

After my grandfather took his last breath, I called my sister into his bedroom and said, “I think he’s gone...” We had been holding vigil for about a month, keeping Opa warm and comfortable, while he did the work of dying in his own way, in his own home. Long before dementia robbed us of conversation, we had talked openly about death and dying. He was clear about his wishes and had prepaid for cremation. I had already spoken with a funeral home in Concord who would honor his contract when the time came, even though it was from the 80’s and had been purchased in Florida.

As his guardian and caregiver for the last four years of his life, I’d had a long time to anticipate this moment, to wonder, “What will it be like?” and to think about what would happen next. I’d known that I wanted to honor him in the privacy of our home at the time of his death. I had talked about this with him, learned the laws specific to New Hampshire, and discussed it with our family, who supported the plan to have a home funeral, though it would be a new experience for each of us.

The logistics for his final disposition were all in order and there was a folder on my desk in the living room labeled, “Death Plan”. I mentally noted the time and called his family physician. She had been stopping in to see him once a week and we had been keeping in touch via email updates as he death approach. She’d had questions about the home funeral process, (“I didn’t know you can do that. How does it work?” “What can I do to help?”) We had talked about it months in advance and she generously made herself available to pronounce his death and sign his death certificate at home, and on the night he died, we completed it together at my kitchen table.

While we waited for other family members to arrive, my sister and I prepared to move our grandfather to the living room. With the help of our neighbor, we wrapped his body in a bed sheet, used belts as handholds, and easily maneuvered around a tight corner and through a narrow hallway to a borrowed massage table we had set up in the living room. We played Bach’s Mattaus Passion, one of his favorite albums of all time, on his old turntable, and filled a basin with warm water and lavender soap.

We washed his soft white hair and combed it out for the last time. I shaved his face, holding his ancient skin taught, remembering how he’d made funny faces at me when I’d stood in the bathroom doorway as a little girl, thinking he was covered in whipped cream when he was shaving. My sister and mother and I bathed him from head to toe.

Opa had big hands, hands that made many beautiful things, hands that had earned a good living and provided for his family, hands that had often pointed a finger offering unsolicited advice, or gestured in the midst of joke telling, hands that had helped me cross the street safely in childhood, and hands that I had held just hours before. While I soaked each hand and cleaned and trimmed his nails, I felt the total unresponsiveness and absence of his gentle strength for the first time.

We worked together to dress him, placed a sheet of Techni-ice under his back, and turned the heat down in the living room. We set his wedding ring, along with my grandmother's, on his chest, and sat together and listened to music that he loved. Then we simply turned out the lights and went to bed.

The next morning, we surrounded him with flowers and invited a few close friends who dropped in to say goodbye, each in their own way. We served tea and cookies, told stories, and looked at old photographs. The dog he loved dearly stayed close to him through it all, quietly mourning the loss of her friend.

In the afternoon, we prepared the cremation casket that would be his final bed. We lined it with a pine board milled from our land, cushioned it with a soft blanket, and filled it with handwritten messages from each family member. We placed him in the casket and surrounded him with his favorite flowers. During the final hour, the closed casket sat on a table draped with a cloth my grandmother had embroidered during their engagement in the 1930's. When the hearse arrived to transport him to the crematorium, we loaded him into it ourselves.

Caring for my grandfather at home after his death was a natural extension of caring for him at home during the end of his life. Neither decision was based on money or convention but each offered opportunities to walk toward uncertainty and intimacy with openness to experiencing it completely. Care of a dying person is intensely physical and emotional, and it takes time to get used to the abrupt ending, even when it has been long anticipated. I woke many times during Opa's last night in our home. It's what I'd grown used to over the years. Of course, I knew he was dead, but actually touching his cold forehead, watching the absolute stillness, and feeling the absence of life in his empty body reminded me that he no longer needed tending. I could let go now of everything physical. All that was left now between us was the love.