



## **The Episodes**

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The Episodes

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*In memory of my father  
Samuel George Denner  
1900-1998*

## EPISODE 1

I take the diapers to the garbage bin. I pin a pair of socks together with a safety pin so they won't get lost in the wash. So much depends upon details. Next, I fix a glass of warm water, a bowl of corn flakes with a soup spoon, and to help my dad swallow (what he calls *lubrication*), a bowl of applesauce. I reassure him that, yes, this is the *Clover* brand skim milk that he always uses, yes, non-fat-protein fortified-vitamin-A&D, yes. By this time, my tea is cold, and it's time to turn on the sprinklers in the garden.

The next step will be to help Dad get dressed and to make sure he is comfortable watching TV. His eyes are poor, and since he can only read the headlines, he likes to listen to the news stories after scanning the paper. I weave my personal routine into the fabric of my parents' way of doing things. It is essential they stay engaged in their own activities and take as much care of themselves as they can. This requires some strategy.

It would be quicker to do the dishes by myself. I could wash and put all the dishes away in the time it takes Dad to unload the dishwasher, but it is one thing he is capable of doing in the kitchen. He wants to help, so I organize the way to do this project a little differently. I want him to feel useful, and it's a good test of my ability to be flexible and not be attached to the job.

The dishes are done. I'll go to the mailbox and get the morning paper. The Press Democrat tells me the UPS strike continues. Small businesses are feeling the crunch. The postal service can't pick up the slack. There's lots of tension and talk. I need to locate a box that was sent to me from Colorado. Dad becomes terribly agitated about my need to commandeer the telephone. He thinks the phone should be free for emergencies. Hard to convince him that this is an emergency. Later, he apologizes for being so rigid, but he can be a handful once he gets on one of his hobbyhorses. Here is the episode of the separation of religion and business. One morning, I leave the house early to do *Chöd*, a Tibetan practice, and when I return, Dad is fuming about "religion taking over the business," meaning that somehow my practice

was interfering with my responsibilities. Hard for him to understand that I had been working for an organization, Tara Mandala Retreat Center, that combined religious and commercial activities. He has begun to think there is a Buddhist coup underway, that there is a "suspicious influence" on my life that will ruin our business (read our family arrangement). He shouts that this fusion of church and state has been tried in other countries and failed. (Am I living in the Middle Ages?) He makes his point by pounding his cane on the floor, spittle forming at the corner of his mouth. He was a chief executive for State Farm Insurance. He is used to getting his way. But this is not a business meeting. This is going on in the family room, and part of the reason I have come home to stay is to mitigate these tirades, so that Mom doesn't have to bear the brunt.

Here I am, bringing diapers to my main authority figure. This old man is not the villain. He is a person who worked hard his whole life, almost an entire century, to care for and protect his family. He has earned his retirement, but when he starts worrying about what's to become of everyone and everything, the family trust, his files, the burial plot, he starts thinking in circles, repeating himself, until I want to run screaming from the room. He is not aware that dementia possesses him. It wears Mom out. She cries and threatens to leave. Then he fusses about being 98 years old, claiming this has only happened once and that we must forgive him, and things quiet down.

For awhile. I see that one of my roles here is referee. This is the longest I've stayed with my folks since I left to go to college 35 years ago. This couple has been married for nearly 60 years. Their relationship has its own dynamic. As a child, I was unaware of this dynamic, and as a young adult I didn't pay attention. Now, I am immersed, embroiled, enmeshed, and I am effecting changes, some subtle and some not so subtle.

After a recent knockdown, drag out bout concerning the historic *Proposition 13* of California Property Tax Law, I got up from the table and went in the next room to eat my muffin in peace. This precipitated an accusation that I was breaking up the family because I wouldn't sit at the kitchen table with them. I tried to explain I did not want to discuss taxes and neither did Mom, and we were accused of ganging up on him and that she wouldn't act like she was if it wasn't for me and that he was standing in the way of everyone living their own lives and he should commit suicide and, damn it, he just wanted to have a little discussion about taxes.

My solution, separate them. Fix some breakfast. Chop up some onion and put it into the scrambled eggs. This could be exciting and new. Take their minds off the inevitability of taxes and death. Change the subject. Mom mentions a friend of hers from years past, and I ask if they visited us when we lived in Berkeley in the 40s, as I have a childhood memory of someone spending the night in the front room. I see a man taking off his shoe, a man

because I can remember an argyle sock. She finds this funny, and she has a memory of when she was four years old, her brother a baby in their mother's arms and her dad telling her mom never to rent a particular horse again because it was a mean horse, had mean eyes. Also, the sweat on the reins irritated her mother's asthma, and she carried a water bottle to wash the sweat off the horse's back.

## EPISODE 2

Around midnight I hear a thump in my dream—a wrecking ball, bouncing off the wall, a plane crashing through the roof, an avalanche, no, don't freak, it's only a tidal wave. I'm up in a flash because I know that it is Dad falling.

Sure enough, there he is on his back behind the door, laughing. I ask him what's so funny, and he gleefully tells me about "a forest of huge trees and tiny houses, very neat and clean, with roads elevated above a field, so clear I could touch them." A few simple images can seem profound in a dream. Terrifying or exhilarating, so much meaning, yet all just a touch beyond comprehension.

I check him for cuts and bruises. A scrape on his knee, a scratch on his cheek, a bump on his elbow. I help him to his feet. Mom is up now and puts a bandage on his knee and helps him back to bed. In the morning, his dizziness persists, so I make an appointment with his doctor. A little fussing about what color shirt and which hat, old or new slippers. Bring the car to the front of the house, back out the wheelchair, bump down the steps, and we're on our way.

