

Tell him he can go

May 30, 1994

Just ten months after Steven's passing, the end of April 1994, I received a phone call from Butch. I knew from previous calls that he was not doing well and that he was experiencing the beginning of AIDS related dementia. However, in this phone conversation, he sounded clear and lucid. At the first, I wanted to know how he was doing and with his usual humor he started describing this gorgeous male nurse that was taking care of him as part of Home Health. "I'm in love; he is tall, blond, dark tan, a surfer-type. Oh, Robert, He's Gorrngeous!" I laughed, "You always know how to pick 'em." There was more of his humor as I tried to find out tactfully how he was medically.

There was suddenly an awkward pause. Butch broke the silence saying. "Robert, there's only one person I want to be with and only one place I want to be." "Butch, do you want to come up here?" He answered with a strong, "Yes." I knew what he meant. Using symbolic language, not saying with direct language, he was asking if he could come here to die. "Butch, you know you are welcome for as long as you like. I would love for you to be here. I will take care of you . . . I know what I will do with you." "What?" "I'm going to get two rocking chairs and put them on the porch. The two of us can sit like two old geezers and just rock away. We'll watch the sunset over the mountains." He laughed, "Oh I'm gonna love it."

All the preparations were made including a number of phone conversations with Butch's mother and father. They were agreeable for their son to come here to live out his last months.

The day arrived for Butch to come to the mountains of West Virginia. His mother was to take him to the Daytona regional airport and I would pick him up here at a local airport. I left early in order to find two rocking chairs, which I did. Then off to the airport to meet Butch as he got off the plane. I was very excited to see my dear friend. The plane arrived, but no Butch. I went to the service counter and inquired about my missing friend. They had his name, but said he never got on the airplane in Daytona.

When I returned home there was a message on the answering machine from Butch's mother. He became very sick at the airport, too sick to make the trip. I placed the two rocking chairs on the porch and stood there looking at them thinking how Butch would have loved sitting there with his friend. It was never to happen.

A week later I received a call from Butch's father. Butch was in the hospital and in very bad shape. I quote, "If Butch can't come to the mountain, can the mountain come to him." His mother and father wanted to fly me to Orlando in order to be with Butch.

Within a few days I was at Butch's bedside and there I stayed for seven days, spending the last three nights on a cot next to him. The first full day I was there Butch recognized me with a big grin. He was never once able to speak but, oh, the expression in those big eyes. I have many times seen that mischievous twinkle in those eyes. His body was almost skeletal making his eyes appear even bigger. That is how he could communicate, through those eyes. At times he would roll them as a response to what someone had said. Like, "Get her," or "You've got to be kidding." Always with humor.

The second day I was with Butch, we were alone with me sitting next to him on the bed. I thought, "It's time." I reached around my neck and removed the silver cross and chain. It had not been removed since I replaced it there shortly after Steven passed away. I held it in front of Butch. "Do you know what this is?" He smiled and nodded yes. "May I." As I started to place it over his head, his eyes opened even wider with a look of expecting me to say more. "Do you know what it means? . . . Let's just call it insurance." There was an even bigger smile when the chain and cross were on him. I put the cross in his hand just like I did for Steven. I watched as Butch too drew his hand tight around the cross. "Sweetheart, don't worry. You are going to do just fine, you're safe." He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The gathering of family at a loved one's deathbed can many times be difficult. Such was the case of Butch's family. His mother and father had been divorced for years. His younger brother had not spoken to Butch or their mother in a long time. His sister and father seemed to be the only two that

would communicate with the entire family.

Butch's impending death brought his family together. For the first time in years the entire family met awkwardly under one roof. For his brother and sister the death of a sibling was traumatic, they had not witnessed the death of a loved one. They both expressed their fear to me, not knowing what to say or what to do for their dying brother. Butch's brother told me he was afraid to even go into the room. In a conversation just outside Butch's room he said, "It's been a long time since I have seen him. I don't know what to say." "You don't have to say anything. Just be yourself, sit next to him. If you want, take his hand in yours. He will know you are there and that is all that counts," at which point I opened the door to Butch's room. "It's all right; you have nothing to be afraid of. You don't have to say anything." He cautiously entered the room. I gently closed the door behind him. Alone with Butch, his brother stayed in the room for half an hour. From that point on Butch's brother visited him daily.

