

How My Grandfather Won His Last Battle

Today my grandfather died.

I'm still processing what it means to live in a world without him. But there's one thought that gives me extraordinary satisfaction: he ended so well.

He was 90 years old. In his life, this man saw the best and worst the 20th century had to throw at him, and he stood strong. He survived the great depression and a world war. He inherited a family farm and successfully passed it on to his children. He took care of his parents. He built strong relationships with his brothers and sisters that last to this day. He raised a large, loving family of daughters and sons. And he trained my generation in all of his wisdom and humor and low-country farm life skills.

He took care of us all. He fought for us all. He set an example of strength and moral fiber that you rarely find in real life.

He was a pillar of strength for his family. And this made it especially hard when he began the slow decline into dementia.

It was hard for those of us who loved him to see someone with such strength lose his vital power. But I can only imagine what suffering it was for him to lose, day-by-day, the strength and efficacy and independence that had been so important to him. He had to experience the pain of losing his memories. He had to live with the repeated pain of learning of the loss of loved ones, the repeated embarrassment of forgetting names, and the repeated humiliation of being cared for by the people for whom he had once been a provider.

He had a choice in all of this. He could have chosen to become bitter and resentful. He could have chosen to curse life and all of the things he cared about before his decline. We would all be tempted in his situation to do just that (all it takes for most of us is a few minutes in bad traffic). And I know that on some days, in his moments of greater awareness, bitterness and suffering and anger and sorrow must have raised their heads.

His suffering did change him. But bitterness and suffering and anger and sorrow **did not take him**.

Instead he chose to keep his sense of humor – joking to the end with his surprisingly sharp wit. He continued to be warm, kind, and thankful, even when he seemed to have nothing to be grateful for. He chose to continue to show love and grace to others, even as friends and family became strangers around him.

I can't speak for him, but I can imagine that few of the struggles he faced in life matched this one. He faced a years-long battle against time and decay and despair and death. He faced it alone, in his own heart and mind. It was a messy, painful, embarrassing battle, with no prospect of greater honor or respect or victory at any point along the way. But he faced it with incredible moral courage and faithfulness anyway.

This was his greatest battle. And he won it.

I have had my differences with my grandfather. I also have had many, many memories and gifts and traits to love in him. But it may be that in his last years he gave his greatest gift to me and my family in the way he lived.

May we all have his kind of courage and love when it counts. And if we ever come to despair that true courage and love only exist in stories, I hope we never forget that a real man had them under the worst of trials.