CHAPTER I

Circling the Wagons

After the third week of radiation, we knew the treatment was killing Dad faster than the non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, so we took him home to die. It was just the four of us: Mom, Dad, my sister Anne, and me. We circled our little wagon train, determined to help Dad die with dignity. It was a Herculean task, overwhelming at times, and we struggled to stay the course. But the alternative hovered over us during those harrowing days: Dad lying in a hospital bed, fed by a tube, radiation bearing down on his already battered body, killing him before the cancer could.

Beneath the turbulence of those days, on the bottom of the ocean, lay a deeper understanding of my dad. Taboo-breaking feelings were dredged up, and a fierce protectiveness toward my parents surfaced. My father's transition to eternity

was peaceful, on his own terms, and in his own home. My memories of him today do not bring regret, but gratitude for the tender intimacy that only impending death can bestow.

I would never have imagined back in 1959, when I was nine-years-old and in the third grade at Whittier Elementary School, that my ferocious father would ever be a lamb. One day, in a darkened classroom, I watched him struggle to thread the 16-mm film onto the big wheel of the projector. His volunteer job was to show the "movies" for the school's annual social. The building was packed with parents and children who played carnival games, ate cookies the moms made, and watched cartoons. Dad's frustration grew when he failed to get the film to fit in the tiny slot. I could see the signs that he was about to blow, and I was terrified that he would swear in front of all these people. But at last the film snapped into place, the Mr. Magoo cartoon began, and I was saved from humiliation.

My parents, Bob and Maryanne Vallee, were married, over the objections of both families, on June 3, 1944. Mom's family didn't approve because Dad wasn't Catholic. Dad's family didn't approve because Mom *was* Catholic. The young couple married at City Hall in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and raised their children unaffiliated with any organized religion. Black and white photos, taken after the ceremony on the steps of the courthouse, show a slender woman with hazel eyes and softly curled brown hair directing a million-dollar smile at her handsome new husband, a tall, bespectacled man, his hair combed back from his high forehead.

Their first child, Dick, was born nine months after the honeymoon, followed two years later by Anne. Although I

never asked my parents directly why they moved with their two small children from Wisconsin (where their families lived) to Ohio (where they knew no one), I thought the disapproving relatives might have had something to do with it. After they settled in Findlay, Ohio, Mom gave birth to three more children: me, Jean, and John. John was born on Mom and Dad's twelfth wedding anniversary, June 3, 1956.

Mom said Dad was a manufacturer's representative, but he called himself a peddler. He sold power tools and other hardware items to retail stores in our home state of Ohio and in Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. He left on Monday morning and returned on Friday afternoon. "Kids, Dad's home!" Mom would call out to us as Dad pulled into the driveway. That was our cue to make a quick mental inventory of what we had done during the week that would make him mad.

My parents built a ranch-style house in a new housing tract in Findlay, nine months before John was born. Since they weren't expecting Jean, who had been born three years earlier, John was a *really* big surprise. Unbeknownst to my parents, their new home was on a flood plain with a creek nearby that overflowed its banks on a regular basis and flooded the entire neighborhood. Our house was the only one with a basement, and when the floodwaters came, it filled to ground level—right to the top step of the stairs. After the water receded, Dad would pull all his tools from his basement workshop, dry them out in the sun, and then haul them back downstairs.

Dad's workshop was his refuge. He spent most of his time on the weekends making furniture for our bedrooms: a small desk, a dresser, or a bookshelf. The basement always smelled damp and musky. Lit by fluorescent lights in the ceiling, it

had scary dark corners. When Dad started down the basement stairs on Saturday morning, I would get worried. Every week, one or more of his tools were missing, or moved from its designated place in the workshop.

"Goddamn it! Where is my hammer?" he thundered one such morning. "I told those damn kids to stay away from my tools . . ." I sat quietly at the kitchen table, trembling with fear. Then I heard my name: "Kathy!"

I had a one-in-five chance of getting nabbed, and this time I was "it," dead man walking, down the steps, one by one, scared out of my wits.

Dad's brown eyes bore into me, his anger like a bonfire, and I was about to get burned. "Where's my hammer?" I was standing close to him, but he yelled loud enough to be heard upstairs. "How many times have I told you not to take my hammer?" I was too terrified to answer, but I knew it was many, many times.

