

Love By Any Other Name....A Tribute to Dad

◆ August 10, 1923 - September 12, 2017 ◆

.....*Michael J Tamura*

A conversation about death and dying is a conversation about life and living. People often fail to realize that. Instead, they avoid discussing death and the process we call dying, because they are afraid. If you don't know that dying is all about learning to live and to live more fully, as who you are, you end up staring at the coldness, the finality, the nothingness of death. Dying then leads to THE END. If so, even when you speak about the dead, you end up talking about them as if they are no longer here, no longer living, rather than merely not having a physical body to inhabit any longer. Would you talk about me that way just because I sold my house and was temporarily without a residence? After all, if you came to my former address, you wouldn't find me and I would be gone from there. But, you could still easily call me, we could even FaceTime and see each other! Would I be dead to you? I hope not.



Me and Dad, Rey, on our walk in Mount Shasta Dec. 2012

So, don't be afraid of having a lively conversation about dying. My wife, Raphaelle, and I so delighted in talking with my mother, Keiko, about how she wanted to go, when her time came. It was one of my mother's favorite topics for a laughter-filled conversation at her gourmet dinner table for the three years preceding her graceful exit. She was the picture of health and the enjoyment of life in only the beginning of the sixth decade of her incarnation. No one else seemed to suspect that she was carefully packing her bags for her great departure, but Raphaelle and I knew. Others tended to see, instead, her golf bag by the front door that she prepared for the following morning's big tournament.

When we talk about death and dying, we learn more about ourselves and about how we could live our lives more fully. Then, whether we suspect it at that time or not, we begin to venture beyond the life sandwiched between our birth and death into our life unbound in eternity. Without having this conversation about death and what it means for us to die, life goes on, but without us. We would assume we were living because our bodies would be breathing, but, in truth, we would be sleep-walking and not quite all the way alive.

I've always said that, to me, graduations, weddings, and funerals were essentially the same. Many people love to be invited to graduations and weddings of their family and friends, but dread the prospect of receiving an invitation to a funeral. I haven't met anyone who initially felt that those three kinds of events were even similar. Of course, the outer appearance and feel of the three are different.

Whereas weddings and graduations are festive celebrations for life, funerals tend to be solemn occasions for doling out condolences for loss and suffering with people often wishing they could offer solace and healing - or receive them.

What makes graduations, weddings, and funerals the same is that each one commemorates a completion as well as a new beginning. A traditional graduation ceremony is even called a commencement ceremony: a ceremony to celebrate the graduates beginning their new lives. Of course, a wedding celebrates the start of the newly married couple's life together. Yet, the start of a new chapter in a life indicates that some other aspect of that life has ended. If you're graduating from



Rey, Raphaelle, and Shanti on a walk down the street from our house, Mount Shasta, Dec. 2012

college, you've successfully completed three or four years of higher education in your chosen field and you're not an undergraduate student anymore. That "you" is dead. So, your graduation would be a kind of funeral for the undergrad-you, wouldn't it? But, it's not the end of your living. In fact, a whole new, bigger kind of living would be just beginning for you.

If you're getting married, the wedding is first a kind of funeral for the single person that you were - the one who may have enjoyed the carefree independent life of getting up whenever, do whatever you wanted or needed to do, without considerations about how that's going to affect your partner. No matter who you were until then, your life isn't going to be the same

from that point on. Hopefully, it's going to get even richer and more fulfilling, and that's what you're celebrating as the new beginning with the wedding ceremony and party. But, just as a college graduation doesn't guarantee that you'll have a successful career in your chosen field of endeavor, a wedding doesn't guarantee a wonderful, "till death do us part" life together. Either way, however, they both have in common the completion of a chapter in your life and a beginning of a new one - just like a funeral does.

A funeral is certainly a commencement ceremony for the soul. It's a graduation from its incarnated life as a unique personality and a beginning of a new chapter in its eternal life. Like in a wedding, when you die, you're no longer that person that everyone knew as "Charles" or "Francine" or whatever you were named. That life of being that individual is done. Also, like in a wedding, you're about to embark upon your new life - the eternal one - in which you are no longer the single, individual person that you thought you were during your incarnated life. To the degree of your learning and progress as a soul, you become more aware that you are part of the whole and not an island unto yourself. You become aware that you are living in eternity, that there is no end to life, only an end to being separate and

isolated unto yourself. As in a wedding, you are intimately partnered, not to another person, but to the whole of life, to beingness itself.

