

Involuntary Enlightenment

By Daniel J. Bressler,
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PATIENTS OFTEN TELL me that “when the time comes” they want to “die with dignity.” Many explain that they imagine coming to terms with their achievements and failures, finalizing their spiritual beliefs, and saying heartfelt goodbyes. It turns out that this lofty goal, so widely shared, is hard to plan for. Even with the most sophisticated end-of-life conversations and Advance Directives, so many factors are determined by dumb luck. What is the terminal disease? Is pain control an issue? Is there mental decline or depression? How robust is the social support network? The answers to these questions often lie outside the control of the patient or the medical team.

My father, Marty, retired from engineering in his 60s and spent the next 30 years diving deeply into a variety of topics that piqued his interests. His opinions were intensely held and vigorously prosecuted. People in his activity circles found him fascinating and fact-filled. Those

of us in his family could add dogmatic and short-fused. He stayed physically and mentally active until about a year before his death from congestive heart failure in March of 2019.

A few months before the end he had a period of relative calm. Unexplainably — one could say *luckily* — his anger gave way to sweetness. His intellectual faculties were disappearing but his emotional range expanded. He would kiss me hello and goodbye, something he’d never done before. I came to imagine that he had been granted spiritual compensations for a failing body. Perhaps this poem’s depiction is merely an act of wishful thinking. Perhaps it is true. **SDP**



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Involuntary Enlightenment For MB, Of Blessed Memory, 1924–2019

At the same kitchen table where you ranted For decades from your encyclopedic expertise And skewered anyone who might disagree Now, all that bluster drained by stroke, Replaced by a toddler’s blithe sweetness Your only demand for another cookie Your only slander for the saltless soup Your tirades transformed to puzzlement As a stranger guides your walker to your home hospital bed for a nap

Between slow meals and urgent trips to the toilet You scan the words on the screen of your Kindle Oblivious to their context The lights of your high beam intellect blinked out. California coastal flowers, gone. Information theory, blank. Your obsession with tax-sheltered municipal bonds Replaced by the docile mystery of the present moment.

Like the Buddhist Master dangling from a cliff’s vine Yet pausing to savor its sweet berry So you are only here, only now. The brain hemorrhage and heart failure have brought Along with the swollen legs and incontinence Involuntary Enlightenment.

Beyond all judgment and calculation, You have glimpsed the Beatific Vision. Unable to grasp crossword puzzles or politics Your attention alights on Being itself. Preparing for your place at the next Kitchen Table Where all topics are discussed without rancor And where all viewpoints have the full consideration Of the Ultimate Authority.