

LIFE AND DEATH IN MEMORIAL

It used to be called Decoration Day - a day to commemorate U.S. men and women who died while in the military service. Now known as Memorial Day, it has changed calendar dates several times (officially back to the last Monday in May) but has only been a Federal holiday since 1971.

In our family, it has always symbolized a day of remembrance for loved ones. We honored those who served but also remembered those who have passed. It was a time to decorate the graves. It is a time to celebrate life and death.

Death to many is the great unknown. It is a natural part of the life cycle. Some people are obsessed with it, while others rarely acknowledge it. I've had the privilege of knowing several people who have come to grips with Death and handled the situation in such a dignified way; it's had a profound impact on my outlook of life.

Let me share three experiences with you.

Frank Bolenbaugh

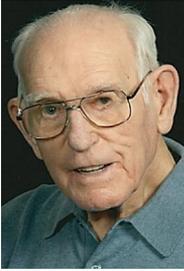


I knew Frank Bolenbaugh for almost thirty years. He was a legendary large animal vet who did work on cows and horses and even a few dogs and cats throughout mid-Michigan from the time he got his veterinary degree after WWII until he was well into his 80's. After he sold his practice he became the resident vet for Starwin Farm, a Standardbred racehorse farm owned by his son David. That's where I met him.

I wrote a column about Frank and his war experiences in November 2006. We talked about death and I remember being impressed with him saying he remembered being scared but never feared being killed. If it was his time, so be it and Death would take him.

He cheated Death during the war and lived a long fruitful life until he chose his time to die.

Frank was a robust man but had his share of serious physical problems over the years. "My Dad always wondered what was going to take him out," said his son David. "He would have a bout of cancer and think 'is this the one' or when he had his pacemaker put in he'd say 'well, maybe it's this one.'"



He ran into health complications and was hospitalized last fall. I remember in years past he always talked about reaching the year 2000 and then he extended it to reaching 100 years of age. But this trip to the hospital really wore him down. He recovered and came home but admitted being tired and reaching 100 might not be worth the effort.

In January, Frank turned 90 and encouraged his son to not cancel a planned two-week trip to Florida. So David and his wife Candy left on January 29th. “I could tell he was struggling to get his breath when I would talk to him on the phone,” recalled David. “It was getting bad so they took him to emergency room Wednesday night, on February 10th.”

Frank had a DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) order and the doctor informed his caretaker that a breathing tube would be necessary or he might not make it through the night. Frank only wanted to know when Dave would be getting back home and when told it would be Friday morning, he finally agreed to have the tube put in to borrow a little time.

Dave and Candy walked into Frank’s room at 11:00 Friday morning. “He gave me a chance to talk with him and said our goodbyes,” said David. “I asked him if he was ready to go home. He nodded and gestured to pull the tube out and he was gone. Wasn’t that courageous?”

Congestive heart failure was the one that finally took this courageous man - one small testimonial to the life of one tough Marine who had a heart of gold. His funeral was a multitude of stories exalting his love for his family, friends and community.

“He always said he would never rust out, he would wear out,” David remembered. “We talked about death quite a few times and he was ready. In these past few years he would say ‘I can’t figure out why I’m still here on earth.’ I would say it was to look after us. I guess he figured we would be okay now as long as death was on his terms and his time.”

Virginia McCulloch

I had my first cup of coffee with Miss Beaverton (1930) in December 2007. At 94 years old, she could still charm the socks off a centipede. What a delight it was to sit and talk about most anything at those Friday morning gathering at the old homestead on McCulloch Road.



She could look at a photograph from her early days in Lyle, Michigan (she moved there in 1915) and remember every person. I noticed the sparkle in her eyes when I mentioned her being named Miss Centennial in 2003. She wasn't beyond bragging about how many of her sons qualified to attend the 50-year reunions of Beaverton High School, either.

By far, the Evans/McCulloch family was her favorite subject to talk about. Although she was never afraid to travel, especially if it involved visiting a relative, she cherished her life on the farm and lived the majority of her life right in mid-Michigan.



Joann McCulloch (married to Willis "Bill" McCulloch, Jr.) sent me an invitation to attend Virginia's 97th birthday gathering on February 7th. Much like the Friday morning coffee club, the house was filled with family and friends. This time the family had convinced the birthday girl to hold court from the couch and allow people to come to her. Reluctantly, she agreed.