The tech at the clinic is gentle and instructive about the process. He helps Dad onto a platform for a scan. I'm reading a magazine. There's a Gary Larson cartoon with cows in a classroom I don't get. We wait for the computer to print out the results. The photos show nothing irregular, no tumors or broken blood vessels, so the doctor feels that if Dad had suffered a stroke it would have been very small. The diagnosis seems to be that it is the continued deterioration of blood circulation due to hardening of the arteries. Old age. He's 98.

He has a good appetite, a good sign. Mom and I talk things over, trying to get a game plan for the next day, or we will be ground to dust by all of Dad's small needs, just getting him dressed, brushed, shaved, washed and polished.

At breakfast, he wants to tell me about driving a team of horses to the train station near his family's farm in Iowa. He had trained these horses from colts, and he was proud of them and felt he could drive them anywhere, sure they would co-operate. The steam from a locomotive

spooked the team at a place where there was a telegraph pole, and they shied and bolted, one horse going on one side of the pole and one going on the other, stripping off their harness and smashing the yoke and tongue of the carriage. Scraped up the horses pretty good. He said it took a lot of coaxing to get them to pull again. After this experience, the horses were not of much use. Dad feels useless now that he can't walk and guilty for being a burden.

Important to be mindful of the luxury of my freedom of movement, of my control of my body, and my ability to care for myself. Sitting, standing, walking, eating, to be joyful. One minute everything is stable and clear and the next minute, stupid and wobbly. And fear gets up. Demons dance. Dad begins to worry his retirement benefits will stop. His company fail. Social Security go bankrupt. His savings run out. Somebody sue. A comet may strike. Martians invade. My legs are failing. I'm going blind. I can't hear. I can't have a bowel movement. Stark photographs.

This is going to take some getting used to. Mom can't handle it all, but there is no stopping her from taking the lion's share. Dad is able to take baby steps, stand and turn. He doesn't want his leg muscles to atrophy, so I help him walk, although he tires after a few steps. Depression sets in because he doesn't want to be helped. I hold his hand and tell him I love him and that I want him to relax and be with us as long as he is able.

I begin to see a change in his attitude like he has passed a barrier and put his trust in us to care for him. He seems humble. Quiet. Still wishes he could read the small print, but so do we all. I'm thankful for this incarnation and opportunity to gain wisdom and merit. Accepting the condition, "All offers subject to credit approval" found at the bottom of the page.

### EPISODE 3

The day has been felled by a chainsaw of angry words. Turbulence and ragged voices. The *six perfections* out the window. The mystery of anger, desire, and ignorance rides on a riptide of self-interest, the flotsam of a family misunderstanding. Pick up the pieces, and go beyond the ideas and feelings. The universe is fundamentally abundant. Fears derive from an idea of scarcity—not enough time, not enough space, not enough food or enough love—all from the point of view of limits. Fear knows no frontier.

Easy to say this, sitting in the comfort of my family and the luxury of a suburban home, but the force of this fear is real whether it's in a place of affluence or one of poverty. Just what is enough? What amount of satisfaction will spur me to right action? What glut of misery will induce me to shun negative behavior?

Dad says that it is my intent to make Mom do an extra amount of work to cause her health to fail, which will put her out of the picture, and I will take hold of the family trust so I can distribute the family fortune to all my relatives. He squints his eyes, sucks in his breath with a hiss, and squiggles his upturned fingers like leeches. Mom shouts that all she is trying to do is remove the breakfast dishes from the table and that she doesn't like being told what she can or can't do and not to act like she is hired help, that she's been taking care of him for years because she wants to and that if he wishes to revoke the trust that is up to him because he won't get better care if he goes into a rest home. I raise my voice a few decibels and tell Dad not to badger Mom, and Dad takes this as a threat to his authority, and he reacts by telling me that my motives are impure.

To act in a way that benefits my dad, I need to look at this accusation. Being pissed off is counter-productive. Breathing deep, I can see I've missed an opportunity to defuse the situation because Dad is only looking out for Mom's best interest, and she has misread his tone of voice as an order. It's another case of Hearing Aid Wars. Sometimes, my parents get to talking on two completely different subjects with their voices getting louder and louder, and the feedback from the hearing aids makes a squealing like the speakers at a rock concert. Usually, I can help them sort it out, but this time I take the words personally and make matters worse.

Dad accuses Mom and me of conspiring, saying I have her twisted around my finger, and that he'll have to revoke the trust because he's lost confidence in us. Mom tells him to do as he damn well pleases, and she goes into the living room to cry. I try to smooth things out, but I wonder if I do this out of lovingkindness or because of the threat of disinheritance? Maybe a slow walk around the block will help me chill out. I'll let the purple rays come down from heaven and feel the red rays come up from the earth. I'll take a look at what's going on in the neighborhood. Fine brickwork being erected at the house on the corner. The pyracantha bushes are lush with berries this year. Robins love their fermented liquor in the spring. Oak leaves in the yards. Ghost and bat decorations and jack-o'-lanterns presage Halloween. Giant orange faces. Luminous trees. Autumn light.

I meditate on the fact that I am an adopted child. I entered through a womb door, but I was put into the bosom of a different family, parents who are generous, patient, and moral but are biologically different. In the six-ring circus of reincarnation, my life has been a cross between being on a flying trapeze and in an animal act—out of the flying pan into the lion's mouth. I can make light of my situation, but I am grateful to have had two mothers, one that gave me birth and one that nourished me into adulthood.

