

## The Black Swan

**I**T HAS been 1 year since my father died. The concept of an anniversary reaction was one that I always accepted on a theoretical basis and looked for in patients. This particular anniversary, however, brings feelings separate from the sadness of the loss. Feelings of admiration, respect, and awe make me realize that every loss is full of deep positives and negatives.

My father was alone, having lost my mother 3 years ago. Two years ago, he was operated on for a melanoma on his neck; the physicians said they "got it all." He was doing great, just lonely, so we invited him for Christmas. I was surprised when he said no. In spite of my best encouragement, he insisted that he would stay home to be closer to Mom. Christmas day arrived, and while I was sad that he was alone, he sounded in better spirits than I would have guessed.

It came as quite a shock to me when I received a call the next week. My father's physician had discovered nodules on his chest x-ray. Computed tomography confirmed the probability that it represented a recurrence of his melanoma. My brothers and I gathered close to talk with Dad and comfort him. He took it all in a matter-of-fact spirit that reflected no fear.

The fear was there, though, when he went into the hospital a week later. He had woken early that morning when something brushed his right cheek. He reached in the dark with his left hand to discover a hand across his face. Having lived alone for more than a year, my father screamed in fright and flung it away, only to realize it was his own numb and lifeless right hand. After several moments' pause, he began his usual routine, dressed, and made coffee. A few spills of coffee later (he was quite in-

competent with his left hand), he left for his morning walk. He would have finished it, but the numbness and dragging sensation in his right leg made him cut his walk short to 2 miles. Thrifty to the end, my father called a cab to take him to the physicians' office since cab fare would be less than the cost of parking his car for the inevitable several days he knew he would spend in the hospital. It was during that hospitalization that he shared a most peculiar story with my brothers and me.

He said, "I stayed at home this year to be close to your mother. The last few weeks I had a feeling that I should visit more. I started to go to the cemetery every day. On each visit, I noticed two great black swans in the pond across from Mother's grave site. They made me a bit sad since they reminded me of your mother and me, always together and so dependent on each other. On arriving one day, I noticed that only one swan remained. The sight of the solitary swan hit me hard and made me cry. The single swan left seemed so like I am without your mother, lost and alone. The day before they told me about the cancer coming back was the day the second black swan disappeared. And though I thought that I would cry again, I felt good knowing that the two swans were together, just like we will be together again, your mother and me."

My brothers and I were awestruck. My father was an engineer with a disdain for abstraction. We assumed that his brain metastasis had affected his thought process and that a story he had read somewhere had been incorporated into his own remembered experience. Surely, this rigid and concrete engineer could not create such symbolism.

On the trip out of the hospital, we took Dad for a visit to Mom's

grave, a last visit. It was as we were driving out that we saw another small pond, quite distant from my mother's grave site, with several black swans. The pond across from my mother's grave remained empty. I will never know if Dad saw the swans, but he didn't react like my brother and I did. The story was no longer a misremembered fantasy. My father seemed to know before the rest of us, as I have experienced with many patients, that the end was near.

I look back on that story, not with a fear of the unknown or a grief that accompanies death. Instead, I see the ironic complexities that make life and death so similar. Never fully comprehending it, we struggle to understand life's meaning only to find it in something as simple as a child playing alone with a toy. Similarly, we grapple with and struggle against death, trying to understand, conquer, or avoid it. My father's tale meant only that *he* had understood, conquered, and accepted it. Perhaps, as part of some grand design, Dad had found the knowledge and courage that he needed.

As a family physician, I have dealt with death many times in the last year. Heart disease, congenital anomalies, sudden infant death syndrome, and cancer have claimed fetuses, children, and adults. I have tried to help families deal with the loss of loved ones, and patients prepare for their own death. At this anniversary, I know, perhaps as part of some grand design, that my father's story of the black swan has given me the knowledge and courage that I needed also.

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