

Lloyd

Andrea O'Connor

I 'm learning how to die," he told me.

Uncle Lloyd was sitting up in his hospital bed, sipping an ice cream soda in between gulps for breath. He had a large belly and plenty of insulation over his six-foot frame. Diets went by the wayside at Apricot Mornings Hospice House.

At 92, a millionaire of time, he had a full head of white hair, white bushy eyebrows, and even white tufts protruding from his ears and a few strands from his nose. Brightness shone from his brown eyes, as if he were a squirrel with a nut. The family eyes. My eyes. Hudson River mud eyes, my father used to say. They grew up in a mansion that sat high on a hill above the Hudson's banks, just north of New York City.

Lloyd was the patriarch of my family, and I was next to fill that role. I wanted to see Lloyd now because I was curious about my own father and thought I could get some answers. Why Lloyd's own children weren't visiting, I didn't know.

The day Lloyd told me he was learning to die, he showed me the copy of the *Ares Moriendi: The Art of Dying*, on his bedside table. He'd read about the Latin text in the Columbia Magazine, from his alma mater, that came in the mail. I visited him once a week for four weeks, and each time I visited, the book gathered more dust.

I was never one to mince words, especially after I began drinking in my twenties, along with all my artist friends. Talking to Lloyd was my chance to find some answers to things I've always wondered about. And he loved to talk. So I came out with the first precipitous question on my next visit when he reminisced about his service in the Korean conflict.

"Did you kill anyone?"

Dead silence fell between us as my question hung in the air.

I wondered why Lloyd enlisted because he was a liberal idealist and had been a Quaker peace activist for decades before his draft.

He paused. "I think I can answer 'no' to that question." That was a technical impossibility, I figured, considering how many civilians and troops had died in the Korean War. He told me the United Nations deemed the conflict a police action against aggressors, so he was bringing about a faster peace. His pacifist ideals were assuaged.

But there could be no denying that seventy years ago, Lloyd had squatted in an M24 Chaffee tank in the Punch Bowl, around the 38th parallel. As the loader, his hands deftly packed the carousel full of charges to rocket out the main gun. The earth blew upwards and there must have been burned flesh and bone too. Lloyd didn't look death in the face, not even through a periscope.

Our talk of death reminded me of the time I was six and I asked my grandpa, Lloyd's father, "Pop, you're old. Do you think about dying?"

We sat side by side in a Land Rover on a back road in Maine. The older man's hands – strong and capable, but ungentle – gripped the steering wheel.

"That's not a question little girls ask their grandfathers, Alana," was the response.

Now, here I was, at Lloyd's death bed. I'd already held three of my family, my father not among them, and two beloved dogs, as they died. I had observed the last breaths that sent spirits afloat in the room, to seep out windows and into hallways, traveling like fog or wind on its way offshore. Spirit makes a quiet hush or a mighty roar, depending on the life lived. I was better at handling death than proceeding with living. What would I think when my time came? I was not at The Door, like Lloyd.

I leaned in toward Lloyd and imagined him in a not-so-long hallway, with The Door opened and indistinct light poured from somewhere beyond. Was his death on the other side?

As if he could read my mind, Lloyd reached out to touch the *Ares Moriendi*, his index finger gliding on the bed cover as if it was a map on the seat next to him in a car. I knew the text noted the five deathbed temptations, seven questions, suggested prayers, and general rules of behavior for family. The selling point seemed to be the reunion with God in heaven.

“Do you believe in God?” I asked him, as I was not one to mince words.

“Not really,” he said. “If man was made in the image of God, did God have a penis?” he asked me. “Did God have orgasms?” Floyd could be as bald with language as me, which was fun. He told me he had watched my grandmother on her knees, in supplicant prayer, every morning, as she sought peace from her own mind. But it never worked, as the young Lloyd observed her life filled with depression and outbursts of rage at the family. So, he closed the door on God and deleted the word from his vocabulary.