So, does an inheritance complicate matters? The money and property that

my dad has is meant to keep my parents in comfort until the end of their days. I'm trying to be neither attracted nor repulsed. I'm trying to act for the benefit of Dad without self-interest, believing this is the natural way to act—kindly and, as much as possible, according to his wishes. At the same time, I am protecting my interests, which is, hopefully, enlightened self-interest.

I walk and relax. My goal is to have my anger liberate into clarity at the moment it arises. When I get back to the house, Dad is still in the same frame of mind. Looking at the bigger picture—he's half-blind and half-deaf, confined to his wheelchair with CNN being his only source of information about what's going on in the world—I am more understanding of his point of view. When Dad is having a fit of dementia, my trying to talk reasonably doesn't work because he refuses to listen, and my remaining silent and smiling and telling him to calm down just increases his frustration.

Then, nature takes its course. He has a sudden bowel movement and becomes totally discombobulated. I apply *Oil of Olay Moisturizing Body Wash* and give him a dose of *Imodium Anti-diarrheal*, and we are looking at a new man. The mind depends on the body and is conditioned by it. This shift of focus from mental activity to bodily functions changes the dynamic of our relationship. Perhaps a bowel movement and shower were all that was needed in the first place. At dinner, Dad is contrite and prays to remain calm and give everyone a chance. Where is the anger now? Washed away with a little soap and water.

## CUTTING A SWATH

an old man pushes his wheelchair  
and a clothes basket down the hall

he is slowly advancing to the laundry  
with a plastic bag of soiled diapers

and with him the whole world comes

## EPISODE 4

It's Veteran's Day. Dad was too young to fight in the First World War and too old for the Second World War. Born in 1900, he is a veteran of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but today he is depressed he's helpless and a burden on his family. He has Mom dig out a file called *Choice In Dying*. He wants me to call his physician and ask if there isn't something that can be

done to let him die peacefully.

Whose life is it? Dad feels it's his right to say, "Enough is enough. I've had enough of this suffering." But without getting into the concepts of sin and karmic retribution, it is necessary to impress on him that being half-deaf, half-blind and dizzy does not constitute a terminal condition. Dad has strong moral convictions. He wants out but can't take his life. No contest, people should be able to die with dignity. The debate, however, is whether assisted suicide should be legal. It's not in California; and in Oregon, where it is legal, the FDA intimidates doctors with the threat of having their ability to write prescriptions terminated.

When should a person be able to die? Some believe it should only be done for terminally ill patients when the pain cannot be kept at bay with medication. This is *mercy killing*, however the precise meaning of euthanasia is *good death*, which can apply in a broader sense to people who are no longer willing to live, and which is based on an individual's right to control their body. Some believe no one has this right and that it is necessary to guard against the direction society might take to get rid of unwanted people. Some believe life should take a natural course, and the time of death is up to God.

My dad has put advance directives in place. A living will is on file, and I have durable power of attorney for health care stipulating he does not want to be resuscitated if his heart or breathing stops and that he does not want to be put on a life support system. I tell him, that other than this, about all he can do is write a letter to his congressperson and wait for a change in his condition.

To get his mind off this subject, I ask him to tell me about his youth. Mom and Dad and I are sitting at the breakfast table, and I put the tape recorder between us. These are his words:

*My father was one of six brothers who came over. He was a small one who came over with his dad and lived in a small town near New Hampton (Iowa). I haven't had many occasions to visit, but there are a lot of Denners in that area. Dad was about the only one who didn't speak German. He was one of the youngest. After he married my mother, they settled*



around Mason City. Farming, they had 160 acres. The house was small, two stories; looked different than those today. It had an outhouse. No electricity. Electricity started to come in about the time of the automobiles. There weren't too many cars. We had horses. We broke horses. That's one of the jobs I had. We had these colts. I know I had a team of three-year-olds that I was quite proud of, well-broke and everything. One deal: of course, they weren't used to an engine on a train, and the engine came in pretty close to them, so they took a break and just straddled a telephone pole. A free-for-all broke out. All came home. Had to be more careful with them after that because of them going through that experience. Before that I could drive them most anywhere.

It'd be seven miles to town. I'd take a wagon, a big old wagon. I think it'd have some flaps down so you'd have some protection from the wind. My mother, she helped me an awful lot at that time. Inventories and all that stuff. And to pass an examination. I walked, I don't know, six miles or more to school, and I got up to where they had an 8th grade guy tutor me so I could pass an examination for high school and qualify for Iowa State. I had a little trouble getting into high school because I had to get some credit as I hadn't time to get very far.

Of course, I took kind of a fancy to breaking those colts. We always had colts, and I was proud of some of the horses I was training. I had a team of horses for several years, seven or eight. Of course, you'd sell some of them, but Dad was always very good about helping me getting into other things and gave me a lot of support.

