

Remembrance and Unanswered Questions

by BROCK WEIR

There has been a lot of time to think recently.

Last week, a member of my family underwent significant surgery at an area hospital. While we knew the surgery itself was a likely outcome of their health journey this year, the speed at which the surgery was scheduled – particularly in our healthcare system – was something of a surprise.

When the date was booked, there were just three days to prepare for it all – mentally, materially, and any other ways one has to prepare for a surgery that is not your own.

There was a flurry of preparation the weekend before last with the big event to address the ‘Big C’ took place and, running on at least a little bit of adrenaline, by the time they were in the operating room, it was a matter of ‘hurry up and wait.’

Arriving at Southlake Health shortly after 7.30 a.m. last Tuesday, it was a good eleven-and-a-half hours before I was able to go home and get some rest but, in the hours that preceded getting the all-clear, there was plenty of time to think.

I brought a fair bit of work to polish off during the wait, but my heart and my brain weren't in it.

The five books I brought with me that day – everything from a historical biography on James VIII/I to Cher's recent autobiography, to a new tome of wartime love letters exchanged between Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz to a harrowing story of loss, conflict and triumph penned by a local author, and a magazine picked up just in case – went largely unread.

So, outside of conversation with assembled family members and well-wishers who popped in and out throughout the day, much of the time was spent more or less alone with my thoughts – and there were many.

As the numerous doom-and-gloom scenarios going through my head mercifully lifted, I realized something that startled me: as close as I am to the patient, as much as I've gotten to know them over the entirety of my forty years on this planet, there is still so much about their life's journey that I don't know.

At least one car on train of thought was put on the track by one such pop-in family member I hadn't seen in several years. They too have known the patient their entire lives, and they have a few years on me. As they reminisced, I learned a wealth of new info going back some 70 years – about their health, influences, and even some surprising things about a spiritual journey that was, for whatever reason, kept under wraps.

So, I decided then and there to change that, using this ‘bonus’ time with the patient to get down to business in figuring out what truly drives them, makes them tick, and assemble the puzzle pieces I've picked up along the way.

Perhaps it wasn't the best time to announce this to them the day after they were settled in the ICU if the widened eyes poking out from the tangle of tubes about their person was any indication; after all, as you may have guessed, they are a largely private person who, perhaps, would hate this topic is even being broached in these pages, but I'm determined to make it happen.

There is some downtime ahead to take advantage of – and, of course, I'm always a firm believer in practicing what I preach.

As we approach Remembrance Day, I experience, as I suspect so many of us do, many mixed emotions – and these emotions sometimes take a different track from year to year.

In some years, my thoughts drift to my paternal grandfather, an airman, who spent far too much time in a German Prisoner-of-War camp during the Second World War. While, against incredible odds, he was able to come home, he died quite young and we missed our paths crossing by some 15 years.

Thoughts also often turn to his parents, who met and married during the First World War. His father also died quite young and while his mother lived a long and fruitful life, we again missed each other by five years or so.

Timing is everything!

In recent years, I've found myself thinking about her brother, previously unknown to me just under a decade ago, and what he must have experienced before paying the ultimate sacrifice for King and Country.

The questions I have for these men and women but was never able to ask, could fill a newspaper double or triple this size, but there's some solace that more than 15 years in this job as a reporter and then editor have afforded me many opportunities to pose some of the questions I did have to others who followed similar paths, experienced similar horrors, and were eager to share their experiences with anyone who asked.

Time was of the essence and you have to strike while the proverbial iron is hot.

There is a stereotype that those who were fortunate to come home usually expounded on their own experiences in order to somehow relieve the 'glory days' of their youth, but from talking to them, this was never, ever the case.

While their individual circumstances varied, whether they were fighting on the frontlines or working here on the home front, there was one overarching uniting factor: they shared their stories so us younger folk would appreciate the true horrors of war in the hopes of ensuring such things would never happen again.

Each passing Remembrance Day leaves us fewer and fewer people who are able to share their perspectives with younger generations, and while it took a while to get to this point, I think we're sadly seeing the results of losing that lived experience from our discourse: horrors experienced by these people fading into history, leaving a door open for up-and-coming generations to downplay these unspeakable traumas, adopt an 'Oh, it wasn't THAT bad?' mentality, cast doubt on what these men and women shared with us, or, at worst, dismiss them outright as fantasy, hoaxes, and conspiracies.

That old saying, 'Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it,' holds no small amount of truth and it's not always even a matter of ignoring history; it could sometimes be simply a matter of not having access to it. And we are all the poorer for that.

Thankfully, so many veterans were generous enough with their time to share their experiences for posterity, and we are the richer for it, even if so many questions will forever be unanswered, but if only more people took the time to listen, read, and reflect on what they left behind.

I'm grateful to have some bonus time with my family member thanks to the team at Southlake Health and I'm damned if I'm not going to do my utmost to get all my outstanding questions answered and, yes, saved for posterity.

These reflections may not change the world, as the recollections of so many of our servicemen and women did, but, none of us know until we ask.