“What did you like about the Quakers?” I asked him. He talked about the corn roasts, with kids running around their liberal parents like little barefoot, long-haired banshees as the adults talked about Nixon scuttling the peace talks in 1971.

Lloyd paused. His hand reached out into the air. I took his fingers in mine, settled our hands down on the sheet. His next breath took some striving, then he settled his hands from mine onto his mountain stomach, and smiled at me.

Crap. I felt like saying something crass like “how many pizzas over decades are under there, Lloyd?”

I was better at communicating with large pieces of steel. My sculptures stood ten feet high, in front of universities and libraries around the world. Children and elders lounged around my work that depicted equity and freedom in slum churchyards in Haiti and South America, where I had done community art projects with families. I used welding and plasma torches that spewed arcs and sparks, to warp and wield steel. Hard edges turned to flowing under my hands. It was grab-it-by-the-balls work, not miring around in family shit or emotions.

I smiled back at Lloyd, left his room, and drove to my welding shop, 2,500 square feet of a concrete building I shared with a cement construction company. I

pulled on old blue jeans and a work shirt that I left hanging on a hook and picked up the leather flight gloves that came from a military surplus catalog. They offered the most protection and dexterity. I grabbed the respirator to go over my face, though it didn't completely block out the burning metal smell. Next to the respirator was a half gallon of Myer's rum. I twisted off the cap and pulled long hard gulps.

I looked at two large steel sheets. One would become an upside down "f" to fit together with the other right side up "f", like figures making love, reminiscent of Brancusi's "Kiss" series. I sat on my stool and fired up the plasma cutting torch.

My leg muscles bulged into bands. I pivoted from shoulders to waist to guide the cut into a straight line. My torso, belly and arms strained to maintain stance and hold the torch. Sweat dripped down my back and between my breasts.

I watched the flame retract against the clean slice of air that used to be a swath of steel.

I stood from the stool, heaving breath, and tore off the respirator.

I reached again for the rum on my workbench, slugged back long swallows as I looked at my "f" taking shape. My own relationships over the years - easy hook-ups; a live-in for a year or few, didn't persevere like my sculptures, installed forever outside a respected institution.

What I made was permanent. And gratifying.

For my next visit with Lloyd, we talked about my grandparents. I remember I was terrified of them, especially my grandmother. Grannie would send me out to pick weeds for hours in the woods. I never understood why the woods needed to be weeded? She would dance naked in the living room. She wouldn't let me leave the breakfast table until I ate the fried eggs that had clear slime running off the top of them. I sat at the table into the afternoon. I was NOT going to eat uncooked glassy, slimy eggs! Grannie finally gave up and let me leave the table and go outside.

"Was my grandmother crazy?" I asked Lloyd because she sure seemed wacko to me.

"Just a little snobbish. And a conservative Republican," he ducked the question. He told me his grandfather was on a seat of the New York Stock exchange at the turn of the twentieth century. Anyone who didn't measure up to their family social, financial and intelligence standards was called a "mick." The racial slur against the

Irish put all inferior people, even those without names that began with “Mc”, into one, immutable category for the Fuchs.

“I knew it wasn’t right,” Lloyd shook his head. “So, I turned a deaf ear to it all.”

“What about my father?” I asked.

“He fell for the mick theory,” Lloyd said. I knew that. My father had been a racist, an elitist, a classist, a narcissist and the other “isms” that protestors march against today.

Lloyd told me that the doctor said my father had dyslexia, so he couldn’t learn in school. Lloyd remembered my father as a troubled child who killed animals; caught muskrats in foot-hold traps and clubbed them over the head if they didn’t first chew off their foot to escape. He shot bucks and hung them upside down in the woodshed, antler racks grazed the floor, blood dripped from a black nose under glassy eyes.

At age 18, my father rushed to enlist in the army and marched through Germany to push enemy troops into the Russian advance from the east. He cut the barbed wire on the concentration camps to free the barely living. Somehow, more skeleton than not, they managed to find food, board trains, and return to a life forever changed by how cruel some among humanity could be to others.

“I never understood him,” said Lloyd.

