

PRECIOUS TIME

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[Assignment: Henry Adams, in his autobiography, claims that the most important things he learned in life he learned accidentally. Write a list for yourself of all the things you remember learning accidentally. Choose one interesting and important item from your list; make another list of all the details that flood into your mind as you recount that learning process. Then write a narrative essay about what happened. Your purpose is twofold: to relate that story to your reader as completely as you can, and to comment on what the process meant to you.]

One cold day in January of 1990 I was at my sister's townhouse when the phone rang. I quickly figured out from the one-sided conversation that it was my mother on the other end of the phone line. She was at the hospital with my father. He had been sick for a couple months with pain in his side. He had had an ulcer for quite a long time, but this was something more. His stomach swelled up almost as if he were pregnant. He went to the hospital the day after Christmas. They ran so many tests and the doctors still did not know what was wrong with him. They drained a considerable amount of fluid from his stomach. I had not been to the hospital because I could not bear to see him that way. Now my mother was calling with more test results. I was trying to imagine what my mother might be saying from my sister's words. Unexpectedly, she raised her tone of voice in protest saying "No!" Her husband Joe tried to shush her, I think for my sake. She hung up the phone and ran upstairs; I could hear her bawling. I knew then what my father's fate was to be.

My father came home a few days later, about mid-January. Everyone kept pretty quiet about things. I was still not supposed to know. No one knew that I was aware of what was going on. I guess that is probably because I did not show it. Maybe since no one had actually said it, I did not really have to accept it or believe it.

One night, about a week later, I was in my room and I heard my mother and father whispering. My mother came down the hall and said Daddy wanted to talk to me. I knew why. I tried to get out of it. I told her that I had a lot of homework to do. I did not want to hear what he had to say. If I did not hear it from him, maybe it would not be so. Mom told me it would only take a few minutes, so I had no choice.

I sat down on the couch next to Daddy and tried to smile like I did not know what he was about to say. Daddy said that the doctors found out that he had hepatitis, a kind of cancer of the liver. The doctors said there was nothing they could do for Daddy. He would have to go to the hospital and get the liquid drained every six months. The whole time I had tears welling up in my eyes. It was when Daddy told me the doctors gave him six months to a year that the tears came streaming down my face like a flood. I never cried so hard in all my life. I put my arms around him and held on, burying my face in his chest. I could not let go. At one point, I looked up and saw that I had soaked his flannel shirt with my tears. He just smiled and said, "That's okay." I sat there like that crying into Daddy's chest and with him comforting me for what seemed like hours. Mom came along and tried to get me to put my pajamas on to get ready to go to

bed. She finally had to pull me off my father, take me to my room, and dress me. I think I was in shock. All I could do was cry. I had known before that night that he was dying. I knew that eventually he was going to tell me. I knew when I sat down what he would say. Still, that did not prepare me for the words that came from my father's mouth. I cried myself to sleep that night, and sometimes, I still do.

When I went to school on Monday, I was in a daze. My classmates and I were standing outside of the classroom waiting for our teacher to come and unlock the door. I was not very aware of what I was doing or the people around me. My friend Kim was asking me what was wrong. My eyes were red, my eyelids were swollen, and my face was pale. She took me into the ladies restroom and I told her everything. She was the only person I told then. I could not even bear to tell my best friend. I cried on her shoulder and she gave me toilet paper from one of the stalls to wipe my tears. We went back outside and waited for the teacher. A guy named Dave looked at us and said, "What's with the sad faces? Did somebody die or something?" I started crying again. Kim yelled at him for being insensitive, but he did not know any better.

Over the next two months different family members travelled from Illinois and Kentucky to visit Daddy. My Aunt Aileen, Daddy's sister, would come from Elk Grove Village and stay the night every chance she got. Grandma was usually here too. I made jello for Daddy all the time. He told me once that he liked my jello and not to let Grandma make it because she did not make it right. She only put hot water in it and not cold water also. Aunt Aileen told me that during the week while Daddy watched T.V., he got excited when Jeopardy came on because he knew that meant I would be home from school any minute. That meant a lot to me.

I spent the next two months caring for Daddy. I cooked some for him, I talked with him, I helped him eat. I did my homework on the table in the living room while Daddy lay in his hospital bed and watched T.V. I spent a lot of time with him, but it still seems like it was not enough. I spent so much time in the house that I almost started losing friends. The only thing the neighbors knew was that Daddy was sick. Every time my best friend would call me and ask me to go outside, I would say, "No, not today."

On March 11th, my best friend and a neighbor Jaimmie came over and asked me to come outside. I felt like I was neglecting my friends, so I reluctantly said yes. Not long after that, we were standing across the street from my house and I noticed that the curtains were closed. I thought that was odd because it was in the afternoon and they had not been closed before. Then I saw my sister's best friend come outside with my five month old nephew Aaron and give him to her father who came out of their house next door to Nikki's. I told Nikki that I would be back and I started to walk across the street toward my house. The closer I got to my house the faster I walked until I was running. As soon as I walked in the door, I knew what had happened. I was devastated. I felt like someone had ripped a piece of my heart out.

The most precious gift in the world is time. I know that now. I still wonder if I told Daddy "I love you" often enough. I question if I gave him enough hugs or if I spent enough time with him. I wonder whether he hears me when I talk to him and if he watches me. I think the saying is true that says you do not know what you have until it is gone. I lost my father, my best friend, and my hero. I have an empty space in my heart that I think will always be there. But I go on, with my memories, and know that somewhere Daddy is thinking of me, as I am of him.