Because I know I raised guinea pigs, and I raised skunks. I had all kinds of things I did to make a little money. That's what it was at that time. I never got back to Iowa very much, and I kind of lost track of people back there. I know I stayed at my aunt's place in town when I was

*going to school, so I could get through high school, graduating so I could get into Iowa State. 1920. I remember I was in charge of our group to graduate and go to college. Not too many folks went to college. None of my dad's brothers went to college. The other brothers were older. They were more strictly German.*

*When The War came, I got involved in a lot of war activities, and my dad was very active. I don't think he qualified. I didn't have any trouble (being German). There was some of that. One brother was in business in New Hampton. The rest of them were all farmers. German wasn't our language at home. I know I was always on the side of the United States. They all spoke German, but I think they kind of resented (what the Germans were doing in Europe).*

*I got so involved shipping different kinds of livestock. Skunks were only one. They made me keep them away from the house. But there were other animals that were very popular and expensive at that time. I raised groups of mink, and I'd always raise up groups so I'd have some so I could sell. That's one thing the folks were always very helpful about helping me in other things in little profits. They were more so than some of my cousins. My cousins just about all spoke German at home.*

*High school, I graduated 1920. Then, college. The first job that I had, I was on the faculty in North Dakota. I remember the staff would go out and stop at various places and help some of the outlying places with their agriculture. I had a start in the county, what you call a district agent, or district group, and I had those groups several places in Iowa.*

*Dad was one of the first ones to have an automobile. It was in the garage a lot of the time because they'd have to break up the snow that covered everything. Sometimes, you'd only be able to see the horse's ears over the pile of snow they'd shovel out of the tracks.*

I'm wondering what was happening on the farm on November 11, 1918, so I look in an old farm journal:

Shipped calf weighed 160 lbs, sold	17.50
Shipped calf weighed 150 lbs, sold	12.50
Cream money, Price 63¢. . . . .	32.04
Sold 44 lbs beef 11¢. . . . .	4.85
Sold 31 lbs cowhides 4¢. . . . .	<u>1.24</u>
	55.63

Expenses:

5 gal gas. . . . .	1.49
crackers. . . . .	25
stove pipe. . . . .	1.95
qt of oil for car. . . . .	30
pd note (S.N.B.). .	50.25
Sam . . . . .	100.00
3 pair socks . . . . .	1.00
licence for Buick. .	27.00
G.E. Wilkins tax. .	59.47
tobacco & candy . . .	.20

A note in the margin: Corrosive Sublimate ½ ounce, lard 2 ounces for lumpy jaws on cattle.

Tucked inside the journal, a letter from the U.S. Employment Service, Dept. of Labor, which reads:

*This is to certify that Sam Denner has been duly enrolled as a member of the United States Boys' Working Reserve for farm labor, and will be allowed to wear the official badge after proving his fitness by actual service for the prescribed period, and subject to the rules of the RESERVE. Attested and Dated, April 8, 1918.*

Mom says she remembers the day the war ended. She was eight years old. Her mom put her on a horse and sent her to the fields to tell the men the war was over. "They all came in, all except Dad. He stayed to shuck corn, and the rest went into town to drink and throw their hats in the air and shoot holes in their hats and do silly things like that. We lived in Cropskey, Illinois, and I remember it because it was such a

cold day."

## EPISODE 5

The front door is rattling. There's a storm. Thunder. An explosion. Terrorists have detonated a bomb in San Francisco. Thunder. A storm. The front door is rattling. I'll go back to sleep. No, there's someone at the front door. A thump in the hallway. Who could it be? Dad? Sure enough, there he is in his pajamas, barefoot, careening from wall to wall with his arms out in front of him.

"Dad, let me help you back to bed."

"I was having this dream. I was in this house that was trashed; there were squirrels. I dreamed..."

"OK, don't wake Mom up; sit down in this chair; and tell me about your dream."

"I dreamed I was getting some fellows lined up. I was supposed to get three of them. I could get eight on one of those things because there was one room in that house that was just junk, and I forgot to look there. I was supposed to do eight in one of those big boxes, and I told them I couldn't do it, and I guess I wasn't in my right senses because there was one there right in that box. So, they just fired me, I guess, and I couldn't get any explanation, and I couldn't do anymore with them because they said I was in trouble because I did not resign or anything, and I guess they just went off and left me, and so I just had to rely on Helen. Did you say she was getting dressed?"

"Dad, it's still early, and everyone is asleep."

"And I just worked her to death. She had to get up every fifteen minutes so I could urinate and change my pads, so I tried to get up, but she needed more sleep, and so I went back to bed, and I tried to stay in bed as long as she wanted to stay in bed, because she had just had it, and I was afraid she'd just keel over, and I'd be stuck for good because what they wanted to do was put me in one of those box things, and I would have had no way of getting in touch with anybody."

"Dad, it was a dream you were having."

"They just had me locked up some way there, and that's not a very good thing to look forward to, but I was kind of disturbed because I didn't get those cross pictures. The fellows that were working on that thing, each fellow was

going to get boxes with three of those things lined up there, and I don't know whether I dreamed this or not, but they told me to get eight on there, but I couldn't find any, and there was this big old empty room where all there was was all this used stuff, used planes; there was this long one, and somebody said I had to get something for the company, and you didn't hear anything about what I was supposed to be doing, did you?"

"It was your dream, Dad. I couldn't hear it. These boxes, what shape were they?"

"What station, do you mean?"

"No, what shape were the boxes?"

"Oh, they were just little, that these things were in, some of them were just in tubes. I don't see them right here now, but these little boxes they have by the plane with the things that get all the connections for each one."

"Like an airplane? Like a plane that flies? or a plane to smooth wood?"

"Well, they get whatever they get on TV. They got some of these fellows lined up, and they're supposed to get frogs to take this, so they use this stuff on the planes, and there are those on each box, and my box was just a square box with probably an *S* on it, one of the boxes with my name, and I was afraid I was going to create an open box, and I would be stuck."

"Dad, are you thinking about a coffin?"

"Toxin?"

"You know, after you die, they put you in a coffin, like a box, a coffin."

"No, just a little box that has these things in them, that have got these signs to get all the parts of the station..."

"Like a computer?"

"Like a small computer, and I was getting some boxes for one of these fellows, and most of them just have three of them in each box."