“I didn’t either,” I said, remembering that my father would hold my brother’s head under running water to punish him for teenage drinking and hold my finger, as a four-year-old, to a chainsaw spark plug so he could laugh when I jumped. There were the times he cornered me in the back of his closet or the coal bin in the cellar. I told Lloyd about some of that stuff, but not the details that I had been over and over in therapy. A shot or two of rum seemed more effective than all that talk with professionals.

“He got that behavior from our mother,” he finally said.

Lloyd told me he messed himself once as a toddler. His mother rubbed the soiled pants in his face. When my young father played with matches, she slapped his face, though his arms were covered in second degree burns. Lloyd, I was learning, seemed to turn away from suffering, forget it, and seek better ground for his mind and feet to stand on. My father had gotten lost in the darkness, to tread the terrain of my grandparent’s mistakes.

I leaned forward on my elbows and saw, again, that Lloyd looked so much like my father. Dad died of heart failure when he was 62. I stood over his grave with my brother and sister. None of us had seen him for years. As the shovelfuls of dirt thudded on his coffin, I thought, "I want to watch him go out of sight, forever."

I reached for the door handle to Lloyd's room and missed the knob. Too much rum for breakfast again. I found him propped on pillows as a nurse fixed an oxygen mask to his face.

He waved away my concern. "This way I can talk longer," he said. That day, I asked about his work.

"My father pestered me to learn some way to make a living," said Lloyd. "So, I fended him off by going to law school." As it happened, Lloyd liked law, liked to look at situations and analyze points of view. He was good at patient listening and even better at talking. His conversation often wandered and seemed random but I always gleaned his point in the end. I could imagine him in the courtroom, blathering, but in fact, he was eking out information and wearing down his opposition. Lloyd was a smart guy.

After Columbia Law School, Lloyd moved to Seattle where he remembered the majestic fir trees and mountains on his way to Korea. He got into partnership with two other attorneys. They asked him to work with the Makah Tribe on a housing project. The group built 45 houses on the west hill of Neah Bay on the rez. Lloyd loved to party at the traditional salmon bakes where he was an invited guest. He had several lucrative receiverships, a gift from a superior court judge, whose election Lloyd had helped with. Lloyd also processed disability claims for marginalized workers.

"Did you move across the country to get away from your family?"

I was now used to his pauses. "Maybe so."

"My biggest mistake." Lloyd shook his head. I thought he might talk about his kids. But no, he had bought a plot of land, built a big house, should have sold it during the fat eighties when all his lawyer friends were flipping property and building nest eggs. By the time he thought of selling, the market bubble had burst, and his receiverships had ended. He'd be short of money for the rest of his life.

“I was not a good investor,” he said. How lucky that he thought his biggest mistake was the loss of a few million dollars, not anger or grief from the state of our family, past or present. Lloyd seemed genuinely oblivious that his kids didn’t visit, or perhaps that he even had kids at all.

On our next visit, we were talking about his wife, Suz. I had never been married. My frequent, short-term relationships with men were based on sex and adventure and I wondered how longer married people managed to stay together.

Hell, I thought, I’ll just put it out there. “How was the sex?” I asked Lloyd.

The pause. “The sex was very good,” he said.

“Until when?” I had started so I kept going.

“Suz was about 63. Alzheimer’s had started.”

As a student, Lloyd met Suzie, or “Suz” as he called her, who was a librarian in the Columbia Law Library. He took her out a few times. He fell in love with her, seated at the movies with his arm around her shoulder, as the actor Dana Andrews sang “True love is an enchanted island.”

After he moved to Seattle, he telephoned and asked her to marry him and come west. A Texas girl of nine children, all uneducated, she was a “mick” in the family’s eyes.

Lloyd and Suz had one son, James. Since population control was a big thing in their circles in the sixties, they decided not to have more children. James, with his professor wife, taught English at a university in Japan.

