Remarks at the memorial service of my father, Dr. John Rieger III

By John Hackett Rieger

Good morning everyone. It's nice to see you all here today. I wish I could call the guest of honor up here, like Tom Sawyer, because you know he liked podiums… but unfortunately that's not possible. So, as his namesake, I'd like to repeat one of my father's favorite lines, familiar, I know, to his fellow Rotarians:

MY NAME IS JOHN RIEGER!

I last spoke with Dad early this month, when I sat with him for a couple of hours in his room at the nursing home. We talked about this and that—about the white peach tree down by the back road when I was a kid; about how much I hated the ham and cheese sandwiches he always packed for long airplane flights.

"Well, what did you think of the coffee?"

I told him that what I remembered about the coffee was that we could fly through turbulence so rough you'd think the wings were coming off, and his cup of coffee on the dashboard never seemed to spill.

His lunch arrived, with a beautifully printed menu—turkey with gravy, roasted potatoes, apple crisp—and beside each item a handwritten notation: "puree." He referred to this indignity as his "pigeon poop." One thing on the menu that day was supposedly an "Italian garlic breadstick," and we spent a few rather hilarious minutes trying to figure out which puddle might plausibly be the pureed breadstick.

Incidentally, it's a great credit to the Meadows and their quality of care that the chief dietician actually joined us to help solve this mystery.

Here's a story Dad shared with me on a leisurely drive up to San Francisco a couple of years ago. After the War, he went to Med School, but he was still a Navy pilot in the Ferry Service, flying military aircraft across the country. In his spare time, the rules said he could borrow a plane and fly it anywhere in a thousand-mile radius. So, he would check out a Corsair and fly it to someplace like Florida and hang out in the officer's club.

Well, gee, Dad, let me get this straight—handsome young navy pilot, just landed in one of the country's hottest fighter planes, and he's also a medical student? He's got prospects? Must have been catnip to the ladies!

I believe that observation earned a twinkle of assent.

Who was this cocky young fighter pilot who eventually became my father? Well, the living have the last word on the dead, so I will risk being presumptuous: I think he was a man who wanted to "be somebody." He believed a man should set goals for himself, and every day he should work toward those goals. A man who was *somebody* was aggressive, demanded perfection, and didn't let people or circumstances stand in his way. Dad took up boxing; he became a fighter pilot; he became a doctor and opened a practice here, just as the valley was poised for prosperity. He was a pillar of the medical community, and a faithful Rotarian. He was an adventurer who flew a single-engine plane around the world. He was a horseman who rode to hounds. He led the life he imagined. He became the man he wanted to be. He was a *success*. My dad was *somebody*.

He also had his faults—in fact, I've been making a list of them for most of my adult life. He was an intellectual bully—I don't think that's too strong. He always knew he was right. His idea of conversation was cross-examination. When I was a college student, searching, like all young men, for a dogma to call my own, he would goad me relentlessly ~~until I lost my temper, over and over, like a sadistic sport.~~ He believed the best way to improve children was to point out what they could have done better, so nothing was ever good enough. ~~And when his sons were at the age when a father really counts, he left. "Dr. Somebody" had a *new* goal for himself, and his family wasn't part of it.~~

There's an old Saturday Night Live sketch, in which an aged John Belushi dances on the graves of his fellow cast-members. I've always imagined this day would be something like that. But no.

For one thing, as Dad got older, things changed. He was a loving grandfather. He would take my boys by the hand and lead them on nature walks in the woods behind the house he shared with Joanna.

And as the years went on, he had to give up his plane; he had to give up his horse; he had to give up his medical license; he had to give up his driver's license; he had to move to assisted living, then to a nursing home. He couldn't walk. Then he couldn't get out of bed. Life slowly robbed him of his powers, of his comforts, of his dignity. In the end he was afraid he had become nobody. Mostly he wished for death.

It was as if the edifice I had been hurling myself against was nothing more than sand, washed away by the rising tide of years, and all that *stuff* from the past was washing away with it.

On our way home from the final vigil, my brother Chris ventured that maybe this is what forgiveness is really like. It's not a noble effort of the moral will; it's just a matter of moving on, because it's too much effort not to, because it really doesn't matter anymore.

On my last visit, Dad was sitting in his wheelchair with his oxygen tube, and he pointed to a pair of long, stretchy rubber bands tied to the bed. "I'm pulling on these every day to build up my arm strength," he said. "It's the first step in my program to get better." Even at the bottom of a deep hole, he had a plan to get out.

As I watch my two superb sons approaching manhood, I *know* they're starting their lists. I know they'll be *the* experts on the faults and failings of their father. I just want to pass along something I've learned from *my* father—that it's hard to live a life; it's *hard*—and I hope in the end they'll forgive me, and that I'll occupy the place in *their* memories that my father does in *mine*, a place of dignity and respect.