

# ART IN MEDICINE

## Uncommon Courage

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For a decade after the death of his wife, he lived in the apartment that had been their home for 45 years. He asked nothing more than to die in this place where every piece of furniture and window was steeped in memory. His wife, buried in a Jewish cemetery 10 miles over the Allegheny Mountains in western Pennsylvania, was this many hills and that many sharp turns up the road to the north. He had visited her grave at least twice a year and driven there for decades before to honor the dead from his synagogue. Many old relatives and friends had died at home while sitting on the toilet. He thought he would prefer this way as well. He had his remaining family well convinced that memories and half a lifetime of familiar surroundings were enough. He wanted no more and he wanted to be nowhere else.

Earlier in his life, he had walked every Sunday morning 10 miles through the country. In more recent years, his walking had become drastically restricted. He did well if he could do his grocery shopping and banking downtown, where most of life's necessities were only a few blocks from home. In warm weather, he enjoyed sitting and sunning his legs on the steps of the VFW service club two blocks from his apartment. The VFW had become the most distant outpost on his range.

Over the last year, this man—who had inspired neighbors in his declining factory town to walk, long before “wellness” and “cardiovascular fitness” arrived on the scene from the medical center—was seen out on the streets less and less. Eventually, he could no longer stand and wait in either the heat or the cold to catch the two buses that brought him the 30 miles to his synagogue in Pittsburgh. His daily rounds had shrunk to his apartment and its hallway that circled from the kitchen back to the living room.

Who knows how the years take their toll? Had he too often lifted his sickly wife from her bed and wheelchair? Had isolation and malnourishment been the price he had paid for the constancy of place? All devotions—occupational, familial, religious—exact their cost as they offer comfort. His story is now in his fragile, unbuffered bones. He accepted his circumstances with patience and grace and was grateful to awaken each morning.

His supports were a cane, a local hospital's Meals on Wheels, a devoted twice-a-month housekeeper who, except when it snowed, took his dirty laundry to wash at her home, and a man who adopted him as a father and even shopped for his favorite whiskey (“to stimulate his appetite”). For a short while, they had sustained the fragile web of his independence.

In mid-November, he fell—no one knows exactly how. Months before, his friend had helped him acquire a LifeLine electron-

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ic device, one he knew he was to wear all the time yet had carefully draped over the bedpost each night. Why, he asked, should he wear it while in bed? He could simply reach for it. . . . Luckily, LifeLine is designed with just such reasoning in mind. When he had not checked in by 8 AM, they summoned the police, who had to break into the apartment to get him. Several days of hospitalization for his fractured pelvis, followed by two weeks of visiting nurses' visits to his apartment, could not restore him to independent living. One day, a visitor from his synagogue—a frequent bearer of treasured Jewish breads and pastries—found him unable to get out of bed.

I know nothing about the power of this friend's persuasion, nor do I know his influence at the Jewish nursing home in the city. I only know from the intake worker's account that, when asked about such things as "codes" and "life support," this man nearing 90 said with the same clenched, resolute fist I first remember seeing when I was four or five: "I want to live!" He had replied without a second's thought. I had thought he was ready to die, or nearly so. And so did he, at least until the long moment when he sat alone on the floor in a pool of once-warm excrement. He understood then that death might arrive, but not quickly and not without humiliation.

He had outlived by years most of his relatives and friends. To the few who remained, he had held steadfastly that his next and final move would be to the cemetery plot next to his wife, not to any nursing home or any relative's. The granite stone was already bought and in place; all that remained were his name and date of death to be inscribed, as were his wife's.

We say "he changed his mind," but I realize now how little I know about such change or even about him. He is almost 90; I am about to turn 50. He is, according to current market value, "unproductive," while I am at least in the wage-earning workforce.

**"Did your father tell you he wouldn't let us carry him down the 24 hallway steps to the car?"**

He, who can scarcely hear even shouting, can tell stories of having heard young Jascha Heifetz and Fritz Kreisler in the 1920s and 1930s, reminding a willing listener what musicality is really about. He, who can scarcely see through his cataracts, still carefully studies biblical and liturgical texts with his "spyglass," as he calls his 5-inch-diameter magnifying glass. From his bed, he thinks he still might learn something new. His nursing home clergy are delighted to have more work for themselves, and the rabbi's wife looks forward to bringing him by wheelchair to daily services.

He gave up his apartment—his half-century life geography—for this strange and repudiated land, The Nursing Home. At the turn of the century, his parents had fled Rumania for the American promised land. I don't know who traveled farther or faced greater uncertainty. My father knew only that when his eldest sister refused a nursing home 20 years ago, the remaining family nearly collapsed under the strain of her care. He did not want this to happen again.

While I stood at his bedside in the nursing home last December, the synagogue friend who had driven him there from his apartment came into the room to visit. He and I had hoped to meet at least once on this trip. We had already spoken several times by telephone as he helped make arrangements for the transition. As we stood at the bedside, he turned to me and asked, "Did your father tell you he wouldn't let us carry him down the 24 hallway steps to the car?" "No," I said, waiting for the rest. "He didn't want to be carried out. He insisted on going down on his feet. With the aid of three men and his walker, he walked down those stairs to the street one last time."

We both had tears in our eyes as he finished. And, no, my father had not told me.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** My father, Charles Dignan Stein, died March 8, 1996.