

Passing On

Kip's struggles and triumphs in his last year of life, an account by his son, Brent

Several years before his death, my father attended a party with his former fellow employees where he suffered a minor fall at a restaurant, taking most of the impact on his right elbow. Careful treatment seemed to help with the recovery but not completely. He was left with a persistent pseudomonas infection that resisted all of the then available antibiotics, hot/cold pack treatments and repeated cleaning. At first a minor nuisance, then a serious inconvenience, then it became a major health problem seemingly without a remedy.

Meanwhile, he noticed some chest pains that prompted a visit to his cardiologist. The diagnosis was coronary artery disease advanced to the point that it required arterial bypass surgery. There was some concern about undertaking such an invasive procedure at dad's age. At a family consultation before hand, the surgeon told him and us there were significant risks with the anticipated procedure but that his prospects were reasonably favorable despite being eighty five years of age owing to his good health. He said "If we go forward with the surgery we will all go over the cliff on this together"

The bypass surgery itself was successful and the surgical incisions healed quickly. Complications came in the form of a stroke caused by some debris finding its way to a constricted part of his brain where it blocked circulation to those parts responsible for speech, and muscular coordination on one side of his body. His recovery from the surgery was rapid but the stroke damage required vigorous physical and occupational therapy in the hospital for several months.

Each day his faithful wife, Pat, drove from their home on the west side of Salt Lake City to the hospital to help with his care. She brushed his hair, brought his freshly laundered clothes, helped him change into them, visited with friends who came to call and satisfied herself the professionals were apprised of his condition and helped them see to his continued care. She pushed his wheelchair to the therapy room each afternoon and took him back afterward, both of them being exhausted.

On the way home from the hospital one afternoon in the parking lot she asked a passerby to help her get the car started. Accordingly, he slid behind the steering wheel and started the engine without difficulty. Trying it herself she found the problem was caused by the seat being slid all the way back so her feet could not reach the pedals. Moving the seat back to its usual position fixed the problem.

On Kip's nightstand he had a small wooden M&M dispenser constructed with a sliding bar he pushed to one side exposing one of the popular candies whenever a visitor arrived or when one of the medical staff came to help. The small gesture of thanks usually evoked a warm smile from both the recipient and from the giver.

Midway through this adventure his infected arm became worse and needed to be removed to eliminate this challenge to his limited physical resources. The amputation proceeded normally and the stump healed quickly. Afterward he referred to it simply as "shorty". The absence of his forearm had little effect on his physical therapy which continued forward with good progress.

July 24, 1997 dawned with a pioneer handcart re-enactment party making their way down Emigration Canyon just in time for the traditional downtown parade. Karen and I crossed paths with the first of the young handcart pioneers on our way to the hospital to visit dad. They were mostly young men and women, sun tanned and in vigorous health from their thousand mile trek. One mother made the entire

trip so her two children could have a better understanding of their pioneer heritage. After our hospital visit Karen and I watched the final part of the parade where the handcart pioneers made their way south down Main Street to the cheers of bystanders. Many of the bystanders were descendants of the original pioneers. At Liberty Park I spoke with a young lady named Lisa Holbrook who had received her LDS mission call while she was helping push her cart across the great plains. Her strong handsome brother looked at their handcart and with a mischievous look said he had a mind to touch a match to it.

After six months at the University Medical Center Rehabilitation unit dad went to the St. Joseph Villa skilled nursing facility where his physical therapy continued in a more intimate setting. Pat continued her daily visits as before. Others of our family made frequent visits, some of the younger ones, I suspect, out of interest in the M&M machine.

A consultation with his attending physician brought home to me just how serious his condition really was. She reminded us he had several major problems, including the stroke damage and his long difficult recovery following the cardiac surgery. For the first time I came to understand that we may be facing a condition from which he might never fully recover. Always before I held onto the hope that with effort he might yet be able to return home.

We visited him early in the fall to find him tired after one of his therapy sessions. By this time he was able to get into and out of his wheel chair and his legs were getting stronger. After helping him up onto his bed he nodded off for a well earned nap as we continued conversing quietly among ourselves. Looking back into his room I had the distinct impression that this would be the last time I would see him in mortality. By then he had drifted off into a peaceful well earned nap.

The evening of November 9 dad's bishop and his counselors paid him a visit and gave him a temple recommend interview, then left the signed copy with him. I suspect they were sent on this official errand and a special time as a request from the celestial spheres. I thank those three faithful priesthood holders.

Later that evening he died peacefully having done his best to cope with the challenges life presented to him during the preceding nine months.

Just before his departure, one of the nurses was in his room and heard him say, looking upward up at a wall: "Look at all of those people. Who are they? They have come to take me home."

For me it was a joyful way for my father to leave his mortal life.