"Go find it!" Dad's temper was at full throttle and raw, naked fear jogged my ten-year-old memory. It was in the garage. I had been trying to nail two boards together and then figured out the nails weren't long enough to do the job and abandoned the project, and Dad's hammer. I tore upstairs, got the hammer, and ran back down the stairs, trying not to wet my pants.

I offered the hammer to him as if it were my first-born son. He grabbed it from me and said, for the one-hundredth time, "Don't take my hammer again!" Every time I had this encounter with my ferociously angry dad, I thought I'd learned my lesson, till the next when time he was gone, and I started a new project.

One of the neighbor kids had a dad who clapped his hands and said, "Good job!" if they did something right. We knew we wouldn't get such praise from our dad, much less applause, so we concluded there was something wrong with that kid's family.

When my brothers and sisters and I watched Ward Cleaver talk to the Beaver and Wally on *Leave it to Beaver,* we laughed. We thought the only kid that seemed real was Eddie Haskell, because he reflected our cynical view of the world, a view we had honed by living with our dad.

We had a good mother. Some of our friends had really mean moms, and their dads weren't much better, so we were grateful for what we had. Mom cooked all our meals and packed our lunches, cleaned the house, and did the laundry. She was a pretty good sport, and she kept her sense of humor.

On a sunny summer morning, a couple of wild ducks from Eagle Creek waddled into the backyard to see my sister Jean's pet duck.

"Mom! Moooom! There are ducks in the yard!" Jean, John and I were screaming at once. "They want to take Jean's duck!"

"Help me get them in the car so we can take them back to the creek." She didn't miss a beat.

"Mom! Moooom!" we yelled again another time. "There are pigs in the yard! They got out of the farmer's field!"

"Get in the house, they're dangerous!" Mom called out to us. There would be no pigs in Mom's car. The pigs slowly walked away, but Mom kept us in the house for a few hours until she was sure they were gone.

Then there was the time the newly minted driver, Anne, tried to back the car out of the garage, hit the storm windows

Dad had carefully mounted on the wall, and smashed them all. That time Mom was too stunned to speak.

We visited our relatives in Wisconsin infrequently when we were young and then less and less as we got older. Dick developed an attachment to our grandfather, Earl Vallee. He bypassed Dad and chose Earl as the man to emulate. He was enamored of Earl and Anita, our grandmother. After he retired, Grandpa renovated an old farmhouse in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, and transformed it into an elegant home. The white clapboard house rose from a fieldstone foundation. The pitched roof had dormers in front and back. The house stood at the top of a long, perfectly green lawn, with mature oak and maple trees in front and a small apple orchard in the back. It was filled with antique furniture and carefully decorated by Anita in Colonial style. My grandparents called the house "the farm."

Dick and I went to Wisconsin to visit our grandparents, by ourselves, when he was twelve-years-old and I was seven. Just flying on an airplane was heady stuff, but the elegance of my grandparents' house and their affluent lifestyle overwhelmed me. Grandpa picked us up at the airport in his wine-red Chrysler Imperial with a white interior. Dick sat in front with Grandpa while I sunk into the soft leather upholstery in the back seat. Grandpa pulled into the long driveway and drove around to the back of the house.

When he got out of the car, we followed him into the kitchen where the aroma of Grandma's delicately seasoned roast beef was a revelation. I had never smelled anything so tantalizing. The dining room table was set with delicate china in a floral pattern, with pink roses in the middle and sprays of

ferns and white lily of the valley blossoms around the edge. I was awestruck.

"You're here!" Grandma exclaimed as Dick and I entered the kitchen. Her hair was perfectly styled, and her pearl necklace and earrings complimented her elegant dress. Even her apron was fancy, a calico print with rows of ruffles at the top and bottom.

"Kathy was afraid on the airplane but I calmed her down," Dick boasted.

"You are a good big brother," Grandma said.

"You shouldn't be afraid, Kathy," Grandpa said, a bit sternly. He had the same brown eyes as Dad, with the same intensity.

"I'm okay," I managed to squeak out.

The next morning I sat in the sunny nook of Grandma's spotless kitchen, while she spread strawberry jam on my toast. I was so overwhelmed by the house, my grandparents, and the food, that I was unable to speak.

"Do you like strawberry jam?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, barely above a whisper.

"Do you like school?" she tried again.

"Yes, I'm in second grade," I said, barely audible.

"Do you want to help me take out the trash?" Grandma asked. She was trying to engage me, but I wasn't making it easy. I was paralyzed with shyness.