Although I was aware of several health challenges including breast cancer, this was the first time I had seen her using oxygen. "She used it around the house but rarely took it on the road," said Bill. "She still had a touch of vanity at her age," he chuckled.

I introduced my wife to her, and then in typical grand dame fashion, Virginia showed genuine excitement and proceeded to treat her like a long-lost friend. We stayed and chatted for about a half hour before leaving to let others have their time with the near century old celebrity. She loved the attention but only as long as everyone was having a good time. I thought there would be years more of coffee time with her.

Virginia went into the hospital ten days later, came home on the 25th and was gone, February 28th.

Abiding by her wishes, there was no formal funeral. In reality, she had out lived her contemporaries on both sides of the family. All her childhood and most of her adult friends had already passed away. Her husband of 57 years, Willis, had been gone since 1987.

When told in the hospital that this was the beginning of the end, her only thought was to go home and be with family. “She lived a blessed life and looked at death as another experience,” said Joann. “As long as her family was alright then she would be alright with death and she had so many people to see that had left before her.”

To say she lived a full life would be understating her vitality. A few years ago, when her doctor told her she would have to slow down a bit, she asked ‘does that mean I have to give up cross-country skiing?’



The doctor said she had the heart of a 60-year old but the rest of her body just couldn't keep pace. “I think she was tired of fighting the cancer,” said Bill. Joann added, “She knew her family was okay so going looked better than trying to stay. She knew it was her time.”

I will miss having coffee with her but through Bill and Joann the coffee club continues. I have an open invitation, which I know will keep the sparkle in Virginia's eyes.

Julie Johnson

Julie is a wife to Scott Johnson (eight years); a mother of three young children; a professional photographer (she took the cover picture of my first book, *Discovering Hidden Treasures*); an EMT (emergency medical technician) and soon to be a graduate from nursing school.



For the first time since their honeymoon, Julie booked a cruise for her and Scott to take in April. When friends heard of their travel arrangements, which had them arriving in Miami just a few hours before departure to the Bahamas, everyone expressed concern. The boat won't wait if you're late!

She tried for weeks to rearrange their flight schedule to no avail. So on April 5th they boarded a plane in Des Moines, Iowa and headed for Memphis then on to Miami. During the flight, she noticed a minor commotion across the aisle. An 81-year-old diabetic man had slumped into unconsciousness and a woman was trying to revive him.

Initially she didn't want to impose but her instincts as an emergency professional took over and she asked if she could assist the woman – who turned out to be the man's daughter and a doctor. "She was terribly nervous and distressed, which is understandable, but I could see this man needed immediate help," said Julie.

No pulse – No breathing...so they got him down in the aisle and Julie set up an AED (Auto External Defibrillator). She shocked the man three times and the monitor indicated to continue CPR. With assistance from another gentleman, she worked on the unconscious man while the plane made an emergency landing in Tampa.

Local paramedics came aboard and Julie gave them her assessment of the situation. As they were ready to deplane, the monitor began indicating a strong heartbeat. "I've been confronted with many deaths and have been trained to handle these situations," said Julie. "Statistically, the chances of someone coming back are slim. The other paramedic and I looked at the monitor and then at each other – first, we were kinda shocked and then we smiled."

When she returned to sit down, the passengers spontaneously began to applaud. Somewhat embarrassed, she said, "It's what I do." The flight continued on to Miami and the airlines called ahead to inform the cruise line what had happened. The Johnsons did arrive on time; had a fabulous cruise and an uneventful flight back to Iowa one week later.

Julie only had time to hug the daughter and wish the other family members good luck – she never even got the man's name. Did he survive? We may never know and to Julie it's not even important to know.

"I tried so hard to get another flight," she recalled. "I guess I was meant to be there at that time. It pleases me to know I performed well under pressure. I only know that he was dead when I started to help him and he was alive when he left the plane. Maybe he was meant to have more time or maybe just enough time to say goodbye to his family." Way to go, Julie.

So this Memorial Day, take time to honor those who served to give us more time. Take that time to also remember those loved ones who we wish we could spend more time with. Lest we forget...our time of remembrance.