One day at the law office, a partner came up to Lloyd’s desk and asked if he and Suz wanted a baby girl, result of a judge’s liaison with a prostitute. They adopted Emily. She was a blonde, blue-eyed cherub in a dark-haired, mud-eyed family. I wondered how that fared in the “mick” infected family environment. But Lloyd was across the country, and in those days, air travel wasn’t common. He practiced “out of sight, out of mind.”

Suz had a short career as a schoolteacher and then many years as a bookstore owner. When he wasn’t at the law office, Lloyd cut wood to feed the wood stove and gardened, proud of his dahlias and prize beefsteak tomatoes. The kids grew up and moved away.

“James was good in theater. Emily never found her niche.” Lloyd offered few details. Eventually, after decades together, Suz began to lose her way going from the living room to the kitchen.

“EFF. EFF!!” She’d call, scared, and confused, a few steps from her chair.

“Right here, Suz,” Lloyd would answer from wherever he was in the house. During the day, caretakers stayed with Suz. She eventually forgot how to breathe as she lay in a hospital bed in the side room while Lloyd was at work.

Lloyd was sleeping when I was in his room that day. I sat down in the chair by his bed and listened to his raspy breathing.

You had love. My thoughts were silent, as I looked at his closed eyes, which seeped water in a tiny stream down to his pillow. I knew that his eyes still brightened at times with the squirrel-with-a-nut gleam. *Life wasn’t perfect, but you and Suz were happy for all the time you had. And that was good enough. I marvel at your acceptance of loss, mistakes, the still unexplained absence of your kids. You don’t think you settled for less than what should have been.*

He opened his eyes. His face was soft and content, now, even in hospice. “Alana, I’m so glad to talk with you,” he said, smiling. In my mind, I saw curved lines across his lips, as if they were carefully welded steel seams.

Back in the studio, I entered my work area, grabbed the jug of Myer’s. I had finished cutting the day before. That was easy, a feeling of control, of power. Welding the pieces together was harder, caused me anxiety. I worried about making the weld strong and true. With the hand not holding the jug, I touched the “f” pieces about to be joined. I sat down, slugged another mouthful, and another. Maybe I wouldn’t weld that night.

I sat with my steel. The fun part came when the pieces were done. I hired a crane to move them, arrange them together, with a gantry, on wheels that straddled the steel forms. I had a good operator, someone I trusted as my 2,000-pound “babies” swung in the air.

I looked up, gazed along my portrait wall of work. I had made huge working sundials in various shapes, each accurately marked both equinoxes. I had pieces that represented fire and air; a shape of a mythical Japanese creature – a Kappa – who was said to bring fertility to couples, something that I explored in sculpture because

I had always tried to prevent it. When I asked the Kappa why parents wanted to foist their misfortunes on their children, I got no answer. There were pieces that made music in the wind, even a self-portrait with eyes, ears, nose, and a mouth. The two-foot eyes hung on rusted chains.

The phone rang.

“Alana, it’s James,” came my cousin’s voice from overseas. “How’s Lloyd?”

“Doing OK. They say a few more weeks. He’s comfortable.”

“That’s good. We won’t do a service. I’ll tie things up in his affairs, not that there’s anything left.”

We chatted about my next work “Sky Spirit,” a towering figure of encircling arms emanating from a centered heart. My client, a rock star, commissioned this piece to grace a corner of his rambling lawn that sloped to the sea. I listened as my cousin talked about his wife, their work.

When he finished, I thought, why not? “What’s up with you and Emily and Lloyd?”

A pause. Just like his father.

“Uh, I know there were issues in your family too. I’d like to hear about that.”

But I had volleyed first, and I knew I could get James started on a long conversation that could wear down a listener. In this case, I wanted to hear.

“Basically, Dad was always working. He’d charge through the door at six in his rumpled suit, and yell, ‘Suz, what do you want to drink?’ Then sit in front of the McNeil Lehrer report. Or head to his committee meetings to save the world,” said James. “Their parenting style was to open the door, let us out and basically it didn’t matter if we came home at 3 am or not at all. We got nothing from him.”

