

Endurance

By

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Life Experiences
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We weren't supposed to be friends.

After all, I was a high school senior while Dave was merely a sophomore. My world at that time consisted of maintaining a straight "A" average and performing in every dramatic production. I solidified my nerd status with my black horn-rimmed glasses. He was a basketball and baseball jock who was dating a cheerleader, and he radiated so much charisma that one day he would be homecoming king.

Dave and I met when fate put us together in the same Spanish class. I persuaded my counselor into changing my schedule so I could get my favorite teacher from the year before. There was no way I was going to take Spanish from anyone other than Mr. Jack DeVilder.

It is impossible to pinpoint the moment it happened when we became friends in that class. What drew us together were our competitive natures. Because I grew up with seven brothers, I came by a that spirit naturally. Dave's came from his overwhelming athletic talent. When we played review games in class for quizzes and tests, they evolved into combat between us where I vanquished him every time. Even at the Spanish Club taco supper, we ended up trying to out-eat the other and we only stopped when the food ran out.

Because I dominated him in class, he challenged me to come and play one-on-one with him at his house. I knew the odds were stacked against me, but I never refused a dare. That night, he crushed me in less than five minutes without breaking a sweat. The gloating he did was in good nature and he gave me credit for my effort. That probably solidified our friendship.

We both tried to deflate the other's ego. When I got my first pair of glasses that year, I remember walking into the crowded cafeteria and hearing a voice yell, "Hey four eyes!" from the other side of the massive space. It didn't matter to him that I was a senior. He knew his jab wouldn't make me angry. In return, during our next Spanish class, I relentlessly grilled him when he tried to give his report on bullfighting. I did everything in my power to throw him off.

He attended my college his freshman year and we roomed together for most of it. When basketball at Augustana didn't seem to work for him, he transferred to another school for better opportunities. Since I was the varsity manager for Augie's basketball team, I naturally disagreed and unsuccessfully fought the move. Despite his lack of loyalty to Augustana, I traveled to watch him play whenever I could or just to spend the weekend with him.

I graduated from college and was hired to teach at our old high school. Like me, Dave was working towards a teaching degree, but after graduating, he pursued a career in business as a computer salesman. He also fulfilled his dream by marrying his cheerleader sweetheart from junior high. We both stayed in the area so we never drifted apart like other friendships.

Eight years after graduation, Dave said one day after he beat me at golf again, "I make a lot of money and I'm not happy. You don't make a lot and yet you love your job." Together we planned how he could change careers and get a teaching position at our old high school. I played basketball (still badly) with the principal and some other faculty members on Sundays and I brought Dave along. The principal became so impressed by Dave and his character that it wasn't long until he moved staff around to create a job for him. Dave quit sales and started on the lowest rung of the pay scale which meant a pay cut from a six-figure salary to one in the low twenties. That was a sign of Dave's commitment to his new profession.

Jack DeVilder, our Spanish teacher, was still on staff. He was only six years older than me so he wasn't exactly ancient when we were his students. I was teaching Spanish with Jack while Dave taught Social Studies. I gave Dave a hard time about stealing my life. Initially, I had taught Psychology when I started teaching and that was his primary subject. I gave him my material and we spent hours discussing lesson plans.

Dave revealed what I knew would be the truth all along; he was a gifted teacher. The same boundless enthusiasm that had been there as a student and as an athlete was there in his classroom. He thrived on the contact with the students and they were enthralled with him. At the end of year, students lined up to have him sign their yearbooks.

As the next few years passed, the principal who hired Dave left. I eventually moved into administration as did Jack and we both ended up as assistant principals with one of our good friends and Sunday ball players, Gary, as principal. Dave was still in Social Studies but was thinking about making his move into administration when the opportunity presented itself. He wasn't tired of the classroom, but he was ready for new challenges. During his tenure, he piloted new programs, served on committees and was a successful tennis coach. The kids never stopped flocking to him.

Then it changed. On Monday, January 13, 1997, I had gone to bed and was reading when the phone rang. Gary, the principal, said the words I will never forget: Dave died unexpectedly from a massive heart attack. He was less than one month away from his fortieth birthday. After working out on his treadmill, he sat down, said, "What's happening?" He collapsed and never came back.

Despite the late hour, Gary, Jack, their wives, and I went to Dave's house but once there, I couldn't enter. Being in the house where he had died just hours before was impossible for me. I

sat in the cold January night in a dark car listening to the wails of anguish coming from his wife that penetrated the silence in relentless waves. People always talk about being numb from shock and that night I understood the feeling. Nothing was real.

When I went back home after midnight, I did not sleep that night nor did I cry. I was at school by 6 the next morning and Dave's sisters came in early to talk to me about his passing. Their story of seeing his lifeless body at the hospital crushed me, but I did not break. As the school opened, I saw sobbing students and emotional teachers as word spread. At a special staff meeting before the day began, I was asked to speak about Dave to help with the communal grief. I told the story of "four eyes" that had happened in that very room 24 years earlier. I wanted them to smile at the thought of Dave. As I looked around the room, I saw the smiles, but also the tears behind them.

I went on and told the story of Dave's financial sacrifice to become a teacher. It represented a commitment that I said should serve as a challenge for the rest of us. Each of us who worked with students must carry that commitment because it is not a job or a profession but rather it is a calling. Dave answered that call with no regrets.

As the week progressed, I was hugged, comforted, and consoled as the time for the visitation and funeral drew near. Those days turned out to be miserable January days of sub-zero temperatures and freezing winds. School was cancelled for both days due to the weather. That did not stop those who loved Dave from being there for him. The line at the funeral home was enormous and never subsided. Everyone who met him walked away feeling as though they had a friend for life. Nothing would stop us from being in his presence for the last time.