"Three what? Three computers?"

"Three computers...they have the telephone thing there where they can get calls for people and line them up to use one of these theater street boxes that had paper telephones, you know, that they used, and I was getting some for one of these fellows, and there were three of them in one package with little phones to use, and I don't know if I dreamed this or not, but I was helping this one fellow, and I got a bunch of three that I was suppose to get, and in one of these I was

supposed to get seven or eight of them in one of them, these two with four each, and I didn't get it because I couldn't find the one that had a total of eight, and it was right there in that same room, but I just couldn't think of it because it was in this spare room that had all this stuff in there, and that was the only fellow that had these that I couldn't find, so they were going to fire me, and I don't know what happened to them because I kind of lost track."

"That might have been when I woke you up in the hallway."

"Probably was, but I didn't realize...I felt so bad because I wore Helen out, and she had to change pads for me, and I couldn't get this thing...I don't know what her plans are today, but I'm stuck if she takes the car anyplace or should go or can go, and I don't know if she's back there or not...HELEN... HELEN..."

"Hold on, Dad, let her finish sleeping. Let me get your wheel chair, and I'll fix you something to eat."

I'm becoming anxious. I'm a little slow on the uptake until I've had my cup of tea, but I'm sensing trouble. I get Dad moved into the kitchen without any fuss, but he doesn't want his usual corn flake and *Cheerio* mixture, so I try my hand at some *Cream of Wheat*, but it comes out thin and lumpy. I start over, stirring it continuously as it cooks, and this seems to be the right technique. I heat some applesauce in the microwave and cut a sweet roll into bite size pieces. I can tell by the set of his jaw that Dad is agitated, and this flurry of activity is creating a tense rapport between us. I make sure he has a full service of utensils, knife, fork, salad fork, soup spoon, tea spoon, and I bring warm water from the tap, just like he likes it. I leave him to his breakfast and go check on Mom. She's sleeping soundly, so I return to the kitchen.

"Don't you want any breakfast?" Dad asks.

"Dad, I never eat this early. I only want a cup of tea."

"I always have to have breakfast. It was important on the farm."

"I know; I'll have a cup of tea with you." I heat a cup of spring water, add some loose-leaf black tea to a bamboo tea strainer, and wait for it to steep.

"Where's Helen?"

"She's sleeping."

"I want to talk to her."

"She needs to sleep, Dad. She was helping you every couple of hours last night. If you want to be less of a burden,

then let her sleep."

"Is she all right?"

"She'll be all right if she gets some sleep."

"Push me in there, so I can see her."

"All right, but we don't want to wake her." I push him down the hallway to the door of the bedroom, and in a loud voice he begins calling, "HELEN, HELEN," so I pull him around the corner and into his den and tell him to keep quiet or he'll wake her, but he says he thinks there's something wrong with her, that she needs to be taken to the hospital, and he starts to dial 911, but I stop him and set the phone out of reach.

"Dad, you're over-reacting."

"She can't hear me. She must be sick. HELEN...HELEN..."

"Dad, calm down. It's OK. She can't hear you because she doesn't have her hearing aids in, and she needs to catch up on her sleep."

"HELEN...HELL..EN."

This is not funny. He is off on one of his tirades. I decide to wheel him back into the family room where he will be less likely to wake the neighborhood, and I shut the door to the bedroom.

"What are you shutting up the house for. I'm not ready for that."

"Please, just quiet down, please."

"And I thought I could trust my son. Now, I've lost all confidence in you. It's a revocable trust, and you're just waiting to get me out of the way so you can divide up everything."

"Dad, calm down. Don't start on all this again. If it will make you any happier, you can take me out of the trust or whatever you want to do."

"Sure, sure, you're going to put me in one of those places."

"You just may have to go to a rest home if you keep throwing these fits, but you won't like it because you won't get the kind of care you're used to."

"I need to see Helen."

Mom appears at the door in her bathrobe. "What is it?"

"Helen, we need to phone the lawyer and change the thing so they won't get all of it and we be left as paupers. I made a mistake, and since I can't see to read the small print, they can get in there and..."

"Sam, what are you talking about?"

"He's worried about the trust again. I tried to keep him in this room so he wouldn't wake you, but now he's all worked up about the family trust."

"Sam, we will make an appointment, and you can make all the changes you want, but just let me get dressed first."

Following Mom down the hall, I tell her of the morning's events. "I heard him moving about and found him sleepwalking and talking about squirrels and frogs and phones in boxes. I don't know what he was dreaming about, maybe being put in his coffin and wanting a cell phone so he could stay in touch. I don't know. At any rate, I'm sorry he got so uptight. He thought you needed an ambulance, and I wouldn't let him phone 911, and you know how he hates to have his authority overridden, and now he's going on about the trust again. I figured you were in need of sleep, or I would have awakened you."

"Well, now I'm up, so let me get dressed, and we'll take it from there. Looks like it's one of those days."

When I get back to the family room, Dad has pulled his wheelchair up to the sliding doors and is waving his hands trying to get the attention of the gardener. Paul mows the lawn once a week, and he has on his sound mufflers and is totally oblivious to the pandemonium going on around him. I pull the chair back from the window hoping to avoid a public spectacle, but this only increases Dad's resolve to lash out, and he grips the door sill with tremendous strength, and I nearly pull the chair out from under him in the struggle. Mom comes back to the fray, and I retreat, hoping she can bring a calming influence, but Dad is not to be mollified. Chill. I go to my bedroom and repeat Vajrasattva's mantra to bring my emotions under control.

