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When my dad died, we had to decide what to do with his Michigan ballot

We wanted to give him his final say. My mother was the first to wonder aloud: Should we fill it out and send it in?

By **Colleen Morton Busch**

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My father died Sept. 25. The next day, his mail-in ballot arrived at my parents' house in Michigan.

We had a pandemic-shaped memorial to plan, but that piece of mail stopped us in our tracks. My mother was the first to wonder aloud whether we should fill out the ballot and send it in.

It's no secret how my father would have voted. Typically private and reticent, he spoke openly of his disgust at the lying, cheating and self-dealing of the Trump administration. Every day, as he lost more capacity — to read, to walk, to do anything independently — he lamented his country's own worsening malady.

He noticed his brain wasn't working right in March, just as the shutdowns started. The crushing diagnosis came in May: glioblastoma. After surgery and radiation, he had some stable weeks toward the end of summer. My sister and I visited and streamed "Hamilton" for him. His foot tapped along, and he watched the whole production — a major feat for someone whose attention span had dwindled to a few sentences.

My father wasn't partisan — he voted for Obama twice, but before that, he voted for Reagan. He was, simply, a voter who took his duty seriously. The only election he missed, says my mother, was the 1998 midterm. (At the time, they lived in the Pacific island nation of Kiribati, now threatened by sea level rise; my father helped the national telecom company build out its Internet network while my mother served as a Peace Corps medical officer.) This past June, when my father's primary ballot arrived, a fresh suture line stretched from the crown of his head to his right ear. When my mother asked whether she should fill out the ballot for him, he insisted on doing it himself.

In the days after my father's death, as the ballot lay unopened on the kitchen counter, we debated what to do. That my father wouldn't get to vote in the election of his lifetime, at the end of his lifetime, felt like an intolerable stroke of rotten luck on top of all the others. We wanted to give my dad his final say. We felt he deserved that after everything he'd been through. We felt that we — *his* people, and the people — deserved it, after everything we've been through.

My sister lives in New York. I live in California. Our votes won't matter the way a vote will matter in Michigan, the state where we were born and where our father died. Voting on our dad's behalf would let us feel what it's like when your vote *really* counts. It would let us seize some measure of control in a year when we've controlled so little and ceded so much. But it was my mother who would have to forge our father's signature. We teased her that if she got caught, we'd visit her behind bars. We joked that she could flee to Canada and move in with our brother. Our laughter eased the darkness of the shortening days, of a world that will never again include my father's silky baritone and shy warmth.

My mother is the most conscientious person I know. She doesn't normally bend rules, let alone break laws, but these are not normal times. Widowhood — all 24 hours of it, after 56 years of marriage — emboldened her. My father's ballot was sent to him the day before he died, according to the postmark, and could have arrived the following day, my mother reasoned. Who could prove he didn't complete it himself? Only those of us at his bedside knew that he couldn't have filled in those little circles, anything near completely, let alone signed his name.

The day before my father's cremation, my mother filled out his ballot, slipped it in the privacy sleeve and signed his name on the envelope.

Then she put the ballot with the rest of the objects we sent with my dad into the fire: Three books, his reading glasses, a tennis ball to throw for any dogs he might meet. His final vote is his secret, untallied but honorable legacy.

In the month since my father died, my family has voted — in Michigan, California and New York — like our ballots might not be counted before our last breath comes. Now we wait. And we grieve.

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