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**By Your Bedside 2005
Your Life Your Health
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(Author's note: In July, 2004, my father was in the ICU and almost died. One week after Father's Day this year, he is back there. How healthcare professional's process personal family crises is helpful to others, I think, in understanding how they deal with their own grief, pain, anxiety and hope. The reality is that my father's deteriorating condition is no one's fault. It is a natural process of life.)

It is very early Sunday, June 26, 2005, one week after Father's Day, and we are back in I.C.U. at Natchitoches Regional Medical Center. It is almost one year since we were last here. The intervening year has been filled with the joy of having you with us; how thankful we are!

Father's Day weekend was the capstone of this year. When the call came early Saturday, June 25th, telling us that you were being taken to the emergency room, I was in my study analyzing patient laboratory results and sending patient-instruction messages to my unit clerk. Yet, in this process, my mind was still re-living the Saturday before Father's Day. All week, I remarked that was the best day you, Mother, Dickie and I had spent together in our lives, in my judgment.

As we drove from Natchitoches to Clarence and then to Montgomery, we remembered how frequently your responsibilities with Louisiana Power and Light (LP&L) had you there. As we crossed the Red River, I remembered how many floods and bank cave-ins had caused you dangerous and sleepless nights while you worked to maintain power service to people on both sides of the river. I still shiver when I think of that 80-foot-tall pole, with another 70-foot-tall pole spliced to its top which you climbed. As we approached Montgomery, we were taken by the beauty around us. Though it was principally green in color, the country side seemed multi-colored because of the beautiful hues and shades of green. People travel all over the world for scenery and we have such beauty within miles of home.

From Montgomery, we went to Hebron Cemetery where Mother's parents and family are interned. We walked around this beautifully maintained cemetery enjoying the respect and honor paid to ancestors by those who contribute to the maintenance of this place of honor. This day, this cemetery was not a place of death but of the celebration of life and of family. As we stood over the graves of Mother's parents and brothers and sisters, I lamented to myself that I had not known Mother's parents better than I did. I was so young when they died.

Dad, your Mother lived twenty-five years after Mother's Mother died. Your Father lived thirty-one years after Mother's Father passed away. It should have been obvious to me,

but this was the first time I had put these facts together and realized why we were closer to your parents.

This year, Carolyn realized that as we approach our fortieth anniversary, she has had you as a father-figure for as long as she had her own Father in her life. At Hebron Cemetery, I realized, Daddy, that Mother also had your Father as her "Father" for the same length of time that she had her own father. It is no wonder why our families are so interwoven.

As we drove from the cemetery to Dry Prong, Mother told us of traveling this same road in a horse-drawn wagon many years before. It was these recollections which began to grow my hopes and expectations for the day, until in full blossom it became more than I had hoped.

We met Dickie in Bentley. There the adventure really began. As we drove from Pollock, we passed Camp Grant Walker, the 4-H Club Camp we attended. When I was thirteen, I won outstanding camper, only because I worked harder than anyone else. I learned how to work from you. And, your grandchildren and great grandchildren know how to work hard, also, another heritage from you to them. Beau, your oldest great grandson continues the tradition of winning outstanding camper awards, this time at Camp LaJunta in Hunt, Texas. He works hard, but he also has been honored for his leadership, his kindness and his team spirit. You would be proud to hear the report the Senior Counselor sent to Beau's parents. The camp owners commented, "We hate to see the month over, we will miss Beau; he is such a fine young man." Daddy, the Bible says that children's children are the honor of old men. You and I are both honored by your grandchildren and great grandchildren. And, they are honored by you.

Pollock occupies such a wonderful part of our family memories. You spend your working life with LP&L. In Natchitoches, some called the company "Holly Power & Light," because you "were" the embodiment of LP&L. However, your life with LP&L started at Camp Livingston, Monroe and Pollock. Your first year with the company was spent commuting to Monroe, while your young family lived with another family at the Beaver Creek Substation at Camp Livingston. Every Monday morning, you met a crew at Pollock and every Friday evening you returned to Pollock from Monroe. Mother, Dickie and I met you there.

Week after week, we had hamburgers and saw a movie at Pollock on those Friday magical evenings because "Daddy is coming home." But before the hamburger and before the movie, we received our "Little Golden Book." The titles of those books are still etched in my mind: *Color Kittens*; *Timmy is a Big Boy Now*; *Scruffy: The Tug Boat* and many more. Saturday, for the first time I realized where I gained my life-long love of reading and of books. It was from you and Mother. You brought us those books and Mother preserved them, such that now more than 55 years later, we still have them. I realize that my life-long love of words, of rhymes and of ideas sprang from those Friday-night gifts in Pollock, Louisiana. Carolyn has contributed to this history as well. Twenty years ago, she had my Golden Books rebound into a single volume entitled, "Dad's

Golden Books.” Another generation, your great grandchildren, is now enjoying them. The café and theater are no longer there, but our memories are preserved forever.

Just beyond Pollock, we parked and walked a short distance to the creek where we often swam together as a family. The area looked very much as it did almost sixty years ago when we were children. We took pictures of all of us which I will treasure all of my life. I felt like a child again retracing these steps with my Mother and Father; it was wonderful.