Back in the family room, Mom, on the verge of tears says, "You can change that damn thing any way you want, but I'm not changing mine. So, do as you damn well please. I don't want to hear any more about it."

"When does this change take effect," Dad asks, "at the first of the year?"

"What change, Dad?"

"When your organization takes control."

"What organization?"

"You know."

"No, Dad, what are you talking about?"

"Now, that I can't take care of myself, that I can't get



around, see the fine print..."

"You mean whether or not you are mentally competent?"

"The fine print..."

"Dad, the family trust doesn't change just because you have trouble taking care of yourself. That's what we're here for, to help you through to the end."

"I don't want those millionaire lawyers to get in here and make it go through prostate."

"No, we don't want that, really, not through prostate, we don't." I'm having a hard time keeping a straight face, but I have an idea. "Let me get the papers, and I'll show you how it's set up."

After I bring the documents back from the file cabinet in the den, I sit and read a few lines and tell him it says that in case of his demise, all his worldly goods go to Mom and, after Mom dies, then to my sister and me. He and Mom are the trustees. He shouldn't worry about losing his position. I let him sit with the papers in his lap, and I go into the living room to talk to Mom. There is a bruise forming on her hand where Dad gripped her too tightly, and I counsel her that I think we ought to phone Dr. Shaefer and ask him for a tranquilizer to help Dad mellow out. She agrees and goes into the bedroom to phone.

The doctor returns her call in a short while, and I get on another line, and after Mom has talked with him some, I give him my impressions. He says that he understands and will call in a prescription. Later, when I pick it up at the counter of the drug store and look at the label, I wonder if I've gone into a space warp when I read, *Haloperidol, take one tablet twice a day in the left eye as directed*. I ask to see the pharmacist, and when he comes to the counter and reads the label, he apologizes profusely and returns to his mortar and pestle. Bustling back in a few minutes, he instructs me on the use of this drug. He says the dose is small, but that it is a strong anti-psychotic drug with the effective dosage varying from patient to patient. He cautions me that there might be considerable side effects, like *Tardive Dyskinesia*, a syndrome characterized by rhythmical involuntary movements of tongue, face, mouth or jaw. This might manifest as protruding of the tongue, puffing the cheeks, puckering the mouth or chewing movements, and sometimes movements of the hands and feet can accompany these. Normally, he explains, only one or none of these occur, and that if a satisfactory response

is achieved, the dosage can then be gradually reduced to an effective maintenance level. However, he adds, the pills must be taken orally and not to put them in the eye.

By the time I get back to the house, Dad has repeated his need to see his lawyer and relayed his fears of being sent to a rest home so many times his voice is hoarse. Mom administers one dose of *Haloperidol*, which he takes with a piece of soda cracker and a little water, and we set him up in his padded chair in front of the TV. I turn on CNN and throw up the menu so I can turn off the speakers. I set a folded washcloth on top of his snow-white hair and place the earphones on his head. I always feel a certain combination of impish glee and pontifical respect in this operation. The washrag is put under the headphones to keep them from sliding around on his head. Mom is working on a special yarn beanie with crocheted grooves for the headset, but the cap is not perfected, and the washrag will do for now. He looks like a cross between a court jester and WW II fighter pilot, but once the cap is finished, he'll look more like a ham radio operator at a bar mitzvah.

The drug takes effect, and he begins to nod out, so Mom and I help him to lie down, and in a little while he is sleeping. He sleeps steadily through the afternoon, and at dinner he is drowsy and his speech is slurred. He says he wants to watch TV after dinner, but it isn't long before he's nodding again, so we put him back to bed. Mom reports she only had to help him once during the night and that she watched him moving his hands around in front of his face. I tell her it is only the effect of the drug and that he is probably learning to *trip* in his mind.

On the evening news, there's a report of a forty-foot tree just down the road from our house that was struck by lightning and splintered from end to end during the storm.

## EPISODE 6

"These pajamas are too light a color."

"You've been wearing light colors all your life. Besides, who is going to see them?"

"It's kind of pale. Kind of white."

"Every season they come out with different colors than the

year before. You'll just have to get used to them. We're lucky we could find any in the material and style you like."

"I guess you're right. They seem a little tight."

"Well, after they're washed a couple of times, they loosen up about a mile."

"That's all right."

"Sit down, and we'll find a pair of socks for you."

I'm coming along with a clothesbasket of things from the laundry, and I say, "Here's a pair."

Dad says, "No, those are too tight. I tried those."

"Maybe they're mine," I say.

Mom says, "Could be; I wouldn't be surprised by anything." She goes into the bathroom to get a washcloth to wash Dad's hands and face. Meanwhile, I start making the beds.

"Gosh, I don't know how you do it, Rich. You do all that stuff. You get in there, and you sure get everything going. You know how to do it. It all comes out looking so good."

"Why, thanks, Dad. Mom showed me how to do it. She says it took her years to perfect this bed making technique. So, it's a tried and true recipe."

"Well, it sure works when you get in it at night and the covers pulled up."

Mom has a wash cloth. "Let me wash your face. You don't seem to be dripping so much today. You look pretty super."

I help him stand and put on his robe. He always seems to get one arm into the seam instead of the sleeve. "So, there you are, new pajamas, new robe, shiny shoes, hair combed. Your chair, sir, and off we go."

So far, so good. Maybe this new tranquilizer Dad is on will elevate his mood. Drugs are not the answer, but they have their uses. Finding the maintenance level will take a little time, but I think it will make things easier on Mom and me and, in turn, on Dad, if we can avoid these outbreaks of temper.

