

My father's last decision

On Christmas morning, he told us: he was considering suicide.

by [Peter Luckey](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue



Century illustration (Source image: Getty)

I thread my arms through the sleeves of his black Geneva robe at our Christmas Eve candlelight service and remember the last time I saw him alive.

If he were here with me now, we'd watch the worshipers—believers and backsliders, the venerated and the vagabonds—find their way to their pews. We'd smile as the Bannister sisters, age seven and five, make a splash with their matching red bows on blond heads. We'd look to the rear of the sanctuary and see Ted, who lives in a truck, guide his two Chihuahuas into the pew, dressed in identical red-and-green

doggie sweaters.

Without words we would sense each other's thoughts: Tonight, everyone is hungry for God.

At the start of Christmas break in 1974, I threw my suitcase into the trunk of my beat-up Ford Fairlane. My sweaty palms gripped the wheel. I pressed on the accelerator. From the side of the road, lights twinkled out from the black abyss. I cranked down the window for a blast of cold air. I checked every curve, exit, and landmark. Butterflies swirled in my gut. I was almost home.

I'd learned that my dad, a man physically fit enough to make his pastoral rounds by motorcycle, was dying. A fast-moving illness called Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease was attacking his brain, muscles, and nerves.

I pulled into the driveway and stared. The parsonage was dark—no lights, no decorations. Dad loved Christmas; normally the house would be festive. I turned the doorknob. No greeting, no hug. I made my way down the hall and up the stairs.

"Dad?" In my voice I heard fear.

I saw a sliver of light underneath his bedroom door. I opened the door and saw him lying on the bed without his glasses. He appeared disoriented and disheveled—a King Lear cast out into the storm.

"It's Pete. I'm home."

"Oh, buddy, you do not know how good it is to see you! Goddamn, I just can't see a damn thing. Not a fuckin' thing."

Out of earshot from his parishioners, he would swear a lot. My two brothers and I loved him for it. The real Dad. But now his profanity alarmed me. Was he losing his grip?

"Can you see me, Dad?" I panicked.

"No, Pete, I can't." My heart raced. I took his trembling hand to my cheek. I leaned into his shoulder.

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“Keep the guns loaded.” Dad’s preacher’s voice hit my ears like cold steel.

It was Christmas morning, two weeks after I came home for break. I had awoken to the aroma of coffee and Mom’s homemade pastries. Our family gathered at the dining room table to eat. We laughed and joked, as if dying happens someplace else to other people.

Then Dad put his fork down. He shoved the elephant into the room.

“Tomorrow, I will be readmitted to the hospital.” His voice rose. “You guys can’t let me go back there. I will never get out again.”

A pause. Then, “Look, you’ve got to trust me. This is sheer hell, and goddamn it, I don’t want to live the rest of my life like this. So leave the guns where I can get them.”

I saw the agony in Dad’s face. Death was the only way out that he perceived. I imagined gunfire exploding, Dad on the floor, blood oozing from his head and into the bedroom rug.

We packed heat on our camping trips, to protect ourselves from bears, but I didn’t know where those guns were now. My brother Chip did, however: he knew there was a Remington 7mm rifle and a .22 Magnum pistol in the closet.

“Chip!” Mom glared at my brother. “Take those damn guns out of the house!” I’d never heard Mom talk to Chip like that.

Chip said, “No, I think we should respect Dad’s wishes. They stay.” Later he moved the Magnum to the top bureau drawer of the room where Dad lay in bed.

My mind wandered back to a three-day fishing expedition Dad and I had taken two summers before. Those nights in the cabin, where the sound of a hissing fire mingled with the hoot of a distant owl, he opened up. “Hell, Pete, I don’t really know what happens after we die,” he said. “We’re here, we’re gone.”

“Gone” came easily to our lips. We’d spend all day in a stream, with the sun dancing on the water through overarching hemlocks, bothering elusive trout with our artificial flies.

“Dad, look! There he is!” I said while pointing my finger at a brook trout’s red belly. We looked again and it had vanished. “That’s life,” Dad quipped.

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A week after our dark Christmas breakfast, we returned home from a three-day ski trip. My dad’s sister, who had been taking care of him while we were gone, greeted us at the door. My heart was pounding. What now?

“Your father made a decision,” she said. The Magnum remained in the upper bureau drawer untouched.

Dad had made a 180-degree reversal, and he decided to go public with it. “After 48 hours of self-searching and study,” he wrote in a letter to his congregation,

it comes to me that ultimately and finally the Christian must view life as a gift from God and every precious drop of life as not earned but as a grace, lovingly bestowed upon the individual by his Creator, and so I find the position of suicide untenable.

I knew my dad was struggling with different forms of strength and weakness: the strength to pull the trigger, the strength to live with his disease. The weakness his disease gave him, the fear he had in facing it. In giving in, at last, to his weakness, he discovered the strength beyond all strength. As Paul boasts, “God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27). He never did take his life. He surrendered himself to his disease, to his spastic flesh, slipping inexorably into an abyss.

Banking on an ineffable and unproven presence that would buoy him, Dad released himself onto that eternal stream, which flows over rocks and underneath the hemlock-dappled sunlight. He made a bet that there was something more than a binary choice of either enduring suffering or ending it. In all the capriciousness of life—we’re here, we’re gone—Dad made one final wager: that there exists a power beyond his crumbling self, beyond suffering and death. That power comes from being in relationship to God, to all that is.

Three weeks after writing the letter, my father slipped into a coma. I leaned over his bed and gaped at his helpless body, attached to a catheter, skin pulled taut over his jawbone, pupils rolled back into his head, his breathing shallow and intermittent.

Soon after, one Monday evening in January, the attending nurse announced, “He’s passed.”

Forty-eight years later, I ask myself, What’s the takeaway? I catch glimpses. When I lead worship I rise from my desk, walk into the sanctuary, and take my seat at the front. I notice the faces of my flock, bathed in the sunlight streaming through the stained-glass windows. Have they ever looked so beautiful? When I glance into their hearts, I see the same thing I see in myself: hurts, longings, dreams, and disappointments.

A soft voice from within whispers. Is it Dad? Is it God? *Everyone is hungry for God’s love. Receive that love. Pass it on.*