Even something as mundane as an incinerator was elegant at my grandparent's house. It was made of red brick, with a heavy cast-iron door and a chimney. Grandma stuffed the trash into the incinerator and threw in a match. The paper burned quickly. Suddenly, Grandma spit at the heavy door, which had grown quite hot. Her saliva sizzled, much to her delight.

"Wow," I said. "Can I try?"

"Of course," Grandma said as she spit again.

"It's fun!" I said with a big smile. Finally, Grandma and I had bonded.

Dick was with Grandpa, describing all the chores he wanted to do. "I know how to run the riding mower," Dick said, eager to impress his grandfather. "I can clean the barn too. Or Kathy and I can help you take the trash to the dump." He was willing to work hard to please the old man.

"Start by mowing the lawn. Take Kathy with you," Grandpa said.

I ran over and jumped onto Grandpa's riding mower while Dick drove. First, we took a tour of the property, which had a large barn with an apartment upstairs, Grandpa's woodworking shop, and a corn crib, an old wooden structure that had been used to store corn decades earlier but now stood empty.

"I love it here!" I shouted over the roar of the mower's engine. "Can I drive?"

"Hell, no!" Dick shouted back. "You're way too young."

It was during that visit that I knew I wanted what Grandpa and Grandma had—a quiet home without the constant chatter of children and the messes they made. Everything in the house was fancy, right down to the soap in the bathroom. It was pink, with an elegant filigree design around the edges. Stamped in the center was *Sweetheart Soap*. When I lathered my hands, a delightful scent of roses filled the room.

When Dick and I went back home, we were both homesick for the beautiful, quiet, magical home where our grandparents lived.

Earl and Anita were not interested in having many grandchildren. I found out after I grew up that they called Mom and Dad's home in Ohio "the baby farm." The disapproval of their son's growing family came to a head with Mom's pregnancy with Jean. Because they were afraid, my parents waited until she was born to tell Dad's parents that baby number four had arrived. And sure enough, Grandpa's response to the happy news was swift and brutal.

"Don't expect me to support all those kids!"

Earl left no doubt. Kids cost money, and he didn't think Dad was up to supporting them. Dad was humiliated and Mom was crushed. Jean was often ill in the first few years of her life. One very cold winter night when we were getting ready to go to bed, Dad carried three-year-old Jean, wrapped in a blanket, to the car. Mom and Dad took her to the hospital because she was having difficulty breathing after battling bronchitis for over a week.

"Go to bed. We'll be back," Dad said to the four of us. Dick, age twelve, was put in charge. John was asleep in his crib, so Anne and I went to bed and hoped Mom and Dad would be back in the morning. Mom said Jean was put in an oxygen tent at the hospital. Anne and I thought that sounded like fun, being too young to understand that it wasn't like camping.

I remember watching Jean when she was five years old as she ran back and forth from her bedroom to the bathroom during a bout of diarrhea when she had the flu. "Jean has diarrhea again," Mom told Dad on the phone when he called from Michigan. Jean overheard some of the conversation but only heard Mom say "die" and thought she was dying. She told me later she was terrified but didn't talk to Mom about it.

Jean missed three months of school in second grade because she had nephritis, a kidney disease.

She may have inherited her intense personality from our father and grandfather, or she may have been so scrappy because she didn't feel good for the first eight years of her life. But Jean took no crap—not from anyone, even Dad. When he yelled at me, I tried not to pee in my pants. When he yelled at Jean, she gave it right back, fearlessly. The two of them were like pieces of flint: The more they knocked against each other, the brighter the sparks.

Jean sat across from Dad at the dinner table on a Sunday night in midwinter after we had been cooped up in the house all weekend. The two grumpiest people in the family started to get on each other's nerves.

"Stop looking at me," Dad said to Jean, glaring at her. He had just complained to Mom that the pork chops were dry. We were all on edge.

"I'm not looking at you," Jean replied with a frown, her chin jutted out.

"Yes you are, stop it!" Dad yelled.

"I'm not looking at you!" Jean screamed.

"Look someplace else!" Dad said, yelling louder.

"Mom, may I be excused?" Jean got up from her chair before Mom could answer, shot Dad the stink eye, and marched out of the dining room. Then Dad took a beer into the living room, sat in his easy chair, and turned on the TV. The rest of us relaxed and furtively slipped pieces of our dry pork chop under the table to Speckles the dog.