From Pollock, we returned to Bentley and turned south toward Kingsville and Pineville to visit the gravesite of Virginia Green, Mother’s niece and our cousin. Sadly, she had been laid to rest alone with no other family or friends buried nearby. In contrast to Hebron Cemetery, this one seemed barren. One of my favorite memories of you, Daddy, is from Virginia’s Mother’s funeral. Virginia was a large woman and you and several other men were only able to ease her to the floor each of the multiple times she fainted. On the way to the grave site in Hebron Cemetery, you said to Virginia, “Will you do something for me?” Virginia said, “I’ll do anything for you Uncle Billy.” You answered, “Virginia, when you die, please don’t ask me to be a pall bearer. It would probably break my back.” She began to laugh and never fainted again. I don’t think anyone else could have said that with the grace and kindness you did.

From there we found a place to park my car so the four of us could travel to Camp Livingston together. We passed Essler Field where you were Fire Chief during World War II. We have always enjoyed the fact that your father was a fireman under your supervision. Until this trip, I did not consciously calculate that you were a Fire Chief on an army base when you were only twenty-one years old. Anyone who sees the picture of you with the dozen or more men under your charge could have recognized what the future held for a young man with the intelligence, the character, the leadership and the perseverance which you demonstrated at such a young age.

That same forcefulness and determination which I see in your young eyes in those pictures would demonstrate itself again when one of the most influential and wealthy men in Natchitoches Parish shot your dog because he thought your dog had killed one of his geese. Many men would have fretted over that for years. You solved the problem by simply gathering up your dog’s dead body, several days after he had been shot, and driving to town, where you deposited that already decaying body upon the desk of your neighbor. It is noteworthy that no dog of yours was ever shot again.

As we crossed Hogg Creek on our way to Camp Livingston where the LP&P substation is, we saw another of our favorite “swimming holes.” How sad that rich people today have only one swimming pool. Our family had at least five and each one was unique. As we entered Camp Livingston, each of us exclaimed, “Do you remember?”, as floods of experiences returned to our consciousness. We all remembered when the Camp was being deactivated and the buildings, many of them concrete, were being blown up. Dickie and I would never be allowed to cross a city street by ourselves, but we roamed through thousands of acres of land which was our personal domain.

Daddy, you raised watermelons which we ate and with which we also had great fights with pieces thrown at one another. It snowed one year and Dickie and I tracked critters through the woods. You pulled us behind your truck in our first red wagon. At Easter, Dickie and I watched the Easter egg hunt from the window -- both of us had Chicken Pox. I started the first grade while we lived there. I was only five and couldn't count, but I was resourceful and the little boy sitting next to me could count well. I passed that year simply by researching my answers from his. Every day of school, Mother drove us five miles to where we caught the school bus, just outside the western gate of Camp Livingston. I remember the Christmas gift you gave the family that year. It was a radio and phonograph in a beautiful cabinet. That gift opened up another world to us as we listened to radio broadcast, some of which we can quote to this day.

We left Camp Livingston and visited your parents' graves, and the graves of your youngest sister, Aunt Jo, and her husband. We also saw where you and Mother will be buried. I am not ready, and never will be to give you up, but I am comforted that while your soul will be in heaven due to your faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, your mortal remains will be among family and friends. I am grateful that for as long as I live, there will be a lovely place for me to come and continue to give thanksgiving for your life and our love.

As we concluded our day, driving down Wonder Lane Drive, we all re-lived what that beautiful road has meant to all of us. We passed the first home I remember in which your Mother and Father lived. To this day, I can draw a diagram of the inside of that wonderful home, whose mystery and magic continue to give me joy even though it has not been owned by the family for 50 years. As we drove to the highway which would take us back to Natchitoches from the south -- we had left by driving north and east -- but our route had us to the south, we talked about the drives at Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter and other times that we joined the entire family at Grandmother's house. Strange, it was never Granddaddy's house, even after Grandmother's death. It has always been Grandmother's house. When this day was done, and there is more which could be told, it had been the best day our family has spent together in our lives. I shall never forget it.

Difficult to believe, Daddy, the next day's celebration of Father's Day was even better. All of my family, Carolyn, Carrie, Sam, Hannah, Holly, Elizabeth, Richmond, Jennifer, Emma, Kate and your yet unnamed great grandson who will arrive in December, along with Dickie, were there. Your sweet smile and active participation in that day made it special. The squeals and laughter of five of your great granddaughters filled the air with music. When Kate, your youngest granddaughter spontaneously climbed up into your lap and stroked your face, hugging and kissing you, the day was complete.

We left you tired but we all drove home filled with love, peace, hope and gratitude. Friday evening, June 24th, Carolyn said as we wearily crawled into bed, "Do you want to run up to Natchitoches tomorrow?" My heart said yes, but my body said, "I think I'll pass." Little did I know that at 6:45 AM, our plans would change.

As I prayed over you on Saturday, kissing your forehead and patting you again and again, I looked deep into your eyes. I thought, "I have met great and noble men, rich and powerful men, famous and celebrated men, but I have never met a man whom I would rather have as a father than you."

Many of the staff in the Medical Center's ICU remembers you from last summer. They cared for you well then, and are doing so again. I am more confident of your good outcome this year than I was last year, which causes me some trepidation. I was wrong last year, you recovered; I hope that I am not wrong this year, as I am confident that you will recover.

Daddy, whatever the future holds for you and for us, we will face it with the joy of our shared experience and with our confident hope in the future based on our faith in Jesus Christ. God bless you, my dear, dear, friend, father and pattern for life. I pray for God to strengthen your heart and body, and when the day comes when He does not, my sadness and grief will be overcome with thanksgiving and gratitude for you, for Mother, for Dickie and for having had the blessing of growing up together in a simpler and richer time, in a place like Natchitoches, Louisiana.

Remember, it is your life and it is your health