

George Neil McInnis – Hero



This is Friday, December 21, four days before Christmas, and I have just driven home in a driving rain from an inspiring one hour with George Neil McInnis who is dying at Beverly Healthcare Center in Laguna Hills, California.

As I am about to bid George adios his dear friend and comrade-in-arms Bob Ring comes into Room 209B with a third of a basket of ripe, red raspberries he picked minutes ago from George's Leisure World garden—the only garden I know that is still producing raspberries on the shortest day of the year—all part of the miracle of Saint George, dragon slayer. His parting words to me are “vaya con Dios.”

George never met his two grandfathers, but he inherited from both the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* adly and mysteriously worn on almost identical passages. For me, from memory, George offered a quotation from *Julius Caesar* (Act II, Scene 2): “Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once. Of all the wonders that I yet have heard, it seems to me most strange that men should fear: seeing that death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.”

Along with the red raspberries George is about to taste death with an inner core of courage that makes me feel insignificant. I am in this dying man's room to tap into his spiritual strength and find peace and grace in a world filled with horror and tragedy. In one hour I am lifted up, energized, spiritually recharged. Lying in his deathbed, George has climbed to his mountaintop and can look back without regrets at a life filled with happiness and achievement.

In effect, George is undergoing a rescue mission to save the life of his bride of 61 years. His wife Eleanor has given all she can but has exhausted herself caring for George. George is so alert, so alive, so conscious of the world around him—and so loving and caring—that he knows he belongs in Room 209B, not at home on Via Serena.

Most of us are familiar with the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and her excellent book on *Death and Dying* where she identifies the five psychodynamic stages of life crises—denial, anger, plea bargaining, depression and acceptance. Life's greatest crisis occurs with terminal cancer victims. The first reaction to the diagnosis is commonly denial: This can't be happening to me. Other people, yes, but not me. There must be some mistake. The test results got mixed up. I'll get a second opinion.

When the diagnosis is confirmed and the patient can no longer have any doubts about its accuracy, anger sets in. Why me? God, how can you do this to me? I have always been a good person, a true believer. Why have you singled me out for this horrible fate?

Then comes plea bargaining. Oh, God, if you will only take this burden from me, I'll be a better person. I'll do anything you ask of me, but please remove this cancer. Plea bargaining is futile, but the deep and sometimes lengthy depression that follows is real. Some never get through depression and die in a state of despair and anguish.

But not George McInnis. George has accepted his fate. He has found peace. He is resigned to his ultimate destiny. He has only one task before him—to die with courage and dignity. His resolve is unshakable.

George could well be the model for William Ernest Henley's stirring poem "Invictus:"

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

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It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

The death of George McInnis is a terrible blow to Leisure World. George is a former member of the Golden Rain Foundation Board and a tireless community servant. Eighteen months ago he was diagnosed with leukemia but turned down chemotherapy and opted for blood transfusions to replace the red cells his bone marrow could no longer produce. His doctor did not give him eighteen months to live.

But there will be no more transfusions. He knows he is going to die and is fighting to maintain as much quality of life as he can and his commitment to serving the Leisure World community where he plays a central role in watching over our governing boards, constantly reminding them of the terms and conditions dictated by California's Davis-Stirling Common Interest Development Act.

When Gemma Heffernan, beloved former director of PCM's Social Service Department, visited George recently at Saddleback Hospital, she suggested George dictate his obituary to his daughter Jane. George replied, "Goddamit! I'm not gone yet. I can type my own obit!"

Facing imminent death, this role model mensch is still feisty, independent, full of life and keeps up the good fight as he has for so many years—an irreplaceable Leisure World servant. Now, with astonishing grace, George has found peace at Beverly Healthcare and welcomes visits from his many friends.

Now it is December 29 and I receive the expected call from Bob Ring. George has gone home and is now cradled in the loving arms of his Lord—passing triumphantly over death to eternal rest and peace—twenty-eight days short of his 85th birthday.

Here's to George Neil McGinnis, born January 25, 1917 in Virginia, Minnesota—a warrior who traveled through the five psychodynamic stages of crisis like a hot knife through butter and stands triumphantly atop Mt. Everest. We salute you, George; and when our time comes, we hope to draw on your example and face death with at least some of your courage and dignity. Thanks, dear George, for leading us through the valley of the shadow of death. We will fear not, for you have shown us how to achieve victory over death.

Dave Blodgett
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