

OF TIME AND  
SPIRIT

*A Tribute to My Father*

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# CHAPTER I

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## Father Remains

2000

Wednesday, December 6, 2000, was the day of my dad's funeral. I gently walked into the Ames United Methodist Church in Bel Air, Maryland, with my mother firmly holding on to my arm. Her arm felt like a skintight clutch to my lean arm. It was a sad day for her and a sad day for me. I knew that I had to be strong for her, and, from within, I thought for me too. It would have been what my dad wanted. He was one of the trustees of the church. Ames was the first African American church in Bel Air.

It was a cold and clear December day, and the sun was shining bright. The grounds of the church were manicured, and the air was thin and fresh, which made the entry into the church easier; and I really felt that my air passages were open and ready to breathe during this celebration of my dad's life.

My mother and I were followed by my brother and his wife, then my sister and her husband. Other family members followed. I could see and feel the light, the colors, and the cleanliness of the church interior. Although this church is located in a rather rural county in Maryland, it was as majestic as an Italian cathedral. The sanctuary was warm and colorful as the sunlight shone through the stained glassed windows. The church was simple and tastefully fashioned. The front of the church was adorned with fresh flowers from family and friends, flanking the sides of my dad's casket.

My parents had purchased their grave plots, their grave liners and markers for their burial many years prior to the funeral. My mother and I selected the casket from the McComas Family Funeral Homes. We ordered two dozen red roses from Richardson Florist to place atop the open half of the casket. My dad was a man who saw the beauty in almost any variety flower; and had he been living, he would have enjoyed the view that I had on this day. He was flawlessly dressed and groomed. I purchased a new white shirt for him and used one of his many church suits for the services.

My dad's extended family, friends, and associates were all seated as our immediate family entered the sanctuary from the waiting area. It appeared that every seat in the church was occupied. I wanted to snap with emotions because the pressure was unbearable as the time was nearing. When I look back, I wonder if perhaps it was my mother holding me up versus me holding her for she knew me and how emotional I was as a man.

The people who were gathered were well-dressed, dignified, and stately as they awaited the services to commence. There were town officials and community and neighborhood leaders in attendance. I could see as we enter the church the crowns of African American women. They were positioned on their heads to perfection. Although it was winter, the assortment of hats appeared like a spring garden as I looked on. The brims on some of the hats were so large they appeared to be taking up space for two seats.

After being seated, my mother disengaged her arm from mine. I was relieved to be released, I could feel the perspiration accumulating under my arm and wrinkling of my sleeves. I sat very silent, upright, anxious, and somewhat petrified as to what was going to happen next. The preparation and coordination of a funeral is a lot of work, and on the day of the service, you are simply exhausted from the hectic planning and turnarounds. This was my first experience with the death of a parent. And let me tell the readers that if you have never experienced the death of a parent, it is like a feeling you have never felt before in your entire life. And if you loved your parent deeply, it is much worse.

After all the congregation and the church clergy were seated, my mind rambled down the path of my dad's life as I anticipated the commencement of the funeral. My mind regressed to stories of my dad's boyhood, his Catholic schooling, his military experiences, his career struggles, his achievements, and his lifetime pursuit of inner peace. My mind also concentrated on our lifelong struggles to communicate as father and son.

While reflecting, I felt surrounded by the love of those lives he touched, and who also cared enough to pay their final respects to a respectable man.

My dad had suffered two heart attacks earlier in his life. His first heart attack occurred at about age forty-eight, the second at about the age fifty-three. When my mother called to inform me of the first attack, I was in undergraduate school at the University of Maryland, College Park. I remained calm for her. At that time, I was learning to be an adult. My mother could be highly emotional, but this time, she sounded weary but was performing her wifely and motherly duties. I was young and did not know much about human health or the process of getting older. I remember my dad as tall, handsome, and physically fit man. It was hard at the time to conceptualize a heart attack other than to know it was serious health ailment.

I guess, I selectively remembered the years when he would do sit-ups and push-ups and balance himself on his head on the living room carpet. He was a champion swimmer, and he played golf. The heart attack did not fit my vision of my dad. I did ask my mother when she called me if he was still alive, and she said yes, and I felt relief for me and for her; but it was a dreamlike image for me. It was difficult to imagine my father being sick at all.

It was a miserable feeling not being at home and not knowing just what to say to my mother. My emotions and all sorts of feelings emerged. My mother told me not to come home because there was nothing I could do, but the conflict inside my soul wanted me to be there, and at the same time, I wanted to honor her request of not creating more stress for her. "You stick with your studies," she said.

