

A Conversation with My Dad  
about Making his Urn Together  
and Taking Care of his Parents

January, 2019

Erin: What was your reaction to my idea of digging up dirt at Malheur together? And when I suggested making an urn?

Mike: Initially, I thought that the dirt we dug in the glass jar was going to represent my ashes. It wasn't until later that I realized we were actually going to use that dirt to create an urn. So that's one reason – until I really understood – that I just thought [laughing] we could throw any dirt in the jar because it didn't really matter [laughs].

I liked the area along the Silvies River we visited. I like the notion that part of that place will be made into a container. I thought the incorporation of everyone [your mom and siblings] giving ideas and things was healthy – it's good for people to plan or talk about these

things – to think about what the future might be. It's nice to have death be thought of as you would a birth or a wedding, I think it can make it more meaningful for everyone involved.

I think your mom and I have talked a lot about death and dying over the years – mostly about others: patients and most recently her father and our sisters. Since you and I started this discussion your mom and I solidified some plans for some songs and other things we'd like for a future funeral service. I think having a more open conversation with everyone has been positive.

And I never really thought that a trip to dig dirt at Malheur could be turned to an artwork.

I was thinking in response to your questions about why Malheur was so interesting to me. I think there are two important components of the refuge for me. I visited often in the 70s and 80s when it was rated one of the top ten birding destinations in the country. There was a lot more water then. The lake was bigger, there was more vegetation, and we would see an amazing number of birds – more than you and I ever saw when you were growing

up. [In the 70s and 80s] I would go in May and sometimes as late June, and the “Narrows” – the area where the lakes meet the highway – was full of water and birds. It was a different experience than it is now – or at least that’s how I remember it.

Although the numbers of birds has reduced, there are still enough migratory pathways for my ashes to go north, south, east, and west. Birds there go as far north as Alaska and the Canadian Tundra. I think it’s the best place for me. I didn’t always have Malheur in mind as the location, but I did have the concept that I wanted to see the world with my ashes and experience new things as a different form.

I also love the horizon out there. It’s so expansive. A person feels part of nature, but also humbled by its scale. I like that – I don’t think people should take themselves as seriously as we do [laughs]. And nature has a way of reducing one’s sense of importance; and you realize that we’re not as independent from it as we often think.

It's also special to me because of our family. Part of my central ethos for myself has been focusing on being a good father. So Malheur represents that as well as my interest in birds, biology, and the natural world. I guess it has become a symbolic construct of what's important to me.

E: I was recently thinking of my time there last summer. And I realized that while I went to learn more about the regional land-use politics and history, it was also more simple than that. It was a desire or maybe an instinct to return to a landscape that I miss.

M: That's one reason I wanted to move back to Idaho from Seattle. After your mom's sister died, we were sitting in bed talking about her, what we would want – where we'd want to be buried, etc. And I realized that I didn't want to be buried in Seattle. I suddenly thought if I don't want to be dead here, then why am I living here? There were many other reasons too, but I remember that very distinctly.

I think your mom and I have tried to have an open discussion about death and what we want for ourselves. We want to be as inde-

pendent as possible and don't want to burden each other. As we get older, it will be nice to have some family around – not necessarily children, but also brothers and sisters and people who can give us some support. There will be an inevitable loss of independence due to changes in vision, hearing, mobility, unforeseen injuries and illnesses.

E: I imagine it can feel really lonely too. Your pace changes while everybody else is at a rapid pace that just gets faster and faster.

M: Yes. One thing I've thought about in relationship to this discussion is how much smarter it is to have a multi-generational family living together.

E: How do you think you would do living with your parents?

M: If we were in a different house situation [more accommodating to their mobility], we would have offered to have them stay here. But my parents always wanted to maintain their independence. I think that's the most frustrating thing for my mom and dad. They're in their [new] house, and even though it's

small and one level, it's still too complicated for them in their present health.

There was a discussion eight years ago when they moved that maybe they should move into a place like an assisted living with a residence that they buy. And they could transition there more easily as things change. I think they were against that because there were no places available in Caldwell. They didn't want to move to Boise or Meridian. I don't think my mom and dad were prepared for the rapidity with which their current situation developed – how fast their health declined.

**E: Can you talk about what it's been like to take care of your parents? How it's similar or different from your expectations? Did you anticipate that you would play this role?**

M: I think the most difficult thing has been the speed with which my dad has declined. His anxiety and depression have been really difficult: his lack of interest in almost everything and his rapid decline in terms of self-care. I guess I always figured that like the other members of his family, he would have a stroke or a heart attack and it would be over quickly. But

this constant, lingering decline and his social, physical, and mental withdrawal over the last four years has been really hard. It's difficult to have a conversation of substance with him. Often times he doesn't want to talk, so he just says, "I can't remember."

For the past few years, it really feels like there's no relationship other than caretaking. It feels largely like it's based on past memories and past relationships rather than an ongoing or growing relationship. So I'm just trying to support them and detach myself emotionally from some of the daily frustration – to try to care for them while realizing that there are a lot of things that we can't change.

But I would like to have a little more planning for my mom rather than waiting for a crisis to develop. She's starting to realize in small ways that she can't stay in their house much longer. She's realizing that her ability to be somewhat "independent" is only because we go over there all the time. She can't go to the store, she can't drive, it's hard for her to walk, hard for her to do laundry – and even though I imagined her aging, I never fully pictured someone as strong as her having trouble with

these basic things. It's sad in the sense that you realize how fragile we are or can become.

**E:** Did you get a sense of when you were younger that your dad struggled with anxiety or depression?

**M:** He worried a lot. He was always very fastidious and wanted things done in a certain way – wanted an appearance that things were clean, orderly, and nice. Probably because growing up they didn't have much – they lived in a remote mining town without indoor plumbing. So I think the attainment of a certain standard of living and maintaining an appearance was important to him.

To be honest, I don't think he ever recovered psychology from the fact that they had to move from their old house. He loved that place on Dearborn. They lived there for about 50 years, and he spent a lot of time and energy tinkering and working on the house. I think part of his depression comes from that – from losing a sense of purpose and feeling somewhat displaced in a nursing home. He feels that this really isn't his home and what was once his home isn't anymore. But my mom



couldn't get up and down the stairs. It was difficult for them to do much of anything in that old house. It wasn't a decision precipitated by crisis, but they worried they couldn't avoid one if they stayed. My dad hasn't really recovered from it.

**E: Has helping your parents influenced what you want as you age? Or how you're thinking about your future?**

M: I think I have a little more clarity than your mother does. I'd like to be somewhere close to family; maybe Spokane near her family. But she thinks being there with everyone can be toxic sometimes – though I'm just thinking in terms of friendship and support. I want to make sure that things are planned, and I hope that I will listen to you and your siblings if you're worried or concerned about us. After helping my dad, I hope I will be more accepting and able to admit when I need help or change.

Even after taking care of them, I still can't have as honest of a conversation about death with my parents as I would like. I try with my mom and she eventually comes around; but she's very resistant to help.

The way she was raised, there was nothing that you couldn't overcome with just sheer determination – every problem is a nail, and you just increase the force of your blows. So maybe she's coming to terms with the fact that that's not how everything works and that she can't fix grandpa's situation.

If I'm terminally ill or chronically suffering, I would want the right to choose death with dignity – if I didn't want to eat, drink, or take more medication I want to listen to that and accept it and recognize when it's time and let nature take care of it. I think biological processes are just more powerful than anything else.