



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

TOWARDS THE LIGHT

My mother banged on the door and burst into the bedroom I shared with my brother. “Get up!” she bellowed. “Dad’s in a coma!” I rolled out of bed and followed her along the landing to my parents’ room. My father was in bed, lying on his back. He looked fast asleep. Or dead. My heart started pounding. “Try to wake him up,” said Mum. “I’m going to call an ambulance.”

Christopher and I stood on either side of the bed, feeling scared and helpless; two little boys, our father in a coma. What did that mean? We knelt down, leaned forward, and called him: “Dad! Dad! Wake up Dad!” His face was serene and pale, like marble. His dark hair was swept back from his forehead, eyes closed, lips pressed together. We moved closer, mouths just inches from his ears, and called again. Urgently and louder. And again. Shaking his shoulders. Wake up. *Dad! Please* wake up.

My father was stricken with diabetes when he was fifteen—he always said it was brought on by the shock of his father’s untimely death—and gave himself an insulin injection every day. I watched him do it many times, alternating from left thigh to right thigh, day after day, always cheerfully, accepting it as “just one of those things.” He was on a strict diet, but sometimes he strayed from his regimen and then the delicate ratio of sugar in his blood became unbalanced and he suffered what he called “a reaction.” He became light-headed, sweated profusely, and his legs turned to rubber. He stumbled and staggered and

slurred his speech. These symptoms could appear unexpectedly and once in a while I could see that others—people who didn’t know him—assumed he was in his cups. I knew better, for he was a moderate man, but it was excruciating to see him like that. At ten years old I was as embarrassed for myself as I was for him.

Somewhere behind my rapidly escalating panic I caught glimpses of my father in different scenarios from our life together. On the sand and in the water at the beach; going for a drive on Sunday; on the tennis court; in the garden; on the back patio at our house.

The vignettes were brightly lit by sunshine and he was always smiling and talking to us about living according to one’s principles, and though



my brother and I asked repeatedly what, exactly, he meant by “principles,” the answer always seemed ethereal, floating just beyond the range of my comprehension as lofty ideals are wont to do. A sudden, visceral understanding that he was in mortal danger raced through my brain, causing my bowels to constrict and my mouth to feel parched. I felt a wrenching sense of loss as I looked down into a black void that



BACK IN TIME ...Continued

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

terrified me. My mind somehow rallied and focused every shred of energy I possessed into one single beam of consciousness that bored into the still figure lying on the bed, searching for a way to revive him. I imagined that I confronted the spectre of death and commanded it to leave my dad alone. Desperate, I started yelling: "Get the hell out of here!" Christopher looked up, startled, but then understood and joined in, both of us shouting: "Get the hell out of here!" We would not normally have used such a strong word at that age, and certainly not in my father's presence. He never used that kind of language; he said it showed a lack of imagination. But on that morning, it came very naturally to his two sons.

It seemed like forever, but it can't have been long before his eyes fluttered open and he took a sudden deep, snorting breath. He turned his head to one side and then the other, his face suddenly transformed by a radiant smile. He opened his mouth and licked his lips. When he tried to speak, he choked, and had to stop and clear his throat. He drew his arms from under the covers and gripped us by our wrists. The pressure from his hand soothed me and I was flooded with a grateful sense of inarticulate relief. We all just looked at each other, grinning, tears sliding down our cheeks.

My father was a spiritual man who felt no need of an intermediary when communicating with his higher self, so he didn't use religious imagery or metaphors to express what he'd been through. He spoke in his usual simple, articulate way, using words that anyone could understand.

"I was in a dark place very far away." His voice was soft, his eyes bright. "I felt at peace, drifting along, happy to be in the flow. There was a bright light in the distance, far ahead of me, that was getting closer all the time. I looked at the light and felt comfortable. I wanted to enter the light. But then I heard muffled noises. I could make out voices calling from somewhere behind me. I stopped and listened. Something stirred inside me. I turned away from the light and recognized your voices. I could hear you boys calling me. And then I remembered; I remembered you and your mother. Memories washed over me, memories of a great happiness I wasn't ready to lose, and I turned back and started moving towards your voices. I knew I didn't want to leave you, any of you. I realized that I didn't have to and tried harder to get back to where I'd come from. Then I heard you shouting, and I understood what you were doing and joined in. You couldn't hear me, but I was laughing and shouting, *Get the hell out of here!* And then I was back. I'm here, with you. I'm back."



Over the course of my lifetime I have seen that profound acts of giving and taking away come in many guises. And I know that I have never experienced them quite so vividly as I did that morning as a scared little boy kneeling at my father's bedside.