

Just A Moment...

A MILLION WORDS



It was time to go have my last words with my father. He was dying, in the bedroom he built. He built our whole house, even dug the foundation himself, with a diaper tied around his head to keep the sweat out of his eyes. He was always working on the house, more than 35 years, and he never did finish it. He was the first to admit that he really didn't know how to build a house.

When I went in to see him, he was lying in the bedroom, listening to *The People's Court*. I remember when he always would be on those Sunday-morning television talk shows, back in the '50s and '60s. Dr. Barry, they called him. He was a Presbyterian minister, and he worked in inner city New York. They were always asking him to be on those shows to talk about Harlem, and the South Bronx, because back then he was the only white man they could find who seemed to know anything about it. I remember when he was the Quotation of the Day in *The New York Times*. The Rev. Dr. David W. Barry.

His friends called him Dave. Is Dave there? they'd ask, when they called to talk about their husbands or wives or sons or daughters who were acting crazy or drinking too much or running away. Or had died. Dave, they'd ask, what can I do? They never thought to call anybody but him. He'd sit there and listen, for hours, sometimes. He was always smoking.

The doctor told us he was dying, but we knew anyway. Almost all he said anymore was thank you, when somebody brought him shaved ice, which was mainly what he wanted, at the end. He had stopped putting his dentures in. He had stopped wearing his glasses. I remember when he yanked his glasses off and jumped in the Heyman's pool to save me.

So I go in for my last words, because I have to go back home, and my mother and I agree I probably won't see him again. I sit next to him on the bed, hoping he can't see that I'm crying. I love you, Dad, I say. He says: I love you, too. I'd like some oatmeal.

So I go back out to the living room, where my mother and my wife and my son are sitting on the sofa, in a line, waiting for the outcome, and I say, He wants some oatmeal. I am laughing and crying about this. My mother thinks maybe I should go back in and try to have a more meaningful last talk, but I don't.

Driving home, I'm glad I didn't. I think: He and I have been talking ever since I learned how. A million words. All of them final, now. I don't need to make him give me any more, like souvenirs. I think: Let me not define his death on my terms. Let him have his oatmeal. I can hardly see the road. ■

By Dave Barry