The Gravedigger

I
go to my patients’ funerals whenever possible. It is a way of showing respect for the patient and the patient’s family. Depending on the denomination, a funeral also provides me with 1-, 2-, or 3-hour periods to sit and think. My funeral thoughts relate to the big issues of life and death, and I come away with a feeling of peace and of being part of a community.

Nothing in these funeral-going experiences prepared me for gravedigging, however. Digging a grave is like a funeral, raised to the tenth power.

The call came at about 2:00 a.m. on a Thursday morning. My friends had just found their son, who had hanged himself. He was my godson. I flew out to be with them later that morning.

They live on 100 acres of very rough, isolated land in northern New Mexico. It takes a high clearance, four-wheel drive vehicle to navigate the 3-mile track from the paved road to their house. All of the eight or so families who live along that track are off the grid. Electricity comes from solar panels and wind, water comes from wells or rainwater, and heating comes from wood stoves. Toilets tend to be primitive.

Communities come together in crisis, and the small community along that 3-mile dirt track was no exception. Tony’s mother wanted him buried on the land. Someone had a niece who worked at a funeral home, and she arranged the permits. Someone else was a woodworker, so he constructed a beautiful cherrywood coffin. People flocked to the house, bringing food and liquor. But there was very little conversation. It was so overwhelmingly sad, and so confusing.

When a person commits suicide, those who remain have a lot of forgiving to do. First, we have to forgive ourselves. There is always something we think we could have said, something we could have done that would have prevented it from happening. Tony called me about 6 weeks before he died and left a mumbled message on my answering machine. I hadn’t called back. In my life certain unwise acts and failures to act have become lodged in my brain. The occasional and unpredictable dislodging of one of those memories precipitates waves of shame. Not returning Tony’s phone call was a good candidate for that list.

Second, we have to forgive each other. The temptation to blame increases with the senselessness of the tragedy. Tony’s parents should have been more firm. His high school friends were destructive. His girlfriend was rejecting. The police and judicial system were biased against mixed-race young men. We can mix and match from a long list of perpetrators, allowing us to resurrect old biases and resentments in a fresh setting. Not a helpful activity, but highly prevalent among humans.

Finally, we have to forgive Tony. Tony had been a bright, good-looking child. However, my discomfort with him started when he was seven. Unconditional love is not one of my strengths. Tony was interested in appearing clever, and seemed deficient in feelings for others. I gave up on him when he was 20—a high school dropout and contemptuous of his parents. By age 22, he had fathered a child and spent 6 months in the county jail for armed robbery. His final act was to come home to hang himself during his first visit in many months.

There was a lot of forgiving to do, but no forgiveness was happening in the house. Nothing was happening except sadness. The atmosphere was claustrophobic. If I were prone to anxiety attacks, I would have had one. Several others did, in various forms.

The task of digging the grave fell to Tony’s father and me. Tony’s mother picked the spot—a peaceful indentation of land a few hundred yards from the house with a view of the Sangre de Cristo and Jemez Mountains.

The first 6 inches were soft dirt, followed by a foot of increasingly compacted clay. Then we hit rock. The rock would splinter beneath the pick for a few inches, so we got through another half foot in an hour. Then the rock got harder and the pick began to bounce at every hit, along with the sledgehammer and assorted other tools. When the pick hit the rock, our bodies rebounded and vibrated in unpleasant ways. But we kept at it, mindlessly pounding the rock. At about the hundredth swing, his father growled. “F__ing Tony!”

I started laughing, and we both sat down and laughed for the next half-hour straight, sputtering out curses. Then we started back on the digging. Rather than think and recalculate and plan how to deal with the rock, we kept banging away. It was ultimate guy stupidity—there must have been a better way. On the other hand, it was so much better than sitting in the house. The work, the sweat, the jangled joints—all of it was a form of penance. And somehow we began to talk, to piece together what we thought, how we felt about Tony. The words flowed. We cursed Tony. We cursed ourselves. Amidst all that conversation, forgiveness began.

We finished the grave, my friend and I. It took us about 12 hours over 3 days. In the end, we broke down and borrowed a jackhammer. Over that time, we talked a lot. By the end we had done our forgiving. The sheer painful difficulty of the task—digging into stone—was sufficient penance for us to start forgiving ourselves, and each other.

And at some point, hanging the pick off the rock, I realized that Tony had done the best he could. Life is tenuous. It is much harder for some of us than for others. He did the best he could.
Perhaps we had all done the best we could. We dug the requisite 6 feet (maybe 5 and a half). The very act of showing up and digging became a metaphor for the two of us, I think. Life will go on.

The burial was a week later. In the morning, they brought the casket up from town. Tony’s father and I stared at its handles, which added about 4 inches to its width. I spent the 3 hours before the ceremony back at the grave—digging in my funeral suit.

James S. Goodwin, MD
The University of Texas Medical Branch
Galveston, TX 77555-0177

Requests for Single Reprints: James S. Goodwin, MD, Department of Internal Medicine, Sealy Center on Aging, The University of Texas Medical Branch, 301 University Boulevard, Galveston, TX 77555-0177; e-mail, jsgoodwi@utmb.edu.


---

**ANNALS OF INTERNAL MEDICINE JUNIOR INVESTIGATOR AWARDS**

*Annals of Internal Medicine* and the American College of Physicians recognize excellence among internal medicine trainees and junior investigators with annual awards for original research and scholarly review articles published in *Annals* in each of the following categories:

- Most outstanding article with a first author in an internal medicine residency program or general medicine or internal medicine subspecialty fellowship program
- Most outstanding article with a first author within 3 years following completion of training in internal medicine or one or its subspecialties

Selection of award winners will consider the article’s novelty, methodological rigor, clarity of presentation, and potential to influence practice, policy, or future research. Judges will include *Annals* Editors and representatives from *Annals*’ Editorial Board and the American College of Physicians’ Education/Publication Committee.

Papers published in the year following submission are eligible for the award in the year of publication. First author status at the time of manuscript submission will determine eligibility. Authors should indicate that they wish to have their papers considered for an award when they submit the manuscript, and they must be able to provide satisfactory documentation of their eligibility if selected for an award. Announcement of awards for a calendar year will occur in January of the subsequent year. We will provide award winners with a framed certificate, a letter documenting the award, and complimentary registration for the American College of Physicians’ annual meeting.

Please refer questions to Mary Beth Schaeffer at mschaeffer@acponline.org.