As you might see, in our incarnated life of learning, here on earth, we like to have at least a couple of graduations - perhaps, from high school and college or some kind of vocational or trade school or from graduate school; then, we hope to have just one wedding, but many of us end up needing additional courses to learn our lessons; and, finally, we have our one big graduation from our incarnation to commence our eternal life as a soul, so we have our funeral. Everything in our incarnated life is a carefully choreographed, step-by-step dance through a comprehensive curriculum of study and practice, and reviews and exams, until we graduate. Remember, too, that those who graduate from school are those who were successful in completing their course of study. Failed students don't graduate. Likewise, those who we honor and whose lives we celebrate at a funeral are all successful graduates of their incarnations. Every one of them.

My dad, Rey Tamura, graduated at 9:26 PM Pacific Daylight Savings Time on Tuesday, September 12, 2017. It was 33 days after he had turned 94. His commencement ceremony was quiet and unpretentious, just the way he lived his life. His caregiver, Gregory, checked in to see if he was all right and Dad mouthed in reply, "O-K." He hadn't been able to vocalize for a few days. Then, he fell asleep. Fifty minutes later, when Gregory went into Dad's room in Gregory's wife Domenica's and his home, he had already made his peaceful exit from this world.

Dying is definitely made-to-order. No two deaths are alike. We each have our own way to leave this world.

There are midwives, who help souls make their way into this world, and there are midwives, who help them make their exit.

I've been one or the other to many souls in my life. It's no wonder, at times, I don't know whether I'm coming or going!

Ten years ago, Raphaele and I went to be with Dad at the hospital, as he was coming out of anesthesia, right after he had a quadruple bypass operation. I was engaging him in conversation, as he got his bearings, when I noticed him looking intently, if not quizzically, at something. He looked down toward the floor from his hospital bed and then he would look up toward the ceiling, as if he were following the trajectory of a flock of migrating geese. Then, he would look from the ceiling down toward the floor again. He repeated this with nothing visible happening on a physical level. So, I looked to see if there was anything to look at on the psychic plane along his path of interest. Bingo! He was following the parade of souls going up and down from floor to ceiling and from ceiling to floor, as if on parallel escalators at a department store.



Rey at his 90th Birthday Celebration surrounded by 35 family and friends.

“What do you see?” I asked him.

“Funny, huh?” He replied. “Those people. Some of them are going up and some of them are going down.”

I called Raphaëlle over, while I continued to watch my dad’s fascination with the spirit-people in the hospital, coming and going, and told her what Dad said. She laughed and said that the floor below us was a well-known and popular maternity ward and the floor right above us was the ICU with patients in critical conditions! The souls getting ready to be born were traveling down and those getting ready to depart were traveling up. When my dad fully returned from the after-effects of anesthesia, he remembered neither what he had seen nor our conversation. It was the only time that I know of that he ever talked about what he saw in spirit, but, as a soul, I’m sure he was looking at the process of being born and dying. It marked the beginning of his preparations for his own departure.

Both my dad and my mom spent the final three years of their lives in preparation for their departures.

Whereas Mom did it proactively with enthusiasm, communication, and laughter, Dad accomplished it mostly sleeping and out of the body. Raphaëlle often said that as a soul just prior to his incarnation this time, my dad was probably reading his newspaper on a couch in heaven and his guides had to keep telling him that it was his time to be born. He was most likely somewhat reluctant to be born and he was reluctant to die. Dad liked everything to be the “same-old, same-old”.



A Japanese Santa?

“What’s new, Dad?” I would ask him.

“Ahh, same-old, same-old!” He would answer.

Even his answers were consistent. He was like that as long as I’ve known him. For years, you could count on him golfing every Thursday with his friends. When I was a child, I used to watch him shave. He did it exactly the same way every time. He was a man of routines. If something became part of his routine, you could count on it being done, the same way, at the same time. As a young child, I took his routines for granted, but, I now appreciate how much that offered me the grounding that allowed me to launch into wild new adventures, explore brave new worlds, and live a free and creative life that may not have been as easy to do had I been worrying about where my next meal was coming from or if my dad would be home in the evening. In our youth, we often opt for the new and exciting, blind to the blessings bestowed upon us by those who provide the safety net of the “same-old, same-old”.

