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LOVE, ALWAYS

Lessons from the Dying on the Meaning of Life

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Translated from Italian by Patricia Brigid Garvin

MY FATHER

My father, Mario, was born at the end of the 1800s. He was nineteen in 1917 when he was drafted into the *Nizza Cavalleria* regiment after the Battle of Caporetto. Most of his fellow officer cadets on the course did not come back from the front after the Great War, but my father, who at a young age had already survived an attack of cholera in Naples, had a strong constitution, so that even in the mid-1990s he was still in great shape. He awaited the milestone of his hundredth birthday under the illusion that he would receive a bonus of a million lire from his bank as his legendary friend Claudio had done. Claudio had lived to one hundred and three, and on his hundredth birthday, at a time when inflation had not yet eroded the purchasing power of the lira, had received the fantastic sum of one million. By now, however, a million was no longer a great amount, but to my father, who had lost the sense of the value of money, it was enough to dream of the lucky Signor Bonaventura, who won this amount each week in the stories my father read to me during the postwar years from the illustrated weekly stories published in the *Corriere dei piccoli*.

Dad didn't reach his goal: from the age of ninety-six his energy began to dwindle and he grew frail. He said to me, 'The good Lord's secretary must have misplaced my file.' My mother, too, grew old, and for the two of them to live at their home alone became untenable when she fractured the neck of her femur. While she was in hospital I looked for a convalescent nursing home to accommodate them both. They stayed there for a year, then we brought them back to their home after my sister, Piera, and I had arranged an efficient system of home care, inspired by the way the nursing home was run.

In order to cope with this new situation in their lives, I took a training course for several months on how to assist the elderly and the sick. It represented the first step towards my current role as a hospital volunteer engaged in palliative care.

My father worked in a bank for fifty years, making a good career of which he was very proud. He was a strict, fair man who inspired fear in his employees. At home he had the maid call him *signor direttore* – which gives some idea of how he lived his role. During World War II we lived in Rome, and he travelled by bike to his office in the centre. When he spoke of the climb up via Capolecase, I pictured him as the great cyclist Bartali, climbing the Pordoi Pass in the Giro d'Italia. On Sundays we took a bike trip out to the countryside, riding along the Via Salaria as far as a bridge over the Tiber, before the town of Monterotondo, which had been destroyed by the bombing. I was too little to ride alone, so I sat in a child's seat behind my father. I had to sing all the way to prove I hadn't fallen asleep, and I used to think that pedalling would have been less exhausting. Piera was older and already independent, whereas our mother, insecure on two wheels, got down at every crossroads and crossed over on foot with us teasing her.

During the years of elementary school, my mother was my confidant and refuge from the difficulties and nightmares brought on by catechism lessons. Our parish priest terrorised me with threats of hellfire as a punishment for my sins, and demonised my dear grandmother because she was Lutheran, suggesting I convert her. Even Sistilia our maid was considered an evil presence because she declared she'd joined the Communist Party. Yet, in truth, both my grandmother and Sistilia were kinder and gentler to me than any other female presence around me. Certainly more than Piera, who carried out illicit operations with our shared money, or my mother, who made me practise writing my letters a hundred times.

My father, on the other hand, was a reliable but distant presence who rather scared me, though I knew certain reassuring secrets about him. One of these was a discovery I made when I was seven years old, which, given the nature of our relationship, I never spoke to him about. In 1942, when I was four years old, there was not a lot to eat in Rome and I often went to bed with a hollow stomach, and sometimes real hunger. Bread was rationed. There was a dark green card with stamps, and each family was entitled to a certain number of *ciriole* per day, depending on the size of the family nucleus. *Ciriole* are bread rolls that weigh less than 100g, and, as a family of four, we were allowed to buy eight a day. My grandmother often took me to Venanzio's, the baker on via Trebbia, to buy bread. I loved the smell of the baked goods in his shop and I was very fond of Venanzio, who was friendly towards children and one day gave me a still-warm *ciriola* to eat on the spot. My grandmother would then take me to the Villa Borghese, and along the way she taught me many things. For example, she taught me to count, and, later, to carry out the four basic operations for numbers up to twenty. So one day at the Parco dei Daini, while using acorns to check my

answers, I discovered that eight divided by four does not equal three. Yet I had a *ciriola* in the morning, one at lunch and another at dinner, as did Piera for that matter. 'Fortunately, grandma didn't teach my dad to do division.' I said to myself, and I thought, 'Better not say anything to anyone and risk losing a *ciriola* a day.'

