

Funny, Like How A Dead Clown Smells - 3/9/11

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Before I start, I'd like to thank RJ for being my friend and my mom for being my mom.

Lots of things in this world aren't funny: broken romances, failures, death, Dane Cook.

These particularly tough things seem impossible to smile about, to laugh about. But think about it. Really think. Think about something in your personal history that makes you sad or mad. I know it's hard, but try. Think about this thing so *hard* that you close your eyes.

Now smile.

My dad liked to maintain a positive attitude, liked to keep a smile on his face and was never too shy to laugh at a corny joke (to my embarrassment). This was something he strove to do even through the toughest times.

Some time ago, I learned that my father had Hepatitis C. He had, at best guess, contracted it while teaching English in Algeria in the 1970s, from a dirty needle used to treat him when he caught a digestive illness. Thus, it had been a presence in his body for 30 years. Cirrhosis had set in and his liver was in bad shape, but not bad enough to place him high on the transplant list. Hepatitis C, a newly named virus, was a tough thing to deal with, but there was another option. A live transplant would transfer half the liver of a live donor to my dad, taking advantage of the **highly regenerative** property of the organ. Luckily for my dad, my aunt stepped in, volunteering for the procedure. In February 2007, my father received half of his sister's liver.

The next 8 months were the hardest of my life.

But they were not devoid of lightness and laughter.

My father spent 8 months in and out of the hospital, a time riddled with incomprehensible mistakes and unlucky turns. Some days and weeks were better than others, but my dad was never *really* healthy during these times. **There were many times** when he needed help simply to stand and when I would feel guilty for getting frustrated when I would ask him to over and over again, and he couldn't. **There were many times** when the medicine he was taking made him foreign to me, when he would say things I could only explain by saying "This isn't him. This isn't Tata" (Tata is what I always called my father. It means dad in Polish). **There were many times** when I groaned before loading into the car for another 40 minute ride to the hospital, when I felt...abandoned, when I woke up not knowing if it would be a "good day" or a "bad day".

I sometimes wish I didn't think of these times when I think of my dad. These were difficult times and they're hard to think about. But there were also things that happened then that help me remember my dad the way I want to remember him and I want to share one of those with you.

My dad turned 55 on September 29th. His room in the intensive care unit was decorated with birthday cards, propped up and taped everywhere. One card played the opening bars of "I Feel Good" whenever it was opened. (I'm assuming you're familiar with the classic James Brown tune. *I feel good nahnahnahnahnahnah*. Remember this. It'll be important.)

Within a week or two of his birthday, my mom, sister, and I were all there, along with a high school friend of my dad's, her husband, and their daughter. We gathered around his bed, talked, and thought, knowing that my dad's condition was worsening. It was hard, to say the least. My dad, however, as he did throughout those 8 months, kept a light spirit, kept the room afloat, kept it from sinking deep in despair. He couldn't talk, but he signaled for my mom to open the singing card, and....for a few measures at a time...the beeping from the machines was forgotten... the tubes disappeared... and my dad...in his bed...danced... He danced as best he could limited both by his physical predicament... and by his status... as a *really* corny dad. The song would stop and my dad would freeze comically and act like nothing had happened. My mom, clearly loving it, would open the card again and my dad would dance for another few seconds. Soon, everyone was dancing.. and laughing... with tears streaming down our faces.

I think I cried so hard that day because I was scared and sad about the possibility of losing someone who almost never gave up, who was almost never mad or sad. I cried heavily at his funeral, but I also smiled. I cried because I knew I was losing the person in my life who taught me that it's okay to smile and laugh even about the worst of times. I loved joking around with my dad for that reason. It was really easy to make him laugh.

Emotions are no easy thing to sort out. There's something funny about laughter, isn't there? It's something indicative of joy and delight, but it can be found even in the darkest places.

Thank you.