

THE LEADING EDGE

Earl Creps' leadership newsletter

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IN THE SCHOOL OF DEATH

My father died three weeks ago.

After a ten-year struggle with Alzheimer's, dad was sent home from the hospital to experience the end of his life with his family. It had been a long time since he knew who I was. But I still knew who he was, and that's what counted.

The final season of his passing lasted about five days. Janet and I flew to Pittsburgh to be with him and the rest of my family at the end. One afternoon, my mother called us from the patio into the former parsonage where I grew up. My father's life had ended quietly in a hospital bed parked in the living room.

Everyone was there. We took some time to say goodbye before the police/EMT/funeral home part of things started up. About an hour later, the hospital bed was empty, and our new lives had begun, minus one father.

Until last month, I was unaware that death was such a capable instructor. What I learned being with dad at the end is more about questions than answers:

1. This is all over in a hurry: My father spent 42 years in pastoral ministry, 30 of it in the same church. Yet the decades rushed to a conclusion before anyone knew it. Pet owners speak of "dog years." Perhaps we need a new category of "leader years" to express the velocity of life for those guiding organizations. At 49, my watch is over in about 15 years. How will I spend that time?

2. All I have is what I remember: For about the last 5 years my father had great difficulty recognizing even his immediate family. In one sense, then, everything he accomplished as a leader had been erased with his ability to recall. It does not take Alzheimer's to achieve this condition. I often seem to dash through the present as if only the future matters. What am I running from?

3. A sense of humor is a really good friend: I recall one phone call with my father in which he confused me with a church secretary from many years ago. I felt guilty about the impulse to laugh out loud. But after many conversations with my mother in which we both laughed about dad's newfound idiosyncrasies, I concluded that humor is a grace from God. Why don't I laugh more?

4. John Maxwell never covered this part: Watching my father struggle to breathe on his deathbed, I cannot believe that there are 21 irrefutable laws of anything any more. I believe passionately in the transformation leaders experience with quality training, but we have to find a way to do organizations spiritually, rather than mechanically. What would that look like?

5. I'm so human, and I'm not happy about that: I almost did my standard newsletter this month as if nothing happened to me. I am still largely in denial. But I've been trained to soldier on as if transcending life-events for the purposes of ministry is some form of heroism. In those last five days, my father taught me that life and leadership must be integrated. His living will requested no extraordinary measures because of his experience dealing with the terminally ill. He knew there are many things worse than dying. What kind of newsletter will I do next month?

6. The end puts things in perspective: The funeral sermon was jolting. Every time the preacher mentioned "Earl Creps" (I'm the 3rd) I felt like she was talking about me! It made me wonder about my funeral. Perhaps the preacher will be one of you. What will you say?

7. Eternity counts more than anything else: The Monday morning after dad's final weekend as a pastor the phone stopped ringing. All those people who were so desperate for his attention, who loved him, who despised him, who consumed him, were suddenly absent. His retirement years were about the same. What I do as a leader better count for the Kingdom, because people are just too conditional. One day it will be just Janet and me. How much of what I do now is to earn the approval of others?

7. Having the right regrets: Several years before his Alzheimer's set in, my father told me his two regrets about the ministry: (1) that he had spent so much time and work, and so little time with us in the living room where he would die, and; (2) that he couldn't do it all over again. So, regrets are not bad by definition. If I had to answer the same question right now, what would I say?

8. A prevailing church is led by the humble: I came to faith in the Lutheran stream of the Charismatic Renewal. Those days gave rise to an enduring vision for revival in my father's heart. Sadly, his funeral was attended by the last 25 members of his former congregation. These were the remnants of a thriving, multiple-service enterprise that developed a facility covering half a city block. In January the survivors will vote on whether the church should formally cease to be, which will release their interim pastor to move on to another situation. I have struggled to reconcile this congregational death watch with the scale of my father's investment as a pastor. Was it all a waste? Is all (my) ministry ultimately a waste, too? At dad's funeral I met Pastor Battle, the woman whose pioneer congregation began meeting in the church's main sanctuary on Sunday, October 13th. Nia (Swahili for "purpose") Community Lutheran Church is an African-American congregation that will reboot dad's original vision for impacting the community. My mother will attend this church, and probably head up their prayer ministry. The church can prevail when founders, transitioners, and innovators work together. Do we (I) have the humility?

9. I have looked the tiger in the eye: With dad's passing, there is no remaining "firebreak" between eternity and me. I am now looking down the barrel of my own mortality. It's OK. Having seen the end, maybe I'll be a little less worried about what people think of me in the present, a little less manic about work, a little more reflective about life, a lot more appreciative of the community of people around me. I have a hunger to deepen my personal spirituality, to grow closer to God, and then let the chips fall where they may. Does anything else matter?

Blessings,
Earl

P.S. The Coffee Doctor will return next month, no matter what!

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