Christmas Day. Dad wheels himself into the front room, and in a grumpy voice he says, "We should not have put up that tree. It's some kind of freak."

"Jeez, Dad, what's with you? It's just a small artificial tree Mom bought to use at a Christmas bazaar. She said that everyone admired it and wanted to buy it, but she didn't sell it because it's so handy to have at home. And, besides, we don't have to go out and cut down a live one. It looks nice with all

the handmade ornaments Lynda made."

"I made a mistake," Dad says. "I shouldn't have opened my presents. People come to visit, and they want to see the way they're wrapped."

"Dad, it's Christmas morning, and we've always opened our presents Christmas morning since we were kids."

"Well, there aren't any kids here now. We shouldn't have put up this tree. What will people think?"

"People? What they will think is it's Christmas morning, and we have opened our presents."

"I'd like to get myself...if I could eliminate myself...if I could get out of here, it might help some. We have to break this thing down. It can't continue like this."

"What thing? This tree? What?"

"If I could just eliminate myself..."

"Wouldn't it be better to try and be of use? You ask to be put out of the way, but wouldn't it be better to ask what you could do to be of use?"

"It's a round-robin thing. It's wearing Helen out, and I don't know how in the hell we ever got going on this, and if I could get out of the picture, it might help some. Helen can't continue like this, and I don't know what to do about it."

"Dad, Mom and I are perfectly content taking care of you, and she says that she had a good night. This morning, it's you that is saying you're depressed. That makes it hard on Mom because she doesn't like to see you depressed. So, if you felt better about yourself, it would help her also."

"But it's an impossible thing."

"What is?"

"To get out of this circle."

"What's the circle? You mean these spells?"

"Changing these pads and getting up and down and..."

"Do you want to know how you can relieve some of the stress?"

"I can't..."

"Can you hear me? Do you have your hearing aids turned on? Turn them on. There, I heard them squeak. Do you want to help Mom?"

"I sure do."

"Do you want to do that in a practical way?"

"The practical thing would be for me to get out of here."

"No, that's not a solution. You have to let go of that solution. That's not something that helps."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

"Yeah. First of all, it has to do with your fear of being old and having the symptoms, and you would do well to accept that this is a natural process and necessary and that we're here to help and that this is what we want to do."

"We can't keep going indefinitely."

"That's something that will change in time; it will be a natural thing, the way it happens. You can't push it."

"Helen has been so good to me, and I feel I'm to blame for the whole damn thing."

"I want you to understand that you taking all that responsibility on yourself depresses you and makes matters worse. It makes it harder for us to take care of you."

"If there was just some way..."

"No, we can't help you to die. That's something that will happen in time. And it doesn't help any by being depressed that you need care, that we're here to give you care. And it costs less, and it's better for the family to be together here at home, so Mom and I don't have to worry about you in a rest home where you'd be unhappy. You feel unhappy here, but in a rest home you would want Mom to be there all the time to change your pads, so you don't win out by making it impossible for us to take care of you here. You would be making it harder on us. So, if you want to make it easier on us, you have to try and be happier here...and there's not a lot in between. Do you want to think about that a little bit?"

"Think about what?"

"Ok, I'm going to tell you again, ok? This is the way it is—if you go to the rest home, you're going to be unhappier than you are here."

"Well, I tell you, I'm going to have to get out of it, whatever it is. I think that's what I've got to do first is get out of the way here."

"See, what happens when you go to a rest home is that you want Mom to come and give you her special care, and that's harder to do going to the rest home everyday to give you all that care than it is to do it here. You could make it easier all around by being less worried; I mean, like you worry about every little thing, and the worry wears people down. If you tried to just enjoy yourself more...you don't want to die depressed, do you?"

"If there's any single way to die, that's what I want to do."

"How about dying happy? Remember the lines by Dylan

Thomas, *Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.* But also, DON'T WORRY! BE HAPPY!"

"It's a darn gone mess is what it is."

"I don't know. This is like the play, 'No Exit.' I don't think being nauseated and depressed will make the end come any sooner. I mean, sooner or later, you will die. So, try and be happy in the process. Mom's happy. I'm happy. We just can't seem to make you happy."

"I know; that's the trouble. That's the whole darn trouble. The trouble is that...it's a mess."

"Dad, you see it as a mess, but we see it as our job. We take care of you because we love you, and that's what we do. We have a house over our heads. We have food on the table. We have things that make our lives comfortable, and it's all due to you. You worked hard for all of it. What's the point in throwing it away?"

"What...what's the best thing for me to do?"

"To let us take care of you. To relax a little bit and enjoy your last days. To try and relax and enjoy what life you have without feeling guilty."

"I don't want to destroy the lives of other people."

"I know your intentions are good, but you don't understand that you're making it harder by being unhappy."

"If there was just someway..."

"If there was, I know, but there isn't; so for now, it would be good to relax, and I'll talk with Mom, and we'll look into what it would cost to put you in a rest home, and we'll have a family discussion about all that, OK?"

"Ok...I want you to know I'm proud of my son. You do so much around here to make things work. I don't know how I deserve all you and Helen do for me. I started way back there on the farm, and I never thought I'd have all this comfort at the end."

"Thanks, Dad; that means a lot to me. It's about the best Christmas present a guy could get."

## DIMINISHING OPTIONS

Neanderthal took his peculiar stones  
And Pharaoh his throne and gilded boat.  
I'll be buried with my TV and remote

As well as a cell phone to keep in touch.