When Mom was pregnant with John, Dad had a vasectomy. Earl and Anita were not as upset with baby number five

because he was a boy. They were diehard sexists, and boys were just flat-out more valuable than girls to them. John played the baby of the family to perfection. He had a happy nature and a quick wit that could make a menacing older sibling who was about to hit him start laughing instead.

The only one below John was the family dog, a mutt named Speckles. Mom's constant refrain after Speckles came into the family was, "John, stop teasing the dog . . . stop teasing the dog, John . . . leave the dog alone, John . . . stop it!"

As each of us married and left home, Dad got more relaxed. The bathroom was no longer Grand Central Station in the morning. He converted one of the empty bedrooms into a neat and tidy office, and his tools stayed put. Mom and Dad went out to dinner a couple of times a week to give Mom a break from the kitchen. When the grandchildren came along, he was playful with them. They called him "Grandpa Bob" and weren't afraid. As he got more relaxed, Mom got more relaxed too. My parents and I enjoyed each other's company and entered a new phase in our relationship.

I understood Dad better and started to realize how much I was like him, especially in our need for tidiness and order. I had a bedroom to myself for only a few years while growing up, and it became my haven, like Dad's workshop. If someone went in my room and took something, I was as incensed as Dad was about his hammer. Talk about "birds of a feather."

After Dad retired, he and Mom left the home they had lived in for thirty years and moved to Prescott, Arizona. By then I had settled in Los Angeles, and my older sister, Anne, lived in Scottsdale, Arizona. Our parents, in their early sixties, were relatively healthy. Dad kept busy for a couple of years

overseeing construction of his dream home, with a workshop adjacent to the garage that would never fill with water. After raising five children, Mom said all she wanted to do was sit down and enjoy needlepoint, reading, and watching TV—and that's what she did.

During those years, Anne and I got closer to our parents, not just because of proximity, but because we spent more time with them. They spent Thanksgiving at my house in Monrovia, California, and Christmas at Anne's home in Scottsdale. Dick, Jean, and John saw Mom and Dad infrequently, with two or three years in between visits, especially after they moved to Arizona. After the first family feud in 1987, it all fell apart.

It had started innocently enough when Dad sent all five of us a letter asking us to sign a legal document that consolidated his family's three trusts. Our signatures were required because we were beneficiaries. Anne and I signed and mailed the documents back right away.

Dick, Jean, and John refused to sign. They wanted to see to see the original trust, claiming that Grandpa was a very smart man and they needed to reassure themselves that Dad was fulfilling his intentions. The thinly veiled accusation was that Grandpa was smart and Dad was stupid. John changed his mind and signed, but Dick and Jean's intransigence was a bomb lobbed into what we had previously considered to be our distant, but basically congenial, family.

The battle lines were drawn. Anne and I were steadfast in our alliance with our parents, and Dick was the four-star general of the campaign against Dad. Dick and Jean's deification of Earl Vallee justified, in their minds, disrespecting their father. Mom knew there would be no winners in this

conflict, not with her father-in-law's ghost so deeply embedded in the battle. She took a neutral position but it didn't help. John played both sides. Eventually Dick and Jean signed, but the damage was done.

We retreated to our respective corners and life went on until the summer of 1993, when Mom went for a checkup, and the doctor could not detect a pulse in her ankles. Her circulation was poor. Mom, a slender woman for most of her life, had developed a big tummy and wasn't motivated to lose weight. I will never know if the doctor suggested going on a diet and exercising, but I do know he recommended major surgery to increase the blood flow to Mom's lower extremities.

"She had a heart attack during the surgery, and they took her somewhere. I don't know where," Dad told me, his voice full of fear. I learned later that it wasn't a heart attack, but Mom had started to bleed unexpectedly during the procedure. The surgeon stopped the surgery and closed her up.

"I'll be there tomorrow, Dad. Where is Anne?" I said, chastising myself for not being there during the surgery. I had booked a flight for the next day. "She is still at her class," Dad said, and I shuddered when I realized he was alone. Anne was taking a class in medical transcription that morning and was probably on the way to the hospital. Mom and Dad had downplayed the seriousness of the surgery, so Anne and I weren't too worried. None of us thought there would be such serious complications, but I regretted that we weren't more careful to ensure Dad wouldn't wait during the surgery alone.

