

Final Moments with Hiromichi Shimoyama

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3 things I learned from staring death in the eyes:

Everyone experiences the loss of a loved in various different ways. Some pass away quick and peacefully, some go so tragically and unexpectedly, and some suffer in pain for days and weeks—which is how my dad left us.

I've never really understood the process of death. I never really asked and I never really heard about it from anyone who has experienced it. So I wanted to share my experience of the two weeks my family and I spent with my dad during his hospitalization and passing. It was one of the deepest, most profound, and spiritual experiences. And I hope that if there're 3 things you take away from this they are:

1. Please, don't be afraid to make a will. That's something we wish we had in order to make decisions about medical actions and funeral preparations. Every time we tried to ask my dad in the past he would often deflect the question maybe out of fear, maybe it was denial in hopes to beat the cancer. However, we need to realize we're all going to die one day and it's very helpful to have a plan.

2. Mourn together as a family. Because you're forced to confront unfamiliar feelings, there is nothing more that can connect a family deeper than mourning and processing out loud together in order to understand each other's hearts and minds. Make a conscious effort to stay together for a few days and grieve together, reminisce memories, and get to know each other again instead of parting separate ways in a rush. I wish I could emphasize this the most. We walked out of the hospital as a family, feeling so much love and peace within us.

3. Recognize that our time with loved ones is so limited on this earth. If there are unresolved issues and feelings that have not been expressed... Don't wait until it's too late to share your heart, we are all human. And regardless of certain barriers that may block our hearts and minds, whether its language, religion, culture, or sexuality... the core of our existence can still feel shared love, understanding, and even pain. The challenge is to just get past that wall and not fear vulnerability. And if nothing else, simply remember to say, "I love you". If you're lucky to have the chance, know that even though your loved one is asleep from all the medicine, they can hear everything you say!!

This may seem fairly obvious but it really is SO much harder to do if the relationship you have isn't so easy or if openness is lacking. That is how it was for my family. We love our dad so much but our relationship has always been quite difficult. Love was difficult to express and past hurt often lingered below the surface. As the years passed we consistently overlooked that hurt and tried to stay present and loving whenever we were together and never tried to understand each others hearts, because we knew time was limited and it felt like hashing out issues or pouring out our hearts was just a waste of time. But trust me, it's not.

I knew it wasn't good when I heard the cancer came back and spread to his lungs—I knew his time was really narrowing down but it was still so hypothetical— My mom called me in January crying and said the doctors were giving my dad 3 months to live but she didn't believe it. I mean how can someone put a time limit to your life?

It's Monday, March 23: The air is thick, surrounded by machines trying to keep him alive, nurses rushing with urgency, dad coughing up unknown fluids, and moaning in pain. I'm holding his hand and there's no one else here but me at 5 AM. We had all taken turns sleeping over in his hospital room while he was still in the intensive care unit and he was still very conscious. His memory was beginning to fade, as well as his ability to speak clearly. It was my turn to stay the night, but we didn't know it would be the last time we took shifts. I must have had a combined 2 hrs of sleep that night. The nurses (who are by all means an absolute godsend) would come in every 15 minutes to give him more medicine or nutrition through his stomach tube making it nearly impossible to get any sleep at all. He would wake me up every couple of minute's in-between because he needed the nurses to come in again and increase his pain medication, or he would be throwing up profusely, so I held the bucket and wiped his face. I felt like I was living a nightmare with him. How can he continue to endure this? I couldn't believe that he was experiencing this much pain and fighting through so hard, while still muttering, "Don't worry M-chan, I will overcome". The most powerful three words anyone can tell themselves. I couldn't help but lie down next to him and cry for him and attempt to feel the same hope he felt. We were supposed to begin radiation therapy and try to fight this cancer monster today! What is going on?!

There were moments when his alertness would cause him intense pain, anxiety and then create respiratory attacks; we thought surely his lungs would just give out right that second. It got to the point where they

almost intubated him with oxygen tubes and we were told that if that happened, that would be the last cognizant moment he would have with us. And once the tubes were breathing for him, we wouldn't be able to take the tubes out without killing him. Reality hit so hard— he wasn't going to be doing radiation and he wouldn't be able to fight this any longer.

