



where you go, I will follow

Everyone needs a lodestar, someone who keeps them moving on the right path. Author **HELEN SCHULMAN** pays tribute to her own true north, a man who taught her much about how to live life to the fullest—and how to end it with grace.

Last April, my cousin David died of colon cancer at age 58. That is the most depressing line I am going to write, because there was nothing depressing about David. He was a happy man with a happy life. He knew how to celebrate what was important to him. For this reason, I'd always looked up to him. But never more so than when I watched him prepare to die.

David was six years older than me, a magical age gap when we were kids: He was old enough to always be excitingly ahead, but close enough to relate back. Or perhaps he was just kind enough to relate back. The cousin thing helped. He wasn't my sibling, so I never fought with him. I didn't know his faults by heart; I didn't get to see my own reflected in his rearview mirror.



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We were not similar in our interests or our tastes, but we came from the same stock—his mother and my dad were sister and brother, the offspring of Russian Jewish refugees—so we understood each other. More important, we liked each other.

As we grew older, David began to speak a foreign language: math. He earned a Ph.D. and became a leader in software engineering and the chair of his department at the University of Washington, in Seattle. He was a computer geek: tall with a great, Gandalfy beard and a sweet but corny sense of humor.



about the author

Helen Schulman is the author of the novels *This Beautiful Life*, *A Day at the Beach*, and *P.S.*, among others. She lives with her family in New York City.

WHEN HE WAS first diagnosed with cancer, in 2009, David set up a website to communicate to family and friends about his illness and to receive their good wishes. It's now a time capsule, a narrative that captures the arc of his illness: the shock of diagnosis; David's characteristic positive-thinking reaction; his eagerness to take treatment head-on so that he could get it safely behind him; and, finally, the way chemo and surgeries wore him down. The scientist in my cousin took some intellectual pleasure in giving the details of his protocols. The mensch in him would issue warnings for the squeamish to skip ahead a few paragraphs.

Over the next few years, David went through more than 24 cycles of chemo and many surgeries, but he did not stop teaching or doing his research or being a caring father and husband and friend. Until the very end, he continued to function vigorously in the present action of his life. As a two-time cancer survivor myself, I admired him for that. I admired the way he shared information on the unrelenting progression of his disease. I admired the way that, even though he prided himself on his optimism almost to the point of defensiveness, he was frank and at times truly open about his despair, realizing at one juncture that "I'm emotionally more down than usually. Maybe it's because I can, for now, no longer glimpse much of a future without a bunch of medical crap in the middle of it."

Part of my high regard for David stemmed from the fact that his reaction to his illness was so foreign to my own. I kept my diagnosis

quiet, sharing with just a treasured inner circle of friends. When facing adversity, I tend to compartmentalize; sometimes what's central in my life is not apparent to anyone else but me (and my poor husband). My privacy is my shield, but it can also be a lonely moat that keeps me away from solace.

In contrast, David's candid nature was making things easier for his friends, his family—and himself. Close to Election Day in November 2012, David had to tell all of us that his doctors had given him only six months to two years to live. He titled the post "Four more years!"—that sense of humor coming through, even at such a dark moment. He also wrote, "My major worry at present is that people may stop treating me like 'David.' So don't do that to me :-)." For me, living so far away in New York City, it was a gift to know what he wanted. I felt free to tease him, to prattle in e-mail, and to kvetch about my own life, because he didn't want a holy halo of doom around his head.

He was still feeling good that following February, and he had "no expiration date" (his expression), so he decided to come east to see some of the people he cared for. It was, sadly, a de facto farewell tour. One evening at my mother's apartment, my mom, my brother, and I talked with David for hours. He felt well. Dying still seemed a bit "theoretical," he said. As he talked, however, it became clear that he was preparing for death honestly and with his own exemplary sense of responsibility—talking realistically to his children and his wife, seeing family and friends, saying what he wanted to say, what *needed* saying, and, up until the very end, passionately living his life.

So here's the point of all this: My cousin, who always was ahead of me in all things, was ahead of me in this, too. But he was going to the same place where we are all headed. And as I watched him prepare, I took succor in his incredible grace. He showed me how important it is to live a



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I won't argue that death isn't scary, but I learned from David that it's not something to hide from or be ashamed of. The greatest gift he gave me before he died was letting me in on how he felt about it.

very crucial part of life well—the end of it. The same guy who took out life insurance when he and his then girlfriend, later wife, moved into their first house together, so she'd never have to give it up, was the same guy who took a hard look at their finances and helped her plan for the decades she might need to spend without him. He was the same guy who threw himself into his work, organizing a conference in San Francisco until his last few days. He was the same guy who came to us to say good-bye, although we offered repeatedly to come to him.

It's a simple enough thought to hold on to—the idea of being the same person you've always been, even as the end draws near, or maybe even your best person. But how simple is it to accomplish? Damn hard, if you ask me, though when I watched David do just that, I vowed to follow in his footsteps. That doesn't mean I'll suddenly become outgoing and gregarious or share any other illness that might befall me on social media. (I'm not even on Facebook.) But I hope that I will carry out my responsibilities the way he did, that I will help my family ease into the life they will lead without me without guilt or fear, and that I will pass on whatever torch I have with my work with dignity and generosity. I hope I will remain true to my own life until it is over. I won't argue that death isn't scary, but I learned from David that it's not something to hide from or be ashamed of. In a way, the greatest gift he gave me before he died was letting me in on how he felt about it.

THAT NIGHT, after David and I left my mother's apartment, I walked him to a cab. We stood on the corner and cried and hugged for a long time. He said, "I can't believe I'm not going to get to see your children and my children grow." I asked him if he was worried about his kids, and he said no. He believed in them wholly. "I just want to see it," he said. When we finally tried to move apart, my bracelet got caught in his hood. We couldn't get it out for about five minutes, until I had to rip the mesh (just a tiny bit), which he tried not to let annoy him, and then we were both cracking up through our tears.

I literally couldn't let him go.

As I held the car door open for him and handed him a bag of cookies that my mother made him take for the flight, I said, "David, you are such a grown-up." He was an adult in full almost all of his life: responsible, creative, practical, putting others first. He said, "I'm just a person." "But you are such a good person," I said. And he was. ■