Mom spent the next three days on life support in the intensive care unit. Anne, Dad, and I waited outside the ICU,

leaving only to eat and sleep. Anne left messages for Dick, Jean, and John, keeping them updated. John called back and offered to come if it was the end, but nobody knew if it was the end, not even the doctors. Dick and Jean did not call Anne or Dad back. Mom had probably told them not to worry, and they were unable to take in any information to the contrary. It was easier for them to conclude that Anne was overreacting and Mom was fine.

On the morning of the third day, the doctor said Mom needed a procedure called a sigmoidoscopy (a flexible tube, with a light on it, is inserted into the sigmoid colon). He thought some of her tissue might have died due to lack of oxygen during the surgery. In that cute way doctors talk when they describe unpleasant procedures, he said he wanted to go in and "take some pictures."

"Can I be there?" I'm pretty squeamish but had been through a colonoscopy and knew what Mom was in for. I wanted to be present, even if she were unconscious. "That's fine," he said as he walked away.

I got to the ICU shortly before the gastroenterologist arrived. Mom had IVs in both arms, with multiple plastic bags full of fluid hanging overhead on what looked like a hat rack on wheels. A nurse called the cluster of tubing that flowed from the bags into Mom's body "spaghetti." Occasionally Mom's eyes would flutter open, but I knew she was unconscious.

The gastroenterologist started the procedure, and I cringed. The smell in the room was ghastly. The doctor kept turning a little valve that released the gas and commented on how much there was. I leaned down close to Mom's face and asked her if she wanted me to swear for her. Mom never said anything

worse than damn, or hell, so my offer to swear for her must have been liberating. Mom's lids lifted and our eyes locked. She nodded, signaling "yes."

I began to swear like a sailor: "Goddamn, son-of-a-bitch, holy crap!" Mom never used these words. They simply weren't part of her vocabulary, until now.

Given Mom's feelings about religion, I didn't offer to pray. She fought for survival in the best way she knew how, not by cowing and crying, but by crowing and describing in colorful language the indignation she felt but was unable to express.

"Bullshit, holy hell!" I was getting into the swing of it. The doctor and nurses didn't seem to notice. Or, if they did, they didn't care.

At last the procedure was completed. The doctor left, and I told Mom I'd go tell Anne and Dad that she did a great job. She told me a couple of weeks later that my swearing had got her through the ordeal. My mother and I had fought hard, and we had won.

The next morning Mom regained consciousness. The nurses let all three of us be in the ICU, suspending their one-person-at-a-time rule. Anne and I stood on either side of the bed, with Dad at the end, and said corny things like, "Hi, sleepyhead." Mom stayed in the ICU for a few more days and then moved to a regular room for another week. Anne left Dick, Jean, and John the good news on their voicemail.

During those long days in the ICU waiting room, Anne and I developed a relationship with Dad that went beyond drinking together during happy hour and eating meals in fancy restaurants. He leaned on us, something he had never done before. We sustained one another while Mom was so

critically ill. Dad loosened his parental authority and saw Anne and me more as equals.

"I want to take you two out to dinner tonight," Dad said. "We need to celebrate, and I want to thank you for helping your mother and me."

"Can we go to Bourbon and Bones and get a big, juicy steak?" I asked.

"That sounds good," Dad answered.

After Mom got home, she had six weeks of cardiac rehab and looked better than she had in years. Dad was livid that Jean and Dick didn't reach out when Mom was in the ICU. The anger and resentment from the first feud were never resolved and remained in the background, like a virus in an operating system.

While Anne and I got closer to Dad, his angry shadow side festered. Dad felt Dick and Jean had disrespected Mom, and his anguish was expressed in anger. The three of them exchanged nasty letters. There was carnage, and no healing.

Five years later, in 1998, when Dad was diagnosed with colon cancer and underwent surgery, Anne left messages for Dick, Jean, and John from the ICU waiting room. John called her back immediately and also called Dad a few times over the next few weeks to check in. Dick and Jean did not respond.

Two years later, in August of 2000, Dad's diagnosis of terminal cancer was confirmed. By now we knew the drill. Anne and I were at the hospital, John responded to Anne's messages, and called Mom and Dad occasionally. Dick and Jean might as well have been on Mars.

Dad had five children: two estranged, one who wasn't estranged but wasn't close either, and two who were about to

walk with him through his last days. My sister and I became a team and trusted one another. I'm not sure I could have done it without her.