Four doctors come in and asked to talk us. They lead us to a conference room, and we know there's no good news, but hope still persisted. We talked for two hours— so many questions, so much we were trying to process, and so much we now had to plan. We wouldn't be able to take him to Twin Peaks or watch another sunset together... and everything else we had all planned to do together, we had to forget. How do we tell dad? We didn't think he could even understand us anymore. So we didn't tell him... And that might have been the biggest mistake we've ever made.

As a family we had to make a decision for someone else's life. And with the information we were given about his current condition, we all felt that rather than have him suffer in the ICU with no visible improvements, we should focus more on pain prevention and comfort care to help ease him into passing. It felt like we were playing God, and I despised every second of it. The doctors told us that once he was upstairs in hospice care, it could be hours to days until he passed. We all held our breath— For 5 days, tortured by watching him suffer, but united in heart together.

The doctors came into his room and began explaining what will happen next when we move him upstairs to the hospice/comfort care room. My dad awoke from the deep slumber he was in and was more alert than ever. I think he was beginning to understand what was happening. He started mumbling with urgency "March 14. March 14. My diary... get my diary." I was so shocked to see his eyes wide open and to hear him speak. I asked him where his diary was. He responded "Cell phone." I reached into his bag and retrieved his cell phone, which he hadn't used in over week. He navigated through his phone so swiftly and led me to a little journal he kept on his phone, all documented in Japanese, and the last entry was written on March 14. He handed the phone back to me, asked my sister to feed him some food and drink various drinks, and then he fell back asleep. He hadn't been able to eat solid food for over 5 months and his whole hospital stay he didn't touch the food that was brought to him, but I think he realized that moving upstairs was going to be the end, so he asked to eat as much as possible... Have his last meal I suppose.

Moving upstairs meant no IV fluids, no nutrition or food, less oxygen, and increased pain medicine. This also meant, he'd either starve to death, his kidneys would shut down first, or the cancer and fluids in his lungs would suffocate him first and then his heart would finally give out. All of which sounded agonizing and did not make us feel any better to get through this process.



Dads room was on the 14th floor of UCSF hospital, it was a little piece of heaven.

For 5 days we barely left the hospital grounds. Gross as it may be, I didn't find time to shower for 5 days and I barely ate because we kept thinking it could be hours and I couldn't bear to miss a second. So what do you do when 6 people don't leave a room for 5 days? You talk.

In the Jewish tradition, when a loved one passes, they “sit Shiva”, which literally means sitting for 7 days to mourn. Our time at the hospital felt similar to that. We had the hospice care team counsel us everyday and ask each of us how we felt or what we have been observing from our dad. We had our church pastor, Reverend Thompson come to pray over my dad and counsel us on Wednesday, March 25. We all had to be completely honest with each other and ourselves. Reverend Thompson asked if we had anything on our hearts that we needed to share with our dad in order to help him let go, so we poured out our hearts over our dad. We wept and said everything we needed to. We never saw each other cry, but we were mourning together and we were feeling similar grief so we all held each other and comforted each other in such a deep way. Dad looked like he was resting so peacefully. My mom and Reverend Thompson left the room, us kids continued to talk to my dad.



All of a sudden his eyes shot open and he tried so hard to pull up his extremely frail body. He lifted his arms and reached out and said “Pull, pull”. So we pulled him up and held him. He refused to lie back down. My heart was about to jump out of my chest! I kept thinking, “He’s so alert! What are we doing keeping him up here? We should help him fight the cancer. Why aren’t we feeding him? He must be so weak. Are we making the wrong choice?!” There’s nothing that will ever satisfy those heartwrenching questions. We kept telling him how much we loved him, but he couldn’t respond. We were crying so much and so shocked to see his strength. He pulled all three of us in for hug and held us tight. We could hardly believe it. We were so convinced from everyone that his spirit was already probably gone and his physical body was just pumping blood. All we had was to continue believing what people told us, because... really... what do we know about dying? The nurse came in and increased his pain medication, and he was gone again. I kept thinking how scared he must be to hear us talking about him passing away when he still feels so alive and conscious. How frightening is that? I couldn’t bear the thought. I sat outside almost inconsolable, feeling so tortured about what he must be going through mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. We’ll never know and that drives me crazy.

