

November 25, 2009



Saoirse McClory's father, Kevin, shown here with granddaughter Tara in 1998, died in 2006 after a massive stroke. His health proxy allowed him to pass away according to his wishes. (Provided photo by Siobhan McClory)

A sad but peaceful farewell

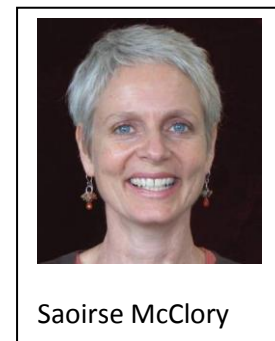
Seeing Dad die as he wished, surrounded by loved ones lessened pain

My father died two days before Thanksgiving three years ago after a massive stroke. Dad - Kevin to his friends - was 82.

He lived for four days after the stroke, and those four days turned out to be a very tender and healing time. My father had been very clear about his wishes in the event that he could not speak for himself. On the living will he had filled out, his distinctive handwriting read: "If I have a stroke - DO NOTHING!"

His brother had died a few years before, also after a stroke. Dad's brother's death was agonizing. He kept pulling out the tubes that breathed for him, so his arms had to be secured to the bed rails. My cousin found it so painful to see her father in such a state that she stopped visiting. My uncle lived for several weeks and eventually died alone.

My father was so deeply upset at the way his only brother's life ended that he immediately filled out forms stating his wishes and selecting a health care proxy to ensure his wishes were carried out.



Saoirse McClory

When he had a stroke, his living will accompanied him to the hospital and I, as his health care proxy, received a call from the physician. Clearly the news was painful to me, but it was incredibly helpful to know what my father wanted.

Having established there was little chance of recovery, we asked that he be kept comfortable. I flew to Ireland, where Dad lived in Killiney just south of Dublin. Family members and friends gathered by my father's bedside. We told him we loved him, stroked his head, told stories and laughed and cried together.

The palliative care provided at the hospital was wonderful, staff worked to ease symptoms, answer our questions and comfort us. They delivered endless tea trays - this was Ireland after all - and on the last day encouraged us to stay near him. He died surrounded by people who cared about him, holding his hands, touching his face and "loving him up."

My father's life had not been an easy one. He had survived being torpedoed during World War II and 14 days on a lifeboat in the North Sea when many of his shipmates didn't make it. His life had been rich and full with its fair share of dark days. As he approached the last years of his life, his wish was simply to die gently and painlessly. And I am so grateful that he got his wish.

During this season of Thanksgiving that marks the anniversary of my father's death, I am deeply grateful that his dying was as he wished. I am also thankful that our memories of his dying are healing ones.

There is a stark contrast in the way the two brothers reached the end of their lives. I think the way my uncle died has had a lasting painful effect on my cousin. It seems that her experience of his suffering has eclipsed so much that may have been happier in their lives. I, on the other hand, having had a fairly tumultuous relationship with my father, experienced a deep healing in the last few years of his life and especially during the period around his death.

As families gather this holiday season, I encourage you to start conversations about what you would like to have happen in the event that you are unable to speak for yourself.

Perhaps it seems like an odd and uneasy thing to do during the holidays, but these conversations - and completing of the appropriate documents - have the potential to have a huge impact on the lives and future of you and your family. Some people start these conversations by remembering people who have died or mentioning a newspaper article they've read.

Sharing your wishes is a precious gift to those who love you.

Saoirse McClory is the director of Community Support at Hospicare and Palliative Care Services of Tompkins County.

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