

From Where My Strength Cometh

James V. Allridge III

I had a visit with my father recently. It is not often that he gets a chance to come and visit by himself, but he said he wanted to see me. Everyone was busy with either work or other important previous commitments, so he decided he would make the trip by himself. I was glad to see him.

As we sat there and struggled to find things to talk about at first, our mood quickly turned to playfulness. I think the most commonly used emotions within our family are joy and anger. We'll usually laugh about something before we'll get mad about it.

As my dad and I talked and reminisced, I began to notice that age is slowly catching up to him. As he told me about deciding to come by himself, he said he made sure he had cellphone numbers of my brothers so he could call one of them in case he had car problems. My dad has been a mechanic as long as I can remember and I have never known a car he could not fix; not so with these new ones. His pacemaker will not even allow him to be near most of them when they are being fixed. I commented on how we used to depend on him as the one to call when we had car problems. Now he is looking to his sons.

As the visit went on, he wanted to show me his new shoes. He grimaced as he tried to lift his leg up high enough for me to see them. He used to be so agile. He finally relented and took his shoe off to sit it on the counter. Nice shoes. Soft leather. Thick and cushioned soles. Good for walking. Probably nice for sore feet. What older folk would call a "comfortable shoe."

We talked more, but he kept being drawn back to the snack machine for Hershey's Chocolate Bars with Almonds. Mother says he has put on a little weight lately, so I am wondering if she allows him these treats when she is around. He eats two bars and a bag of chips.

A few minutes pass and he complains of stomach problems. I say it is probably gas. Babies and older people get gas a lot, so I have been told. He sets the phone down to moan and rub his stomach. I worry but make farting sounds like the young kid on Eddie Murphy's version of *The Nutty Professor*. He laughs. He groans. I make more farting noises. He laughs some more. He picks the phone back up. I make farting sounds again. He laughs some more. It is how we deal with pain. He stops complaining about his stomach.

We talk some more. The property officer brings my drawing for him to take home. He looks at it. He cannot see it too well without his glasses. He will

look at it when he gets it home. We talk some more. He asks me if I see how small his arms have gotten. They look a little wrinkled. I say, "Dad, you're 69 now. You look okay for your age." I ask how he feels. "I don't see so well. Don't hear as well as I used to, but I feel okay." "I remember about ten years ago," I begin to recall, "when you told me and Ronnie (my older brother) that you felt you'd be dead in six years. You're still here, so you must be doing something right." "Yeah, and I'm still a handsome devil, too," he jokes with a big smile. He has a few teeth missing.

As our visit ends, I tell him to drive safely and I love him. He says, "Me too." As he gets up to leave, I notice he struggles just a bit and frowns a little as if his body is not supposed to be acting that way. But once he's up, he has a steady and erect stride as he leaves the building. A tall and proud man.

I am brought back to my cell and I think about my Dad and all he has been through. This is the man who was wheeled out in the corridor after being pronounced dead in a hospital in Germany. He pulled the sheet from over his face. Not once but twice. This is the man who later had three more near-fatal heart attacks and now has a pacemaker. His second one. He really should quit smoking. This is the man who saved me from burning to death when I was four years old, as I waggled helplessly in our backyard with my pants leg afire. My hero.

This is the man who, years later, had his own leg caught fire as he worked on a car down the street. He just laughed and popped the blisters as my frantic mother drove us to the hospital. I laughed. It is how we deal with pain. This is the man who, at age 43, would race me and my brothers home from the corner of our block, we on our bicycles, he on foot. He always won. I hated that.

This is the man who taught me as much as I wanted to learn about auto maintenance; how to hang Sheetrock and tape and bed; to paint and do masonry, carpentry, plumbing, and roofing; how to fish and so many other things. This is the man who, for ten years, faithfully visited and brought my mother and brothers to visit my brother and me on Death Row.

This is the man who had to bury his eldest son when the State executed him in 1995. This is the man who goes to visit his eldest son's grave and talk to him. This is the man who has come to visit me for the past six years since my brother, his son, was executed. This is the man who came to visit when everyone else was busy because I had had my appeal denied.

My friends and supporters have been writing to me, asking me where I get my strength and courage from in the face of this adversity. Just look to my Dad and you need not ask from where my strength comes.

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