The following day on Thursday, we thought for sure it would be the day he passed. He didn’t move once throughout the night and his breathing had become lighter. His body was burning up, so I was constantly wiping him with wet cloth and surrounding him with ice packs. When the nurses came in to change his sheets, he unexpectedly woke up again and began to panic in pain and reached out for someone. Karin, Toku and I rushed to his side and held him and kept telling him everything was okay and that we loved him so much. The nurses increased his pain meds and he was gone again.

We prayed over his body every night, we shared good memories for hours into the morning, we sang songs beside him, and we all set up camp around his bed... all six of us (Me, my boyfriend Matt, Karin, Toku, his girlfriend Devon, and my mom) and Karin holding his hand throughout the night. Our significant others sustained our lifestyle in the hospital for 5 days by providing us with coffee in the morning, brought food for every meal, and bags of clothes to change into. The bond that was created between us all was now made to be unbreakable. You couldn’t have put together a more solid team to help encourage and support one and another.



Hiromichi Shimoyama and Karin Shimoyama

Friday, March 27—we were all finally getting more comfortable and making the hospital room our home. Mom finally felt okay spending her morning in Berkeley to sign up for school, Matt went back to work, Devon went for a run and showered at home, while Toku and I finally began to do some homework. We were all pretty drained from talking and crying and definitely needed a day to not stress, but it was the 5th day and I just knew my dad couldn't go on any longer.



The nurses changed his sheets one more time and I couldn't bare seeing his spirit get sucked back in and awake again, so I left the room and Karin stayed strong by his side. The nurse came running out and said to Matt and I, "We're so sorry, this has never happened before, this shouldn't have happened... we'll make sure this doesn't happen again. I think your sister must be a little traumatized, but she handled it well". We walked back in Karin was cradling dad under her arms, he was gripping onto her and she was singing to him. He was sleeping again but he had woken up fully again and was in complete shock and

pain. When I saw him his eyes were shut tight with tears sitting on the edge. He must have also been so traumatized from the whole experience too.

I whispered in his ears, "Dad, its Friday March 27, 8:26 PM, what a wonderful day, right?" His feet began to get cold. The doctors told us to expect the outer extremities to begin losing blood circulation first, before the heart stops. I wrapped his feet up in blankets to try and keep him warm, but it didn't work, of course. It was a ridiculous thought, but a part of me hoped that if I could keep his feet warm, maybe his heart wouldn't stop. His breathing began to labor a little bit more and we heard the gurgling in his throat. The doctors told us to expect that before he passes. It was 9:58 PM and I diligently watched him while everyone was eating dinner. Then we heard it. We woke up mom and everyone gathered by his bed. I called the nurse to come in over their intercom... I didn't know what to say. I panicked and just said "I THINK THIS IS IT!!" I was crying... we all were. I was holding his hand and rubbing his head. He scrunched up his face and let out his final breath and a single tear rolled down his face....

Time of death, 10:00 PM. I held my hand on his heart for a long time, wondering if I would magically feel it beat again. His face went cold and his hands were moist. There was nothing left. But he looked so peaceful, finally. We all walked out of that hospital around midnight, with a little place in our heart that felt comforted that he wasn't in pain anymore. The five days of mourning gave us time to process and accept what was happening and allowed us to walk out of there with our head held high and feeling at peace with the night.

We love you dad. We hope you're at peace 🙏🙏 At your memorial service it was said that just like being born into this physical world there are labor pains and it seems like its the end of the road for the fetus, but really there are so many people welcoming the birth. So just like death, there will be laboring pain, but the spiritual world has prepared for your welcoming and birth into eternal life.

Thank you for allowing us to share this journey with you. It has been a great blessing to have such a wonderful community supporting all of us. All of our thoughts are with you all too.

With sincere gratitude,

M. Shimoyama on behalf of The Shimoyama Family