It was more than an hour before the line progressed where I could finally enter the room. I kept my eyes averted from the far end where I knew Dave was waiting. As I first passed

through the line of family, I was lost in the embraces from his parents and sisters. Dave's dad had always been a rock and at that moment he was sobbing into my shoulder as I held onto him.

Next was Dave's wife and children. Kim had always been Dave's love since they met in junior high school, and their two daughters were the living representation of that devotion. We exchanged words and talked of the happy memories that should never be forgotten. Their faces showed the strain they were under, but they were able to stand and deal with the onslaught of grieving people. It was a courage that would have made Dave proud.

I turned from them and finally saw Dave. He was as handsome and fit-looking as ever. It was hard to believe it was his lifeless form in that casket. I can't remember a single thought that passed through my mind but I do remember that I had to touch Dave. Never before at all the funerals and visitations I had attended, including those of my own parents and brothers, could I reach out and touch the deceased. Dave was different. Whether it was the need to bond with him one last time, or to simply prove the reality, I rested my hand on his sleeve for an instant and then moved away. I did not look back.

The next day dawned and it was the funeral. It was sunny, but continued to be bitterly cold with school still cancelled. I accepted Jack's offer to go to the funeral with him, his wife and their son who was a senior at our school. We said very little to each other and parked a block away from the church. Even though we were a half hour early, we had to be seated in a side room since the church was already overflowing. There was nothing to do but sit and listen to the organ without speaking.

I looked at my watch since I was convinced that it was time for the service, but it was still fifteen minutes away. Jack caught my reaction. He quietly said, "I know. It's never going to start."

The casket finally entered followed by all of Dave's family. The service was long and yet it seemed to be no more than a flash. He was eulogized by his college basketball coach in such a way that we all knew Dave's death was a personal loss to each of us. Every note of the music began to drive the reality of what had happened into my consciousness.

The emotions I had fought all week finally found release. The closer it came to the end of the service, the more I realized there would be no more laughter, competitions, or his strong shoulder for support. The tears came as I watched every person and listened to every word. I was not smart enough to bring a handkerchief so Jack, seeing my struggle, got a tissue from Nancy. He tapped my arm and, instead of just handing it to me, he pressed it into my hand.

It was that human contact that caused the wall to fall. I realized at that moment that Dave was truly dead because of the touch of Jack's hand. Because of my great admiration for Jack when I was his student so many years before, I had met my best friend. Now, I was seated next to him at that same friend's funeral. My friendship with Dave came full circle at that moment. We began with Jack, and with Jack it was now over. That realization was devastating.

When the service ended, we were told to exit by a side door. It was a struggle for me not to break down completely as we made our way out. I walked a little ahead of Jack and his family as I simply wanted to get away. Outside, the cold air slapped at my face and I heard Jack's voice behind me. "Bob, where are you going?" I choked out the phrase, "I think I'll just walk home."

There was a slight chuckle behind me at the ridiculousness of that statement. Jack caught up with me and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. My wall shattered. The convulsive sobs started and I didn't think they would stop. We walked the block back to the car with him supporting me all the way. I was no longer a 41-year-old man but a 17-year-old boy once again.

It was wrong for Dave to be dead because we were young and our lives were still ahead of us. I felt cheated out of a future because Dave was no longer there.

At the car I was crying a week's worth of tears as Jack hugged me tightly against him. Through the tears, I choked, "It's all your fault." Jack never let go and asked what I meant. "Because I liked you so much, I met Dave." He quietly laughed through his own tears which contrasted so sharply with my heaving sobs. Cars passed us as the teacher comforted his student.

Jack and Nancy were not going to the cemetery so I asked them to drop me at home so I could drive myself. Jack asked, "Are you sure? I don't like the thought of you being alone." I assured him I would be fine. My house was less than 2 blocks from the cemetery so I arrived before the procession. Eventually, I saw the long line of cars so I knew Dave had arrived. Despite the bright sunshine, the temperature was still well below zero so we huddled together as the minister intoned the final words. After he finished, I was back at my house in less than two minutes with nothing but memories of Dave.

The next night was a home basketball game and I was asked to say a few remarks before the game began. I toiled over the words because I had heard the moving eulogies already offered and I did not want to duplicate them. What struck me was that I would be speaking at Wharton Field House, the scene of Dave's high school basketball triumphs. Where Dave had been the athlete, I had been the orator. No text of mine had ever gone through so many alterations. I sat in the stands waiting for my time and I could not stop changing my words. Adding to the pressure was seeing Dave's family in the stands across the way. My words were to be the last tribute offered which would bring his life to its close.

When my time came, all noise and conversation ceased. At first, I shared the basics of Dave's life and what he meant to anyone who knew him. From the time I was asked to speak, I

had no doubt how I wanted it to end. I asked the crowd to stand for a moment of silence. When that concluded, I said, "Dave was my friend. The one thing I would kid him about was his love of applause. I think it is right, fitting, and appropriate if we all join in one last round of applause for a great friend and a great man, Dave Youngvorst."

Everyone rose back to their feet and the applause was deafening. It filled the cavernous field house in a wave that I didn't think would end. I turned and walked away while the ovation was still filling the vast basketball arena. I cast my eyes up and said, "There you go, Sport."

In that moment, I felt his presence once again and was at peace. I realized that our physical friendship may have ended, but the spiritual side of our relationship would endure. Death could not erase him as long as I kept room for him in my heart. Twenty-six years later, he's still there.