

October 18th

On Thursday, October 18th, 2012, at around two in the afternoon, I became the same age as my father.

He took his own life when he was 57 years, six months and one day old. Mom found him in the basement not long afterwards. The body was still warm, and his face was moist from tears and sweat. Were these clues of sadness and fear?

Four days later at the service, as the military Chaplain extolled the virtues of life and to never fear death, I studied my dad's face as he lay in the casket, etching his features in my mind so I would never forget. I began to wonder how I would look, feel, and think when I became his age, calculating just when that day would occur.

Twenty-eight years hurriedly passed by, leaving a bountiful trail of events, experiences, and emotions. There were happiness and grief; tears and laughter; marriage and children; cars and a beautiful home; a busy career; pets; graduations; vacations; Christmas, Easter, and the Fourth of July celebrations; the Challenger explosion, 9-11, and the Gulf War. Many memories anchored in my mind in a full and blessed life, yet nothing slowed the approaching date.

As October 18th neared; I became more anxious and could not avoid thinking about my dad and wondering if I had become anything like him. I was consumed with questions surrounding his death; always void of answers. How will I feel at that exact moment of the suicide? Certainly, the same fate would not await me...or would it? What were his final thoughts? Did he think about me, my brothers, and his wife while he was dying? Was he sad knowing he would never see us again? Were there regrets once he began the process? Did he get half-way and maybe decided he did not want to do this any longer? Or did death come instantly with no time to reflect?

My dad was a good man. Portrayals about him were consistent and abundant: "Would never turn his back on anyone", "Wouldn't hurt a fly", and "Not a mean bone in his body", were common phrases to describe him. At age 39, he was diagnosed with adult-onset diabetes mellitus; commonly known as Type II diabetes. This was especially detrimental to a man who found intense passion in cooking, then eating his epicurean creations.

When the military doctor informed him of the diagnosis of diabetes in 1966, I think his world started to crumble. About the same time, he received orders to serve in Vietnam. The two events prompted him to retire after 22 years of military service. The combination of inactivity and the disease began to take a toll and he began to fall into a depression—slowly at first and unrecognizable.

His new job as a night postal supervisor required him to work odd shift hours—often in the middle of the night; never getting a full night's sleep. He began to eat whatever he wanted and no longer took insulin as prescribed. Blood sugar levels kept rising and were out of control. Looking back, it became clear that the diabetes led to his depression and the depression

prevented him from properly taking care of his illness. Both physical and mental health burdens served to work against each other to destroy him bit by bit.

His family doctor nagged about maintaining better weight control, but the physician failed to recognize or address the ever-growing despondency and hopelessness that consumed my dad. One day, I found him crying when he suddenly exclaimed,

“If I had any guts, I’d kill myself!”

This angered and frightened me. How does anyone respond to that? So, I walked away. Much later, I realized he was reaching out—asking for help. Perhaps I had become his last chance to survive.

A month later, on a cold January afternoon, he hanged himself in the basement of our home.

It has taken many years to cope with this tragedy. My sense of remorse serves as a constant demon. I am still not at peace and probably never will be. Regrets and “what ifs” abound. How many loved ones do we know suffer from depression, anxiety, and addictions every single day? How many commit suicides to relieve the torment they suffer? And, how many of us “survivors” know how to deal with it or what to say to our sick loved ones?

So, back to October 18th. The weather had been dreary and rainy for several days. Nevertheless, I went outside to sit by my koi pond to contemplate and reflect. While lost in reflections, I noticed how brilliant the autumn leaves had suddenly become. They were glowing oranges, bright yellows, and fiery reds. I looked over my shoulder and witnessed the sun rising and breaking through the clouds. The warmth and brilliance bathed my face causing me to squint. Its rays were sprayed against the dawning sky at just the right angles displaying brilliant colors of magenta, reds, pink, and purple. Suddenly a warm sense of peace and comfort blanketed me, dissolving the apprehension I had all these years about this date. My dad was “talking” to me:

Calmness seeped through my soul and suddenly I knew everything would be okay. The day I had wondered about and even dreaded for the past 28 years was now going to be a perfect.

My dad will remain 57 years, six months and one day old, but after this day I will become older than he. As I continue to leap away from this age, I will carry the gift of purpose—to do good in this world--he conferred upon me.