

Jerry

My brother-in-law Jerry was one of the nicest people I have known. In Yiddish, “a gute nishoma.” a good soul. I don’t ever remember him saying a mean or unkind word. He had a remarkable capacity for seeing good in everyone. He was a loving father, a good friend, a selfless volunteer, and a hard worker. He worked for many years for a contractor who installed central air conditioning in new, high rise construction. Jerry was responsible for pricing the job, which is both responsible, and nervous-making. If you price it too high, you might not get the job. If you price it too low, and you might get the job, but your boss may lose money. You have to figure it just right. Fran believed that despite the importance of his role, he was not well paid, and received few benefits and no pension.

Jerry was active for many years with the Lions, a service organization that helps needy people obtain glasses, and provides other services. Jerry annually dressed up as Santa Claus. One year he received an award from his town, honoring him as “the volunteer of the year.” He was proud of that.

When Jerry was in the service, he was a cook. He may have learned cooking from his mother, or he may have volunteered to cook because it was a better assignment than some of the other stuff you might have to do. He continued to cook when he came out of the army, and was the main food preparer during the time he lived with his daughter Heidi in Arlington, Texas, and when visiting his daughter Niki in Newton, MA.

Jerry was a good father and grandfather. He loved his daughters, Heidi and Niki, and they loved him. Niki is 10 years younger than Heidi, and when Niki was a teen-ager, Heidi was no longer living at home. Heidi married, had two children, Rick and Alyssa, and eventually moved to Texas. Niki left home in her twenties, came to the Boston area, found a job and a husband, and also has two children, Lucas and Seth.

When it became clear that Jerry was dying, and was hospitalized, toward the end of November, Fran flew out to Arlington. We did not know the details. Was it his heart, or a combination of heart and kidney failure? It was two years ago that he had the first congestive heart failure experience that sent him to the hospital. It has been down hill from then. He must have been getting weaker, feeling more vulnerable, taking more medication, seeing more doctors.

Questions: What did they tell him? When do you know it is not going to get better? How do you react when they tell you that they can’t do anything for you? Is it then that you realize that the end is near?

Have you taken care of everything? Any last minute arrangements? Is there someone special you want to say goodbye to? Does your life pass before you? Do you have feelings of satisfaction, or regret? Do you think about the funeral that will take place? Is there anything special you want people to say about you? Do you think about how people will feel when you are gone?

Are you in pain? Are you hungry or thirsty? Are you feeling comforted by the people around you? Are you aware that you are in a hospital? Is there somewhere else that you would rather die? Is the time passing too slowly or too quickly? Do you know what day it is? Do you want

to stay in this state for as long as possible, or do you want it to be over? Do you wonder what it will be like after you die? Do you feel cheated, having to go when people older than you are still around? If you could choose to end your life, would you? Does staying alive top “quality of life”? Would you want to go on living if you could not speak or walk or read or take in food or control your bowels or have any control of your environment? What kind of life would it be, lying in bed attached to tubes, having your family and friends feeling sorry for you?

In those last days, Jerry requested that he be buried in the same cemetery as his parents, and with the help of Niki, he drew up his will. The day before he died, Jerry was moved to hospice from Intensive Care. Everybody was at his bedside. More questions: What are they feeling? Sadness? Regret? Pain? Loss? Anger? Impatience? Are they grateful that they are able to be with him, knowing that this is the end? Are they comforting him, or themselves?

When Niki called to tell me that Jerry died at 3:30 pm Saturday December 1, I called David. Then Jerry and Fran’s sister Sallie called to tell me that Steven received a text message from Niki with the news. Then Fran called, telling me that she was at the airport and that it was a matter of hours. I told her as gently as I could that Jerry had died 15 minutes after she left. It would have been much better if she could have been with him when he went. Fran spent the next hour sitting in the Dallas airport, waiting and grieving.

The funeral took place at 10 AM on December 5. Jerry’s body had been shipped from Texas. David flew in from Michigan, and Sallie and her three children drove from Rochester. Eulogies were given by Fran, Jerry’s long-time friend Ronnie Teitelbaum, and Niki. The ceremony conducted by Reb Moshe Waldoks, was dignified and moving, and his words were comforting. The chapel was filled. After the funeral, the long drive to the cemetery. I was touched that so many people came. We all went to Niki’s house for the “Memorial Observance.” There was to be no “shiva.” The following day, there was a brunch at our house, and Fran and I were able to talk at length with Niki and Heidi after everyone left. It is clear that Jerry had very little. He was 73 years old. What he left was a hole in the hearts of the people who loved him, and a good name.

12-7-12 (revised 12-10)