Anne and I weren't close when we were growing up. I was a tomboy, and she was more of a girly-girl. I was a hard-boiled cynic, and she was more trusting. I would jump into things, and she would pause for a moment. Our temperaments didn't mesh.

One bitterly cold night in 1959, when I was nine years old, I went outside after dinner to play on the snow ramp my brother Dick and I had built a few days earlier. Our neighborhood, on former farmland, was flat. If we wanted to slide on our sleds, we had to build our own snow ramp. We rolled up several snowballs, pushed them together, and sprayed it with the garden hose to make it icy.

It was a moonless night; the only light was from the back windows of the house. I pulled on my snow pants, winter coat, boots, and mittens, and then begged Anne to come outside to push me off the ramp. Eleven-year-old Anne didn't want to go out into the dark and the cold. I begged and cajoled until she agreed, to "shut me up."

I got myself positioned in the center of the saucer sled at the top of the ramp. Anne gave me a big shove, and I flew off into the dark, holding on to the sled handles as tightly as I could. On the way down I hit a patch of ice, almost flipped over, then bumped up against a snowdrift at the end of our one-half-acre lot, out of breath and exhilarated.

"I made it!" I screamed with delight, lifting the sled up for my sister to see in the dim light.

"Let's go inside," Anne complained. "I don't want a turn. I'm cold."

I wondered why she wanted to go inside. The cold night air frosted our breath, and the icy ramp and adventure beckoned to me.

After we were long grown and had families of our own, Anne and I worked to help our parents through many illnesses and surgeries. In August 2000, when we faced Dad's terminal illness together, our different temperaments complemented one another. I don't think Anne would have hired professional help without Mom and Dad knowing about it, but she agreed with me when I did. I know I wouldn't have called our siblings to tell them about Dad and hospice, but I was glad she did.

There were no peacemakers among the seven of us—five adult children and two aging parents. No one told us to knock it off and get along, if only for Mom and Dad's sake. There were no pastors, no lifelong friends of the family, no favorite uncle or sensible great-aunt who intervened. My parents raised us far from our relatives, outside of organized religion, and with no close social network of any kind.

I didn't know how Dick and Jean would respond to Anne's attempts to communicate with them. Would they soften, or would Dad's terminal illness fail to thaw the thirteen-year-old ice? My sister and I cared for our father during his last days, with estrangement poised over our heads, like a sword.

We were faced with a decision when the doctor suggested a feeding tube so that Dad could be subjected to more treatment. I stood by his bed and looked at a suffering man. Continued radiation would make him suffer more, for no good reason. It was common sense time, and Dad was a very common sense guy.

His lips were dry and chapped. He was hungry and thirsty, but when he tried to eat or drink he choked, gagged, and then coughed for as long as twenty-five minutes.

"Dad," I asked gently, "would you like some ice chips?"

"That would be nice, Katrinka," he said. I had forgotten that he called me that pet name, and the memory came thundering back. I was about four years old, eating breakfast in the kitchen in Ohio. Dad was headed to the back door, on his way to work. He stopped, and his voice was playful when he said, "Katrinka, what does Tony the Tiger say about corn flakes?"

That was my cue. "They're GRRRR-EAT!" I proclaimed at the top of my lungs.

He had a big smile on his face. "Say it again, Katrinka." I told him, no less enthusiastically, "Tony the Tiger says they're GRRRR-EAT!"

He chuckled and went out the door. I will always cherish that moment when Dad and I remembered a time when he was a young man, and I was a small girl who made him smile with my Tony the Tiger impersonation.

If Dad had gone through another week of radiation he would have died a horrible death, and we would have missed that sweet memory, along with many others. My sister, Mom, and I had the opportunity to say goodbye, each in our own way. As Dad's body began to fade away, I felt a spiritual connection to him that continues to this day.

Taking on the responsibility of having a family member die at home is arduous and exhausting, but it can conjure up memories from long ago that have been forgotten but return with a tender poignancy. It is an opportunity for reconciliation and allows time to put earthly affairs in order. Watching

a human body deteriorate is frightening, but the spirit shines forth as it prepares for new life.

There were times during the last twenty-nine days of my father's life that I was stretched to my limit, but I would have forever regretted the alternative. Because Dad had the courage to face his terminal illness and graciously accepted the help he needed to remain at home, Anne and I grew closer to our parents in ways that we never dreamed were possible.