

By Jamie Buckingham

IT WILL BE 'NEAT'

■ Little April's question put me on the spot. She's 5 years old and wanted me, her granddaddy, to tell her how to get to heaven.

I told her you get there by dying. That didn't bother her. She's not been taught you have to fear death. We were sitting at my breakfast table and I told her death was like a tunnel.

"Do I have to go through the tunnel alone?"

"No," I told her, "Jesus will hold your hand."

She thought that was "neat" and wanted to know when she could go.

I told her that was God's business. All she had to do was be ready—and to stay close to Jesus.

That settled it for April. I only wish my faith were as strong.

It's not death that scares me. It's dying. Maybe I've watched too much television. Maybe I've driven past too many wrecks on the highway, been into too many morgues, walked through too many refugee villages in Third World countries. Dying, from a world's perspective, is not "neat."

I know this: The older I grow, the more I am determined to face death victoriously.

Recently I found a note I wrote to myself six years ago, shortly after my 87-year-old daddy died. I was at a conference center at Green Lake, Wisconsin. That morning I had risen early and walked down to the lake. It was spring and the crocus and dogwoods were in full bloom. The sun was just rising over the mirrored surface of the lake. Two swans left a golden wake behind as they glided gracefully past. Everything spoke of life.

I sat on a bench and wrote.

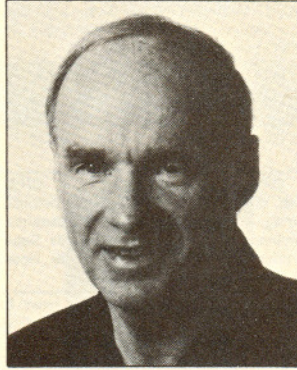
"I wish I knew what happened that Sunday morning Daddy went to heaven. I've tried, to the best of my ability, to reconstruct all the events leading up to those last few moments. Mother has given, in detail, all she knew. What she didn't know, and what no one knows, was what went on in Daddy's mind.

"I think I know, but I'm so prone to wrongness, especially when it comes to knowing someone else's deepest thoughts, fears and desires. So it remains a great mystery—one upon which I can only speculate.

"There are times—like this morning, when I sit and get quiet in a strange place, apart from the maddening crowd—that I wonder. And ask. I want to know, God. I want to know because I still love my daddy. I want to know because one day I will face the same transition. I learned so much from him. I want to learn of this, too.

"Was he afraid? I think not. He feared many things that were far less significant during his last months. He feared falling. He feared not having enough money to handle hospital bills. He feared leaving mother alone and unattended. But I do not believe he feared dying. He had grown too close to God for that.

"Therefore, I believe when that Sunday came, and all the loose threads had been knotted and clipped, and suddenly he



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was helpless—unable to function physically—he laid his head on his pillow and willed himself into heaven.

"That's what I believe. Yet, I want to know."

Dying, for my daddy, was in April's words "neat." He had walked long with the Lord. Like Enoch, he had come to the end of the day and God said, "Walter, you're closer to My house than to yours. Come on home with Me." He did as old Jacob did. He "drew up his feet into the bed, breathed his last, and was gathered to his people" (Gen. 49:33b).

My daddy, because of his childlike faith, did not fear dying. As James Weldon Johnson, the black Southern poet, wrote of Sister Caroline in "Go Down, Death":

She saw what we couldn't see;

She saw Old Death.

Coming like a falling star.

But Death didn't frighten Sister Caroline;

He looked to her like a welcome friend.

Mother called, and I arrived while his body was still warm; I wish I had been there when Death took him home to Jesus.

Last week I visited my mother. She, too, has turned 87. She is just a few miles away in a cozy little apartment in the Baptist retirement center, located on the old homestead which was given by my father. Things are not well with her body. She has lost the ability to walk. She fears having to live out long years in bed. She was sitting there in the semi-darkness trying to eat some clear soup, her spoon shaking and clattering against the side of the cup. Her once-exciting world has narrowed to four walls. She's not concerned about my travels or about summit meetings in Geneva. Her big concern is getting to the bathroom in the middle of the night without falling.

"What do you want most?" I asked.

I thought she would say, "To come and live with you." In fact, I was hoping she would say that. Jackie and I had earlier agreed, knowing it would mean a radical shift in our lifestyle. But why not? She took care of me when I was a helpless child. Shouldn't I now care for her in her helplessness?

Instead she said, without pausing, "I want to go and be with Jesus. Now."

Well, why not? Her reason for living is to commune with God, and she can do that a lot better in heaven than here.

Jackie and I knelt beside her chair. I took her weak, wrinkled hands in mine—hands which once changed my diaper, which bathed and caressed me, which wiped away my tears—and I prayed, asking God to take her home. I asked God to dispatch His angel. "Go down, Death, and bring her to me."

I don't know when it will happen. I don't know how. But with April—and with mother—I know this: it will be neat. ■