I describe Sissy, Butch's sister with great affection. Even though she said I was there for Butch and his family, she was there for me. Yes, I too was in pain over the eminent loss of my lifelong friend.

I had not seen her in many years. There was an instant recognition and bonding as we reminisced about Butch and the years I lived in Florida. However, the conversations moved to the immediacy of the moment. What was happening to Butch? As best I could I counseled *on death and dying*, stating the importance of a union, through love, with Butch. He was going to depart this life and as his loved ones, it was our love for him that could help him make that transition. "It's all right to help him, release him. He is ready, tell him he can go." Within a few hours Sissy was accepting, as the two of us became the constant that was at Butch's bedside.

I shared with Sissy my feelings about Butch's last days being spent in the antiseptic environment of a hospital. Unfortunately circumstances did not allow him to be any other place. We knew that if Butch had his way he would have chosen some place outrageous. What could we do for Butch? We talked about kidnapping him from the hospital and taking him to the beach he loved so much. We would wrap him in blankets, prop him up and let him spend his last hours watching the sunrise. Not to be foiled, I found a tape recording of the sounds of the surf. The next day Sissy brought to the hospital a portable tape player. She had also made a special trip to the beach to gather up sand that was put in a child's beach bucket. We set the stage for Butch, the sound of the surf as Sissy helped Butch put his hand in the bucket of sand. He rolled his eyes at both of us as a big smile came on his face. It was the least we could do.

For a mother and father to lose a child disrupts all that is inherent in the natural course of human life. Even though Butch's mother and father had been devoiced for years, this unnatural order of survival brought them together. A lot of mutual anger and pain was forgiven as they united in support of each other through the common bond that was their dying son.

And so my friend Butch became a teacher of unconditional love. His family healed and came together out of love for him and each other.

Early one morning after I spent the night next to him, I awoke and looked in the direction of his bed. There he was, staring at me, as if he had been waiting for me to wake up. He never took his eyes off me as I sat up. We looked at each other with such power. I was mesmerized by the knowing and love that was in his eyes, something he knew that I didn't. A knowing that I have seen too often, a knowing that the time is near. I felt his peace. By mid day, Butch's life was indeed waning. He fought all day to let go as all of us coaxed him not to suffer anymore. But, the body is a machine that does not like to surrender. Not until the late hours of that night, surrounded by loved ones, did he take his last labored breath. With Sissy's help we reverently removed the silver cross and I replaced it around my neck. Butch was gone . . .

Butch's remains were cremated, but nothing had been determined for a memorial service. I shared with his family the story about Steven wanting a service here and his ashes being put up on the hill. I offered a place on the hill for Butch. It was a welcomed suggestion by his entire family.

Shortly after my return home I received a letter from Sissy. Here is a portion of that letter.

June 4, 1994

My dearest Robert,

After days of thought and deliberation, I have concluded that there is simply no way I can put into writing the message I so passionately want to convey to you. Words seem trite and extremely inadequate when trying to express the multitude of feelings I have been privileged to experience as a result of your visit and Butch's death. Either event, singularly, would have certainly affected me, but the beauty with which you gently and gracefully guided both Butch's and my introduction to death has had a profound impact on my life. Your positive influence on one of the most dreaded and misunderstood events in life has not only created wonderful memories, but has instilled in me a strong desire to continue your work with others.

I continue to marvel at God's goodness! Two weeks ago I was praying for strength to enable me to get through Butch's impending death: scared of how I might react: and wondering how I could ever deal with the consequential feelings of not being there for him due to my fears and inadequacies. Then, poof, a name from the past surfaces and the answer to my prayers walks through the hospital doors (and you thought you were there for Butch!). Indeed you were there for Butch, for all of us present, and for all those who will yet be touched by the reverberations of your mission.

I can't thank you enough for your visit and the love and compassion given to Butch and the family. The moment we hugged each other, I sensed an instant "knowing"; a bond that had just been renewed, one which has linked us together for a long, long time.

"Sissy"

A month later, Butch's mother and father flew here bringing his ashes. On June 24, 1994, the first anniversary of Steven's passing, a second service was held in the studio and up on the hill with Fr. Reece officiating. A stone had already been placed to welcome Butch. A small portion of his ashes was held back and later scattered on the ocean in Florida by his friends.

ROBERT A. BAIRD II

"Butch"

October 5, 1947 - May 30, 1994