Dad may have been a man of few words and one who wasn't emotionally too available, yet, even as a child, I was aware that his expression of love for others wasn't in what he said or how he acted towards you directly. He shared his love in what he did - behind the scenes. He did a lot of that everyday, but there's one vignette of memory that I recall fondly from early on in my life that exemplifies that.

One chilly winter's morning in Tokyo, when I was about 6 years old, I woke up while it was still pitch dark outside. It must have been about four-thirty or 5 o'clock. I heard a quiet shuffling in the house so I got up out of bed to investigate. When I peeked around the corner from my bedroom, I saw my dad carrying one of the kerosene stoves into the hallway bordering my room and the small tatami-matted family room. He didn't see me spying on him. I watched him pour kerosene into the fuel tank, wipe and tighten the cap, and light the stove. Once the stove was working, my dad went to the garage and returned with another stove to put in the living room. He went through the same procedure to light it. Then, he went about his business of getting ready to go to work and left the house before anyone else was awake. I realized that was what he did every morning for us in the winter, before he drove off to work before six. I didn't connect-the-dots back then, however, that that was also why he always had to nap after coming home, before dinner, instead of making time to play with me. As children, we often assume that our life is about us. And, when you think your life is about you, you would find it difficult to let your loved ones die.



One of the things I've learned from having died five times and returning each time is that although every death experience is unique, there are two things that have accompanied my dying every time. First, immediately upon your exit, time stops ticking by and eternity is. If you've somehow forgotten from your prior deaths, you're reminded in no uncertain terms, life is eternal. Second, and not as obvious, is that any selfishness that you still hold within you stares back at you glaringly - but, only if you care to notice. After all, everything comes to a stop in the presence of a dying person, doesn't it? We pull over and stop our cars in order to let the ambulance with a critically ill or injured person pass. The minute someone sounds "code blue" in a hospital, the doctors and nurses on the crash team drop whatever else they may be doing to respond to the dying patient. But, what eternity taught me is that my life isn't about me. Not even close.

When we're a baby, however, it's all about me, isn't it? *Me hungry. Me want milk. Me want warmth. Me want to be held. Me OK now.* Then, as we mature, we learn to recognize more and more that there are others, who have their own needs and desires. We learn to share. *But, what about me?* That keeps coming up, nonetheless, no matter how old we get. Especially, when we're getting closer to our graduation from this lifetime. That's what we're here to master: "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done."

It is said that when the student is ready, the teacher always appears. Yet, in life, our teacher doesn't always look like a teacher or even a person. Whenever I was willing and ready to learn, life always gave me a teacher. At times, the teacher was a flesh-and-blood person. At other times, the teacher was a condition or situation in my life. What's always important isn't who the teacher is or his or her credentials, but whether I'm willing to learn the lesson. And, when I am, I've learned that my teacher, in no matter what form, was perfect.

One day, part way through my school year in fourth grade, I recall my dad telling me that he could no longer help me with my homework questions. I happened to be in the gifted class that year and he felt that he didn't have the expertise I needed to do well in my classes. I knew I was on my own from that point on. I was nine years old.

What I didn't realize, however, was that my dad was feeling like he didn't have much to offer me. He could no longer help me with my schoolwork, he couldn't play baseball with me, he couldn't teach me about car engines, and he didn't like building things or drawing, painting, sculpting, or making model airplanes. The more I excelled in things, the less he felt he had to offer. Somehow, I think he decided back then that the best gift he could give me was to stay out of my way and not hold me back in some way. Of course, I didn't know that until I learned that my life wasn't about me.

For years, I experienced my dad's reluctance. Often, it was like ramming into a concrete wall just to give him a birthday or Christmas gift or to treat him to a dinner out. Whenever any of us would suggest a fun thing to do together or to go somewhere, his answer would be a predictable, "Nah, don't bother." I would explain to him that it wasn't a bother, that we wanted to give to him or do something with him. Once in a while, he seemed to give in just to appease us. I had heard that he was a fun-loving prankster in his youth - what had happened that turned him into what seemed almost a party-pooper? I didn't know for a long time. I could rarely get him to talk about what was important to him, how he felt about his life, or what he might be thinking about.

