

We Choose

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I received a phone call while on a blissful spring vacation with my family. The health of my dad, who retired back to his home country, Bolivia, fifteen years ago, was quickly deteriorating. A distant relative from my mom's side agreed to check on him and take care of him for five days before I could get there. When I finally arrived, I truly found him at death's door and had it not been for the relative, he would have died essentially alone without any family and without any evidence of one of his children caring. Don't get me wrong. He was doing relatively well a few months prior, and it's not easy for any of his kids to pick up and make the at least twenty-four journey. But I'm the oldest female of the three kids and the proverbial, often delusional fixer so off I went. Things quickly went into crisis mode and each day had to be taken in baby steps towards a not-so-clear outcome. The one thing I knew for sure is that whether he lived six days or six years, I didn't want him to die alone.

Two of my older kids offered kindly to accompany me. No one in my family was keen on me traveling alone to Bolivia to single-handedly manage this situation. My closest local girlfriend even offered generously to travel with me. But I couldn't ask anyone for such a thing. As I was booking flights, I told my mom what was happening (my parents divorced decades ago), and she said she would go with me. I was shocked. My parents don't communicate with one another, and at 78, a trip to Bolivia is no easy feat for her either. However, she'd been wanting to go for the last few years to see remaining family and friends but had been nervous to travel by herself. This gave her the opportunity to travel with someone, and also to help out her daughter. We've never been very close, but I realized right then, she was showing up for me when it mattered most. She stayed with her half-brother, and I didn't see her much while there, but she sent food via my cousin and helped tremendously on the long trip back with my dad from Bolivia to Miami. At the airport and during the flight back, my parents talked on a different level than they probably ever had. My mom told my dad she thinks he would help if the situation were reversed. My dad thanked her repeatedly and later told me he found her to be compassionate. I think they both got some closure on a failed relationship. I got a sense my mom put me above any other noise in her head or aches in her joints. Overall, a gift.

Nursing homes don't really exist in Bolivia - you keep the elderly with you in all but extreme cases. I knew right away there was no question my dad couldn't continue living alone. He also wasn't in good enough health to make the long trip, but I knew there simply wasn't another solution. Pack up the apartment, call the landlord and ask for leniency, pay the "portero," or front door man, to help with hauling trash and luggage, choose what clothes and memorabilia to pack, make sure my dad eats and drinks, and take him to a hospital for "ancianos" to ask the doctor whether he can at least make the trip.

Turns out he didn't have that much left in his apartment. My dad is a recovering alcoholic (sober 14 years) who was never great with money. My relative told me to not call the landlord and just leave or I'd be charged for the remainder of the lease. I didn't want to do that, so I called him. Turns out Alvaro had tremendous compassion and came to see my father. He said these are "circunstancias especiales," and no need to worry about the lease agreement. He even offered to get my dad's meds from his wife, a pharmacist. I thought my (getting-old-myself) back would give out while cleaning things out and packing. Turns out the portero, Rodolfo, offered to help with

hauling, packing, and even calling a locksmith for the lost drawer key that had some valuables. Rodolfo was delighted with the mountain of fine clothes I gave him (my dad believes in “una pinta fina!”), the old iPad, the computer, the suede shoes (same little Latin American-sized feet), and the groceries. Of course, I slipped him some dollars too, but I think he cared most about my blubbing tears when I said goodbye and told him, “Solamente Dios te puede pagar” (only God can repay you).

My dad was frighteningly weak but was improving some. Doctora Munez said he could probably make the trip but ordered a full battery of tests back in the States. I then had a heart-to-heart with my dad. His mind is also slipping, but I caught him at a lucid moment sitting back in his apartment on the tenth floor overlooking the Andes Mountains. “Do you want to die, Dad? Tell me the truth.” “NO! I am not ready to die.” “Well then, let’s do our best together to make you as strong as you can be. You will have to trust me. We will make it back, and we can make you better. Don’t know how much time you have left, but let’s make it the best it can be.” “Me parece buena decision,” he said. I think it’s a good decision.

I know that distant relative who cared for my dad for five days a lot better now. Marina is the daughter of my mom’s half-brother, who is 93. She cares for her father and knew how to handle my dad. When she first went to see him, he was incoherent – dehydrated and falling over. She yelled at him to wake up and get in the cab with her when she first found him. Off to the “clinica!” In the next five days, she barked at him to eat and drink; she said, “your daughter is on her way – buck up,” and regulated his meds all until I got there. When Marina and I said good-bye at the airport we were sisters gripping each other tightly, crying. “Have patience and show love. Keep a sense of humor! Be strong every day!” she said. Marina’s dad has Alzheimer’s and is awful with her. She knows the trip home and everything after is daunting for me. We are both caring for adult children. She knows it’s not easy. She has empathy.

Before my dad would wake in the morning, I would walk to the “Hipermax” grocery store and buy food. Bolivia is on par with Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of poverty, but I always loved going as a child. Some great first cousins to play with, ubiquitous “kioskos” full of candy and Fanta, and a feeling of travel to another dimension. This time it felt particularly surreal to be there, and I have to say, the poverty weighed even heavier than it ever had. How do they eke out a living selling gum on the streets? Or am I defining happiness only through my own spoiled lens? The day before we left, I cried all the way to Hipermax. A peculiar mixture of loving my heritage intertwined with oppressive hopelessness around the poverty and stifling air pollution. Odd for me – I am usually an eternal optimist.

I had a few quiet moments of reflection during that week. One reflection has stayed with me, and I’ve written it down to keep. I think it’s worth sharing if nothing else, with my kids. It’s inspired by a funny, but sometimes philosophical book I was reading while in Bolivia.

For some it’s remarkably quick, for others the epiphany comes too late. Tragically, for many it never clicks...

Every day we get to choose what kind of person we will be. Defeatist or encouraging? Self-absorbed or eager to live with others? Stingy or generous? Frowning throughout the day, or laughing? Grumpy or grateful? Closed off and isolated or open and loving? Harping on what’s wrong, or focusing on what’s right? Constantly anxious or peaceful? Quick to condemn or humble and accepting? Entitled and lazy or quietly driven and accomplished? Quick to skirt tough responsibility, or quick to accept an opportunity to do the right thing?

Whether you believe in an afterlife or not, we are here once and then we’re not. How we live, whether we truly live and whether we do a good job is up to us. We choose.