

# Ted

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Some people bring cold rain to one's life, and others bring sunshine. Ted embodied the latter. He was already well into retirement when I met him, an unassuming gentleman living with his second wife in a mobile home senior community. He was well liked by his neighbors, and friendly to my office staff. He had hypertension for many years and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease despite having quit smoking thirty years prior. He shortly developed heart disease, and I helped him through a myocardial infarction and the congestive heart failure that followed. During several hospitalizations, consultants did not engender his trust. Somehow, within a year or two, Ted bonded to me as if we had had decades of relationship. Whenever Ted and his wife Betty came to the office for a new problem or adjustment of an old one, I would present therapeutic alternatives and options, but Ted would say, "Whatever you think best, doctor." And then he would do EXACTLY whatever I suggested.

Ted, I discovered, had been the comptroller for American Airlines by the time he retired, after having worked for American for thirty years. He was very modest about having been a very, very important fellow. He never spoke about it unless asked. Betty's daughter in Ohio was found to have breast cancer, and Ted spent a lot of time helping her. Later, when Ted was hospitalized for a colon resection for bowel cancer, both of Betty's daughters flew to Florida to return the kind of emotional support that he had in the past provided to them.

Attachment has its virtues and its drawbacks. Ted and Betty worried about what might go wrong any time I went on vacation or to a conference. His health was precarious enough that sometimes I would return to indeed find him hospitalized by one of my call partners. Living will and advance directive discussions are part of my once-a-year list of questions at an annual exam. Ted and Betty always maintained that when their days were over, neither one wanted to linger beyond what time was reasonable. Technology, ventilators, and so forth were for the living, not the dying. While neither was ready to fold their cards, and they were devoted to being with each other, each articulated a very straightforward view about the end of life.

Over time, Ted's kidney function continued to worsen, and

his creatinine eventually reached 6.0. He didn't feel that bad, but he didn't feel very good, and had no appetite. He needed hospitalization for fluid overload and pulmonary edema. We held a conference to review his circumstances. The decision was at hand: permanent dialysis, or no dialysis and death soon. This watershed decision was traumatic for Betty, who did not want to lose her husband, but neither did she want him to suffer. Ted reconsidered his prior choice, and saw nothing to warrant a change. He said "no" to dialysis.

The next days passed quietly as Ted needed more oxygen and eventually morphine for his congestive heart failure and superimposed pneumonia. Close friends visited him briefly at regular intervals, and I talked with Betty daily for support and reassurance. Ted slipped into a coma, then slipped away entirely, without visible suffering and in a very quiet and unassuming manner.

Betty grieved again, and handled the bad circumstances as well as anyone could. She went through Ted's clothes about a month after he died and donated them to charity. There were a bunch of suits, hardly worn, and crisp white shirts still in their wrappers. Later still, she brought me Ted's last gift. He had kept little of all the memorabilia from his thirty year career at American Airlines, but he had treasured a small dish with the company logo given him at retirement, and had used it to hold pocket change. Betty asked me to keep it, to remember Ted by.

With Ted gone, there was not a lot to tie Betty to Vero Beach. Her remaining daughter encouraged Betty to move where she lived and could be of help. Betty realistically knew that her health would likely become more of a problem in the future, not less, and moving seemed the best option. My staff and I had a tearful goodbye with Betty and her daughter when the time came. Both were again grateful for the care I had provided and the relationship we had over a long span of time.

We got a couple brief letters in the next year, but I've not heard from Betty further. However, the memento American Airlines dish still sits atop my dresser, and Ted and Betty are still part of the family of my heart.