I had somehow forgotten that my dad loved high-salt and high-cholesterol food, like eggs, bacon, butter, whole milk, steak, beef kidney stew, Longhorn cheese, saltines, kosher dill pickles, and half and half in his coffee. He said he quit smoking at the age of thirty-five, but he continued to drink gin his entire life before and after his heart attacks. Gin was my dad's trademark libation. If anybody knew him well, they knew he liked gin. My mother said he was drinking gin miniatures when she met him. If I had remembered all these things, I should have known a second heart attack was inevitable.

When he later had a second heart attack, his doctors stated that he needed to have quadruple bypass heart surgery. He clearly stated before my mother and me in the living room at home that he did not want to have

the surgery. My dad had never been in a hospital a day in his life before his heart attacks. He hated doctors and the prescriptions they recommended. He thought too that prescription drugs went against the body's natural rhythm, and he sought homeopathic methods to treat himself. I don't know what he thought his consumption of gin did to his natural rhythm.

At this point in my life, I was the child who felt least close to my dad because we had little in common, probably because I was terribly close to my mother. I looked at my dad and said, "Dad, you must have the surgery!" I said it as a matter of fact. I was absolute but gentle with my statement. I am sure he was wondering under what authority I could make such a statement, considering we were not soulmates at that time, and he was the father and in charge of his life.

My dad looked me in the face and said, "Why?"

I really didn't know why, but I replied, "Because you have not finished raising me. You still have more work to do with me!"

It was a silly statement since I was a grown man, a homeowner, a college graduate with two graduate degrees. What more could he have done? I must have been in some type of denial mode that I could not explain. I knew for sure I was not ready for him to die; I wanted to give him a reason to keep living.

My dad dejectedly, and without equivocation, said, "All right, then!"

I believe my dad underwent quadruple bypass surgery, for me. I would suspect it made him feel needed, loved, and important to someone. It was amazing to me that he did not seem to feel any more loved than me at that time.

I was a young adult at this point, but we both knew that he and I had not completed our parent-child cycle, whatever that was. In any event, I was clearly not ready for him to die, yet our reason for being in each other's life was not clear to me either. He was my father and the provider for our family. He was quiet and introspective—a thinking, writing, and performance-and-achievement type of man.

My dad arrived at the Johns Hopkins University Hospital for the second time, and after he was prepped for the surgery, the doctors quietly warned my mother that this was a serious surgery and that my dad may not make it through the procedures. I guess he wanted us to be prepared. My mother and I braced ourselves with the doctor's warning, squeezing each other's hand just as tight as we had at this funeral. We walked with the doctors and nurses by the gurney that held my dad's body. There were

hoses, cords, pipes, needles in my dad's arms; his head was wrapped, and he was covered with those sanitary cotton blankets. It was like a scene from the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

My mother held my dad's hands, nervously repeating, "Everything will be all right," as the orderlies were almost running down the hospital halls, on highly polished floors and sanitary white walls, until we approached the double swing doors and were no longer permitted beyond them. The signage announced Hospital Staff Only. This was the moment that the surgery was going to be performed. I don't know why, but I knew he was going to be OK as I pulled my mother away from the doors as they closed in our faces, giving me a true sense of finality. The surgery was going to be done.

I hated to see my mother cry anytime; but on this occasion, I knew she was scared, saying out loud to the doctors and nurses who pushed the gurney, "My husband has never spent a day in the hospital his whole life." She knew he was afraid. He said, he didn't want the surgery in the first place. She knew he did not like doctors. Tears fell from her eyes uncontrollably as the automatic swing doors shut.

My dad was knocked out by the time he entered the operating room. I remained calm for my mother. We waited for eight hours. When the doctor returned to the waiting room, he informed my mother that the surgery was a success. At that moment, I cried from the release of pressure I had held from the waiting and the anticipation of the outcome. My dad made it through the surgery. He was going to live, just as I had expected and needed him to do. I had no idea why I needed him to live against his wishes. He was always a self-sacrificing man and, subconsciously, to me too. He always gave me what I asked for, always.

At the time of his surgery, I lived in Baltimore County, Maryland. I worked in Washington DC, and it was a hundred-mile round-trip drive for me. I commuted each day from home to the Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore City before starting work at 8:30 AM in Washington DC. I would return to the hospital after work, then return home. It was a long stretch—five hours a day commuting back and forth through the Baltimore Harbor Tunnel to the Baltimore-Washington Parkway to Interstate 695, a.k.a. Capital Beltway. I was feeling purposeful; I had meaning for the first time in my life. My dad was important, and I got my chance to take care of him. I had no children and was excited about caring for him.