



Farewell, Good Neighbor

By Kelli Wheeler

My in-laws live right behind me. Gate cut into the back fence, dinner together every Sunday and everything. Usually, when I tell people this, they hesitantly ask, “And this is a good thing?”

My answer? “Oh, yeah, it’s a good thing.”

It’s been more than a good thing for five and a half years, ever since

they helped us move into the house behind them. My husband adores his parents. They adore him. They in turn adore me because I love their son and gave them beautiful grandchildren to brag about. How can you not love people who couldn’t be happier to call you their own? My children love going over to Nana and Pa’s whenever their hearts desire, even if it’s just to give a shout-out to Pa and play a round of Rummikub with Nana. It’s a love fest all around.

I realize not everyone has this kind of relationship with the in-laws, and that’s why I’ve always counted it as one of my blessings. The people my kids affectionately call Nana and Pa have enriched our lives in such a profound way, I couldn’t begin to explain it in a mere 800 words.

Sadly, however, my husband and I recently had to explain to our children that Nana-and-Pa’s (said as if it were all one word) is now just Nana’s.

For two years, we agonized over how to tell the kids that leukemia would rob us of our beloved patriarch; how to make them aware of what was going on without frightening them or overwhelming them with too much adult information; how to help them understand the many hospital visits and a visibly sickening grandfather who used to be able to fix anything.

Eventually, we took our cues from them. Children are so much more perceptive and capable of understanding than we realize. In trying to stand guard as protector of their innocence being stolen too soon, sometimes we let the thief in the back door. We didn’t think they knew what was going on, but they did.

After a particularly scary trip to the hospital that made the adults realize this disease was not likely to be cured, it was time to tell the kids. I felt very strongly about not letting the kids be blindsided by the death of their grandfather. I even wrote a story trying to explain it to them and help them sort through their confusing emotions.

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In the end, I was comfortable with their knowledge of what was happening and respectful of their desire to not talk about it. They let me know where their heads were with occasional statements like “I’m not ready for Pa to be an angel yet” or “It looks funny not to see Pa sitting at his seat” when his usual spot at the Sunday dinner table was left empty while he was in the hospital.

Driving by the Kaiser facility on the way to Target, many times my son would matter-of-factly say, “There’s Pa’s hospital.”

And this was enough for them. They did not want to talk about it further because they said it made

them too sad. Pushing them to talk about it only upset them more.

That is the other blessing in all this. Though my husband and I mourn that our children won’t get more time with a wonderful man who loved them so completely, they are still young enough to wrap their grief up in neat little boxes, tuck it away and then run and play together like puppies. Their innocence is shaken but not shattered. They know we are here for them when they decide to really take a look into what those boxes hold.

The other day, my son started to ask me if he could walk over to Nana and Pa’s, but then corrected himself, asking, “Can I go to Nana’s?”

I told him sure but called him back to tell him he could still call it Nana and Pa’s. He said, “I know,” then happily ran off to see what Nana was up to.

It was then I realized that it was me who still needed to call it Nana and Pa’s. That even though this amazing man was no longer going to be walking through that gate from his house to ours calling, “Hey buddy! What’s for dinner?” his place in our lives would forever be etched in my heart.

Now, please excuse me for a moment while I apologize to my mother-in-law for making her cry here. I hate to do that to the president of my fan club.

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