Sometimes tears play a part in holding ‘it’ together

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Published Feb. 17, 2008

*The (Tacoma) News Tribune*

Chilly, I sat rigid in the dark blue SUV, looking out the window. Next to me sat my father. He was steady, unmoving; his full attention directed toward the road ahead of us.

For the entire 45 minute drive, no music played. It was silent, almost as if nothing else in the world was happening.

For three weeks, my grandfather had been suffering from the effects of a hemorrhagic stroke. The blood once encased by veins was now trickling into the pockets between his brain and his skull. The doctors could do nothing more than drain the blood into a clear-plastic container. And surgery, bearable in a younger, healthier person, would be too much for him.

He could no longer breathe on his own. A respirator forced the tissue in his lungs to expand then to contract. I took my first step into his semiprivate room, a soft “whoosh” took hold of me, dominating the room. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

Behind each scrub-green curtain, lay another victim of a life-threatening disease. It was in that moment, that fragment, in time that I realized the gravity of the situation.

The whoosh continued as a reminder only of the fact that he was no longer capable of forcing himself to breathe. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

Until then, my mother refused to take me to visit him. It would have been too much, she said.

“Believe me, it’s not something you would ever want to see. I don’t want you to see him like that if there’s a chance of him recovering.”

There was no chance.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. The respirator continued to keep him alive. It was the only constant in the room.

Two weeks later, my grandfather stopped breathing for the second time. Where there was hope before, all was lost now.

The next day, my mother, two aunts and grandmother, his wife for the past 47 years, met with the doctors. They were told that unassisted, my grandfather would not be able sustain his own life. They were given two choices: Attempt the surgery, though his chances of survival were less than one in 1,000, or give him a large dose of morphine and pull the respirator from his lungs.


On the drive to the hospital, I vowed to myself that I would hold “it” together. I needed to remain solid for my mother, aunts and grandmother.
If they could hold it together for three weeks, surely I would be able to hold it together for one hour.

As I entered the room, and was able to see more and more of the myriad tubes protruding from my grandpa’s head, the tears I vowed not to let fall began to sting my eyes. One fell. After that, I could no longer hold back. More and more tears fell, each hitting the ground—audibly pattering on the tile floor below.

The whoosh, whoosh, whooshing of his respirator continued almost like an hour glass timer, each whoosh another grain of sand falling before his, now inevitable death.

After a few minutes in the room, I asked if I could have a moment alone with him. Everyone left except for my grandmother, who stayed with me holding my hand and her husband simultaneously. She never left his side, that day.

I reached down and gently lifted his hand. The only sign of life was the warmth that it held. Then I leaned to his ear and asked him not leave, to show me a sign that there was still hope, something to show he was still listening, was still there. No such indication came.


After five or so minutes I leaned down kissed him on his forehead, ran my fingers over his newly-shaven head and said goodbye to my papa for the final time. Thirty minutes later, he was gone.

The whooshing stopped.

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