I heard how James and his friends dressed up in their fathers’ old Army fatigues – World War II or Korea – and shouldered the old M1 Garands, empty of shells. They’d march to the neighbors, three streets over, have Kool Aid and cookies, then marched home. By the teenage years, James was out that open door to do drugs with the gangs that moved into Seattle from LA. Emily was rocking the back of the latest model cars with any boy in school.

“He did nothing,” said James, disgusted. “And he couldn’t hold onto money to save his life.”

“But he lawyered you out of prison?” I said, having heard that from my father that James had gotten arrested for selling narcotics.

“What any public defender would have done,” said James.

Lloyd had dodged the mick theory, the war, the lost million dollars, but maybe he shouldn't have dodged his kids. In the end, Lloyd's children didn't even care to visit him at his deathbed. My father hadn't turned away from any of it. He held all the suffering in a tight, angry fist that beat against life and us all. The brothers had the same lack of success with money, though. I doubt James would have taken my lot, but I would have gladly taken his.

That morning, I came through the front door at Apricot Mornings, wondering how they named these places where people come to die. I called Lloyd's name when I entered his room. No answer. He lay on his back, slightly inclined, no oxygen mask, monitor or lines attached. His eyes were closed, the squirrel-like gleam eternally shuttered. They had told me on the phone that Lloyd had lost consciousness the midnight before and administered morphine to ease fear and pain. I sat down, took his hand in mine and started to talk.

I spoke to him of all the love he had for Suz, and how he tried his best, based on what he knew, to raise his kids. How he had helped the Natives on the reservation and poor people with disabilities. And though I hadn't seen him much growing up, as he and my father didn't speak, he had inspired me. When I was a young girl, to have a liberal Democrat and a lawyer with a nice house for an uncle was a bright light to contrast my father's dark racism and bankruptcy.

I talked about the gardening, the wood cutting, the festival salmon bakes, and Quaker meeting friend get togethers. “You weren't perfect. Life wasn't perfect, but you were happy.” I talked to him, but more to myself. If Lloyd learned how to live well and love, was there hope for me?

He stirred. He lifted his head, looked at me, through me, with astonished eyes as though seeing me for the first time. He stared at me, but past me.

“What are you seeing, Lloyd?” I asked.

He sees the answer, I thought, looking at his face. He sees that the pieces of love in his life were only the beginning.

He lay back down, closed his eyes.

I lay my head on his chest. His breath was slow, slower.

“Are you going to die now, Lloyd?” I asked quietly.

Slower still, then none.

Back at the welding shop, in my jeans and work shirt, with my flight gloves and respirator under my arm, I reached for the Myer’s jug. My hand froze in mid-air. My fingers fluttered, as I’d seen Lloyd’s do. I saw hands, imagined them coming to take mine.

Clamps held my 20 foot “f” shapes at 90-degree angles. I fired up the welding torch, put the welding rod in the end, climbed the scaffold, pressed the electric current against the steel. The bead, between the two shapes melted, blended to a seam that would bond them together forever.

It was strong and true. I stepped back, tore off the mask, gulped in the dusty air and metallic fumes.

Alana, you’ve lived.

I had traveled the world with my “babies.” Students had discussed freedom expressed in my art. I had seen the marginalized elders, children by the hand, who gathered to celebrate installations in front of the churches. So what if boyfriends hadn’t worked out? Was there still time?

I had heard Lloyd’s spirit leave his body, a resounding stillness, like an angel’s footfall in a cathedral. It slipped away, ushered out from amidst the reverberations of salmon bake parties, mountain hikes, argued cases, cocktails and sex life. He had looked beyond the mistakes and unanswered questions.

I pulled on the respirator, turned my electric arc onto the next bead, dissolved it into a welded seam.

Alana, you are alive.

My body arced in position to hold the torch. My breath pounded, as powerful as the heat that made the beads. My face gleamed in the torched sparks of light. Lightness, traveling, traveling into everness.

It was my turn, now, to be the next millionaire of time.

Alana, live more.