Once, when I was in the second elementary class and my father was checking my exercise book, I realised that he'd mastered dividing whole numbers up to twenty, and perhaps beyond. So it was in his heart that he was unable to do division: for two years, he and my mother had eaten only one bread roll a day to save my sister and I from dying of hunger. This discovery shocked me, but I never said anything to anyone, and certainly not to my dad because I was too shy, too touched, and in any case dad did not encourage verbal communication. I kept this discovery like a treasure in the secret part of me. Meanwhile the Allies had arrived: there was pea soup and white bread.

Dad worked for fifty years in the same bank, then lived in retirement for over thirty more years. This second long period enabled him to overcome the strict austerity that had characterised his life and which had prompted him to impose on me, and perhaps even on Piera, the indisputable authoritarian decisions that had led me to leave home as soon as possible to get away from him. Only after a long and difficult time did I find myself finally free and able to take full possession of my life. Over the years, dad improved like good wine, becoming in extreme old age an affectionate and communicative father and grandfather — attentive, and capable of affection. He left a warm memory of himself and was much loved, forging relationships with the people he spent time with. I once saw him surreptitiously kiss the hand of a nurse's assistant who looked after him in the retirement home. In his last years he learned to discover and wonder at the beauty of creation. For him, old age was not a process of gradual limitation but the culmination of a path[1] in which he reached the fullness of his humanity.

My training for assisting old people who are dying has taught me to try to help those at the end of their days to discover that they can be proud of their lives, and that they have done wonderful, admirable things. So one time when I went to Rome to visit my parents I decided to tell my father about my childhood discovery. Dad was half asleep in a chair; he had lost a little of his lucidity, but distant memories were still stored away. He recalled the bread rationing, the way it had been shared out at home, and how we had all suffered. I thanked him and we cried together.

He also remembered another episode, and we pieced together the details. It concerned his older brother, Uncle Federico, a retired air force colonel. I clearly remember Uncle Federico in full uniform: he looked as if he'd swallowed a broomstick. He also had a sword and I'd wondered how he might put it to use in air battles. Anyway, Uncle Federico had found a doorman in Piazza Istria who sold bread on the

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[1] Enzo Bianchi,, *Vivere l'anzianità,* Bose, 2010, Edizioni Qiqajon.

black market. My uncle had the money to buy the bread, but would never have dared to shop on the black market – he, a one-time senior officer in the air force who said that 'certain things are not done'! His principles intact, my uncle was nonetheless pragmatic, and so he asked my father to go and buy him ten baguettes, promising to give him one free as commission. So Dad went by bike to Piazza Istria with my uncle's money and brought back the booty on his bike rack. Before he delivered the bread to his brother, he dropped by at home. From the bicycle room – the bikes had to be shouldered up to the fourth floor to keep them safe – came a delicious smell of bread. How could I have resisted? I would have gladly eaten a whole baguette, maybe two, but I thought it more prudent to take a bite from the ends of each of the ten loaves, that way I could blame it on mice if anyone noticed. But on the contrary, the marks of my small teeth were irrefutable proof of my guilt. My father scolded me severely, but I realised he was crying.

Now this great old man was at the end of his strength and no longer hungry; indeed, he couldn't manage to eat anything. But he was able to be moved by his emotions and to recall memories of suffering, sharing and love. What had kept us apart was gone. We were together, we loved each other, and we forgave each other. I said, 'You've been a good father to me and I thank you for your example in life,' and he replied, 'You're a good son and I love you.' This current of love and forgiveness eased my sadness over his death. It's a part of me and of my honouring his memory.