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Confrontation with the inevitable

By Darrell Sifford

It was 8 o'clock on an already-warm July morning, and the grass was drenched with dew. In an hour, I would meet a friend from high school - he's a lawyer now - for breakfast at his house, and then he and I would drive 50 miles into south-central Missouri, to the sprawling Lake of the Ozarks, and spend the day on his yacht. Yes, a real yacht.

But now it was private time - for me and Mom and Dad. It was the first time that I had visited their side-by-side graves since Mom's death earlier that year. I parked my rental car beside where they rested and left open the door so that the big-band music from the radio would wash over me - and them.

It was appropriate because they had taught me to appreciate that kind of music, which Dad once described to me as "the only real music I know."

Harry James was blowing "Trumpet Blues" as I sat down at the foot of the graves, talked to them about my life, about Marilyn, about Jay and Grant, about triumphs and defeats, about love, about being thankful, about . . .

"You both died the way you lived - full of joy," I said. "I hope I can do as well."

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The letter was from a New Jersey woman who had read my column on the importance of confronting the inevitability of death - because avoiding the confrontation necessarily meant missing many of the joys of living. Here is part of what she wrote:

"It seemed as though you wrote that just for me . . . I am 66, and I just recently began thinking of my mortality, and I'm having a problem with it. I heard about a woman last year who was prearranging her funeral because she was dying and didn't want her family to have that burden. I thought she must be a wonderful person to be so considerate of others. . . .

"I decided to do the same thing, but I didn't realize how traumatic it would be for me. For the last six months, I have been in turmoil. Where do I want to be buried? I come

from the seashore. Should I be there? Or should I be in the city where I am now? These are decisions that I don't really need right now - because of some overwhelming problems. . . .

"I know I must make a decision and then get on with my remaining years. . . . I'm trying to change, to make peace with things, but it's difficult for me. Maybe it's better not to know where I'll be when the time comes. What do you think?"

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Psychiatrist Barry Schwartz is a longtime friend with a sense of humor. He once described to me the most elusive patient he ever tried to work with. "The guy said he might be late for the next session and, if he was, I should go ahead and start without him."

But there is also, as you would expect, a serious, insightful side to Schwartz, who, after he read the column on confronting death, told me about a book that he had read not once, not twice, but three times.

The book: *Zen in the Art of Archery*, by Eugen Herrigel, published originally in German 50 years ago. It's just 105 pages long, but, said Schwartz, those are 105 incredible pages.

"There is the story of a lance-carrier in the emperor's guard who one day prostrates himself before the imperial sword-master and says 'Oh, great sword-master, I implore you to teach me the art of the sword.' The sword-master seems embarrassed and tells the lance-carrier to stand up. He tells him that he's been watching him for 10 years and that there is nothing he can teach him, because he knows he already is a sword-master. . . .

"What follows is disbelief by the lancer. 'I know nothing of the sword. How could you be noticing me for 10 years? I'm only a humble lance-carrier in the palace guard. You must have me confused with someone else.' The sword-master is adamant. He has been watching him for 10 years and he, the sword-master, knows that the man already is a sword-master. More confusion. More

denial.

"Finally the sword-master scratches his head and says, 'You say you are not a sword-master. Well, have you mastered anything?' And the lancer says 'Yes, master, I have mastered the fear of death.' And the sword-master grins and says 'Ah, then there is nothing I can teach you.'

"It's a powerful little book," and he suggested that I read it three times.

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When we have mastered our fear of death, we are free to make decisions without the gnawing worry that whatever we decided might not have been right. Or best. Or most appropriate. Or what was expected. To the New Jersey woman who wrote the letter to me, I would say that location is far less important than the love that is conveyed by the very act of prearranging burial, which may be one of the most selfless deeds that anybody can perform.

Mom and Dad prearranged their burials, and, as was their custom, they were upfront with me about their reasons. They wanted me not to be burdened with that decision when the time came because I'd have enough other things to tend to.

They wanted it to be less difficult for me - because they loved me. That was what love was all about, they said - looking out, as best they could, for those who mattered to them.

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Harry James had finished "Trumpet Blues" and had been followed by Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Jimmy Dorsey and some of those other guys. Now Glen Gray's Sonny Dunham was blowing the car doors right off the hinges with "Memories of You."

It always had been one of Dad's favorites - "the way a horn should make a song sound," he said. It was time to leave . . . until fortune brought me back to our little town in mid-Missouri.

"Goodbye," I said, and I repeated, "I hope I can do as well."

That's the lofty goal at which all of us can aim - trying to emulate those who have done it the very best, the masters.