 12, 1996

Valery Clark from the VA called. She explained to me that "the papers" needed to be signed by me in order for the hospital to release George's body. She was very kind and said that I did not have to come to the hospital, I could give permission via the phone and a tape recorder. Just that simple.

I explained to her the events of the night that George passed away. She was outraged at the way I had been treated and offered an apology.

And so my dear George, I hope you suffer no more indignities. That we can give you your final wish. To put you to rest, on that hill, next to your beloved Al.

February 15, 1996

I went to George's house to check on it and to clean out the refrigerator. I also called Doris, to bring her up to date on everything.

At the close of the conversation, in order to offer sympathy, I said the following. "I just want you to know, that the last nine hours of dear, sweet George's life, he was not suffering." Doris said, "Don't refer to George as dear or sweet, he was neither."

How very, very sad dear George, not even now does your sister have compassion. I now know, more than in the past, why you were alone. I asked Doris if there was anything in particular that she wanted from the house. "O I was talking to his sister the other day about that, she believes that if you breathe the same air as someone with AIDS, you will catch it. She doesn't want anything. I know he had two animal prints hanging on the wall that I would like to have."

February 16, 1996

I had a restless night, waking a number of times. The impact of the last week has brought me down . . . to a humbled state. Feeling insecure, not at all sure of myself, transient, not feeling at home in this mortal life. My mind cannot comprehend the eternal, as I have witnessed death so many times. I feel as if I truly know nothing. My own arrogance, saying to the dying, "It's all right, you can go. Don't suffer anymore, let go. It's all right, don't be frightened, you will do just fine, you're safe."

I had abandon, for them, hope of this life, for the next. "You can go."

My mortal being knows nothing.

Who am I, to give permission to die?

It was their life, their death.

Between them and their maker.

Who am I to intercede in the irreversible?

The other part of George's death.

Up until now, I have been reluctant to write about what really happened those last few moments of George's life. "How much can one moment hold?"

All day I had been praying for George, in deep contemplation of his life and the death struggle that was before me. I stayed very close to him both physically and spiritually. Constantly reassuring him that he was not alone and . . . "Don't suffer any more, George, it's all right, you can go." I said this to him verbally and in thought many times.

All day there had been no change in his breathing rhythm. However, at the tenth hour of his struggle, I began to hear the rattle and the rhythm was lighter. I had also noticed he was cooling. All signs of emanate death. My prayers and thoughts became more and more focused. I even moved physically closer to him, laying my hand on his. I listened, felt and watched, patiently and quietly. My being knew that the time was near.

Then, the beginning of that immeasurable moment in time. At first, I felt a little restless. I was being, ever so subtly, pulled away from him. I thought, I want a cigarette, no, I shouldn't leave his side. I rolled this back and fourth in my musing. "I could just go in the lavatory and sneak a cigarette, I would still be able to hear him." OK, I got up and went into the lavatory and closed the door, and listened intently. I could not hear George's breathing. I opened the door, looked and listened. Everything was the same, less than thirty seconds had past. I took my eyes off of George just long enough to start to light the cigarette. The silence was shattered, a yell, almost a scream came from George. I quickly looked up in the direction George's bed. His arms were straight up in the air, his hands making a fist, he was crying out. In an instant, I was at his side. He was thrashing, as if fighting, his eyes were wide open. There is no other way to express the look on his face. It was total fear. I felt his fear and stepped back from the bed. I feared for myself. There was a dark presence around him. He was literally speaking with low guttural sounds. They were sounds of anger, in fact cursing aloud, as if in a fierce battle. I became genuinely fearful for George. I stepped back to the side of the bed, very close, grabbed his grappling hands tightly, holding them to his chest. I then leaned over him very closely, to where our eyes met. My eyes have never encountered such fright, an expression of total terror. I felt it, not for myself but his. I cried out, without thinking. "Dear God, save his soul, Blessed Jesus, hold him, hold him close. Dear God save him. George! George! It's Robert, I'm here, I'm here with you. Don't be afraid. Do you see the light, it's Jesus, go to him? GO TO HIM! GO TO THE LIGHT GEORGE, IT'S JESUS, GO TO HIM!"

I felt the tension in his hands immediately ease. His eyes that were so full of fear slowly closed to half way. I clutched his hands firmly in mine and held my breath as he began to breathe with ease . . . then irregularly . . . then stopped . . . I laid my hand over his heart. There was movement . . . then faintly . . . then nothing. All was quiet and still. I continued to hold his hands firmly in mine. Almost as if waiting for assurance that George had safely passed on into the Light.

I finally let go, sat in the chair next to him and listened . . . to the silence.
I wrote in my Journal.

*8:08 p.m. Alone with George, he drew his last breath.
God, keep his soul safe.*

June 2, 1996, George's surrogate family gave him his wish. There was an Episcopalian service officiated by Fr. Reece. His ashes were put next Al's. The head stones side by side with the inscription, "*Together in Sprit.*" He had one other wish. He requested a song by Vince Gill to be played as part of the service.

"Go Rest High in That Mountain"

I know your life on earth was troubled and only you could know the pain. You weren't afraid to face the devil, you were no stranger to the pain.

Chorus: Go rest on that mountain son, your work on earth is done, go to heaven a shoutin', love for the Father and Son.

Oh, how we cried the day you left us. We gathered round your grave to grieve. I wish I could see the angles faces when they hear your sweet voice sing.

GEORGE D. CLAYTON

Together in sprit

Nov. 26, 1944 - Feb. 10, 1996

ALFRED L. SMITH

Together in sprit

Jan. 27, 1940 - Oct. 8, 1994