## EPISODE 7

Feelings of frustration, anger. Moments of depression, claustrophobia, fear of being ground under. Sometimes, I forget why I'm in Santa Rosa. I get caught up in my own projects and miss the point. I'm here to help my parents. Dad can be very tiresome. He has his good and his bad days. If he isn't having some kind of paranoid delusions, he's perfectly content with getting up, having three meals, putting on his headphones and watching CNN endlessly repeat itself. During the night, he has to be helped to the portable potty by his bed, change his absorbent pads and put on fresh pajamas. I assist my mom. Mom is used to this, and with the aid of a wooden step I built and an aluminum handrail, she can usually get him back to bed without much fuss. She says she's been doing this for five years and is used to being awakened and then going back to sleep.

Dad's personality goes through changes. I've written about some of these episodes. I'm not sure if it is from the pain medicine or slime on the neurons of the brain or a moon phase or biorhythms or a tendency towards schizoid behavior or just the natural progression of a worrisome line of thought. He gets to thinking about some detail, and he can't let go of it. There was an account for the burial plots that the State required to be changed because there had been no activity, so the money was moved from one bank to another and re-deposited, but he can't be sure. I dig out the papers from his file cabinet, lay them out on a card table in front of him, and show him the transaction any number of times until he's satisfied. He can't see to read anything smaller than the headlines, and he's worried there's some fine print he's going to miss that will jeopardize his situation.

He awakes from an afternoon nap and asks, "What am I going to do with the stock?"

Mom says, "I can't understand you. Are you looking for your socks? You have them on. I'll change them for you." I say, "I think he said 'stock'. Maybe, he's been rounding up cows in a dream." Then, I remember that it was a day of heavy trading on Wall Street. Another record high for the

Dow. I'm sure he has a vivid memory of Black Thursday—the day the stock market crashed in 1929. He told me he remembers the infamous Halloween Night broadcast by Orson Welles of 'The War of the Worlds' and that it was very spooky. Given this event was followed by Adolph Hitler and World War II, it's no wonder that after I change the channel from CNN to TCM to watch George C. Scott in 'Patton' blast his way across France towards Berlin shouting, "I'm going to bury that damned paperhanger," Dad says he's seen so much of this in his lifetime, he doesn't want to see anymore of it. I fully understand. I turn it back to see n' en to see if the president has kept his pants on today.

One evening, Dad and I watched the San Quentin Drama Production of 'Endgame' by Samuel Beckett. Dad was riveted to the screen. The main character, Hamm, is a blind, old man who mostly dominates center stage in his armchair. His adopted son, Clov, who is his lackey, attends him. Two other characters, Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell, are contained in two barrels and make brief appearances. This is classic Theatre of the Absurd, a mournful and distraught masterpiece, a mixture of lyricism and angst—an open wound of existential despair.

The scene: bare interior, gray light, two small windows, Hamm in his armchair on castors covered with an old sheet and the two ash bins containing Nagg and Nell. After a brief tableau, Clove speaks, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished (Pause.) Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap. (Pause.) I can't be punished any more. (Pause.) I'll go now to my kitchen, ten feet by ten feet by ten feet, and wait for him to whistle me. (Pause.) Nice dimensions, nice proportions, I'll lean on the table, and look at the wall, and wait for him to whistle me."

The mystery of Being and the dynamics of relationship. The experience was so pointed, so acutely like the actual reality of our situation, I was amazed when Dad turned to me and said, "I don't need to watch this. I'm aware there are these changes."

I portray myself as having a combination of acceptance and transcendence in my attitude about my dad, but there is definitely another side to this picture. Sometimes, I feel I can agree with him when he says he's lived too long and is nothing but a burden on his family and he's keeping everyone



from getting on with life. These feelings arise after I've been involved in a tense interaction with him.

I slapped his hand the other day because he was jabbing his finger in my face and accusing me of turning Mom against him because she told him she had reached the end of her tether and had begun to bark at him. This was understandable, since she had been up umpteen times during the night. She told me she could understand how someone could take a baseball bat and bash in a person's head. I was taken aback. This is really extreme for her. She's always right on track—kind, considerate, mellow, and with a sense of humor.

Dad, too, is usually agreeable, but he doesn't tell you what he wants, and he doesn't always like what he gets. He says, "Whatever is easiest for you," and I say, "Well, nothing is easiest; just tell me what it is you want." He wants me to be comfortable, but he's so insistent that I have a pillow, that the TV is turned towards me, that I'm warm enough, that I become uncomfortable with the fuss. It's infuriating.

This all seems insignificant as I write about it, but the accumulative effect is intense. Gertrude Stein opens *The Making of Americans* with a story about a son carrying his father across a field on his shoulder, and the father shouts, "Stop, stop, I only carried my father as far as that stump." I can relate to this because I'm, also, a son and a father. On one hand, who can really be trusted? And on the other hand, how much control can be exerted without being oppressive?

I apologize to Dad for slapping his hand, and he apologizes for the things he said. I realize he doesn't know, at the time, that he's having one of his fits, and I know this is no excuse for parent abuse. I love the guy. We talk, shake hands and calm ourselves.

I sit on the patio and do my practice: *The Sadhana of the Wish-fulfilling Wheel of White Tara*. I take refuge, generate *bodhicitta* and meditate on emptiness. I dedicate the merit of my practice to all sentient beings and try to integrate the calm state into my daily life. Who deserves more lovingkindness than those who gave me nourishment as a child? Where better to find spaciousness than where I live? What better place to try than in my parents' home? I mean, with rent what it is these days, I'm getting a real bargain!

"Dad, tell me that story about the horses breaking loose, again. I bet that must have been quite a sight."