When he started his slow, gradual dying, he spoke even less. Then, he couldn't remember and didn't want to talk much. So, he slept. And slept. And slept. Like Sleeping Beauty, but without a Prince or Princess Charming for him. He was mostly gone for the final year of his life here, but his body kept on ticking. It must be true that if you get enough sleep, you live a long time. Besides, the 25 years of daily Qigong meditation that he practiced must have stored up a lot of extra vitality in his body. Other than some dementia and being in his nineties, there wasn't much wrong with his body, till it finally gave out. That was another of his gifts to us. No hospital runs and all that go with them. True to form, it was, "Nah, don't bother."

It was in the frustration and helplessness of not being able to give much to my dad in his final couple of years that I started to get to know the man that I didn't know most of my life. Just as my own deaths showed me any selfishness I still held within me, the dying of a loved one reveals the same. I realized my frustration and helplessness weren't about my dad or his way of living or dying. It was about me. I

realized, for example, that in my selfishness, I failed to see what my dad's reluctance and seemingly immovable resistance to change were about. I only had experienced his reluctance and resistance from the viewpoint of how they had affected me and didn't see what they meant to him.

I discovered that he was reluctant to be a burden, a bother, to anyone. Just as he chose to stay out of my way when I was growing up so as not to hold me back from doing everything I needed and wanted to do, he was staying out of everyone's way when he felt he didn't have much left to offer. It was his gift to those he cared about most. It was his way of loving us.

He must have had at least a few lifetimes in the kind of indigenous cultures in which the elder who felt that he was no longer a contributor to his tribe would go out into the wilderness and wait out his death alone. Well, he couldn't quite get out to the wilderness this time, but he waited out the final three years of this life in an out-of-the-way, loving elderly care home. We may not have been able to provide him with the open space and freedom of nature, but I hope that the alternative was at least more comfortable and comforting than to wait to freeze on a tundra or to be a grizzly's meal.

I do know with certainty, though, that he will get to see and experience the gift that he was and that he gave to so many of us during his long life here. As love never ends, he is still a beloved son to his mother and father, older brother to his three sisters and brother, husband to my mother, father to my sister and me, father-in-law, cousin, uncle, grandpa, great grandpa, WWII Japanese-American Camp Internee, Korean War veteran, US government civil servant, base commissary manager, civil engineering accountant, avid golfer, good neighbor, loyal friend, brother Mason, Buddhist, and respected Nisei. Where he is now, he will get to see that he was far from being a bother to others. In fact, I've never met anyone who didn't like him.

Shortly after Dad made his quiet exit from this world, Raphaele and I checked in on him. He was well-taken care of in spirit by two strong, but loving guides, as he slept. Yes, he's that consistent: He was sleeping when he departed and he was sleeping on the other side! We helped him gather up his energy from wherever he left it in this world. Then, the next morning my younger son, Nick, called me from Indonesia, when learned about his Grandpa's passing. He said that he saw Grandpa fresh and bright like it was his first day on the job. Nick also saw him sitting on the couch, contently reading the newspaper. Just the same way Raphaele saw him just prior to being born! There is something to be said about consistency.



Grandson, Greg, and Grandpa at Rey's House in Sacramento, Christmas, 1996

Dad never sat me down to give me a father-son talk, not about the birds and the bees, money, or cars. He never lectured me or offered a man-to-man talk. Yet, he succeeded in teaching me a most important lesson in life through his steadfast insistence on remaining a frustrating enigma to me for most of my life, through his staunch reluctance to be a bother to anyone, and through his determination to keep everything the "same-old, same-old". His seeming refusal to change his ways forced me to change how I saw him. I had to relinquish my own selfishness, time and again, to see him in a new light, each time I looked at him. Yes, our most selfish possessions are not high-ticket



items in this world; they are those thoughts, feelings, and images that we hold so close to us for so long that, in our arrogance, we believe that they are immutable reality for everyone. In the last three years of his life, Dad taught me, not by words, but by his ever-so-gradual dying, how he shares his love.

Through my own experiences in dying, I've known that we each have our unique way we go about our dying. Now, I know it's because we each have our own way of loving. And, it's in the way we go about our dying that reveals just how we love. It's not something anyone of us could explain. It's just how we are. That's the last lesson my dad taught me on his way out.

Thanks, Dad. *I love you, too.*



