



# LAST WORDS

DOUGLAS COLE

*I wanted to know what he thought about the big questions in life: Is there a god? What is the soul? What happens when we die? Is there rebirth, heaven, hell, nothing? How can there be evil? How can we know?*

I MAY HAVE MISUNDERSTOOD MY GRANDFATHER'S LIFE AND HIS death. When he died, his wish was for no funeral, no memorial—nothing. And as I far as I knew him, this matched his religious beliefs. I once asked my grandmother—this was after my 86 had died—if she and my grandfather ever talked about dying or the soul. And she said, no, never saw any point to it. They never went to church, and there was never any discussion at family gatherings about religious or spiritual matters. They talked work and politics. That's about it. It seemed odd to me, a family bereft of any spiritual structure. It seemed stark and old pioneer. It was America on a vast plain seeing only that. None of the rich spirituality of the native people. None of the Bible talk of the other pioneers. Not even the grim puritanical shreds that might keep a community together by just showing up at a church. They took no truck with any of it. So it appeared. These were my people, my kin.

But who really knows what goes on in the mind of another? My grandfather loved my grandmother, stayed with her his whole life. I often wondered if he did this out of some kind of passivity because she was a hard, mean-hearted woman, but I don't think that's it. He

carried himself with a quiet grace. Everyone loved him. He was not especially demonstrative about his emotions, but many members of my family remember him as a person of profound tenderness. He tended his patch of earth with a farmer’s scrutiny to season and water and temperature. He kept fuchsias going year-round; in winter he’d hang them in the garage to protect them from the cold. I think those plants were not the only things he kept safe from the cold.

He smoked a pipe. I always loved that smell. The rooms he occupied were often full of blue smoke. He was diagnosed with diabetes when a young man, controllable through diet, and so he lived most of his life with no sugar at all. Then, in his seventies, another doctor checked him again and said he was fine, no diabetes, that he probably never had it at all. And so he started in on sugar again. And he loved it. He was always rail thin. And he wrote. Each year he received a new annual journal, broken up into days, and the story in our family was that he wrote every day, wrote everything down. This was the man with no religion.

I was always curious about those journals. After I began to write myself, I wondered what sort of things he was writing about, what he thought, what sort of secret life he lived inside of his words. Insights. Moments. Thoughts. Maybe even poetry. His soul was in his words, I imagined. I once saw some letters he wrote to my grandmother when they were very young. She was in the hospital for one of her many conditions, and he wrote to her about the house he was building for her beside the lake. He used beautiful language to describe it. He wanted her to see it in her mind. And I had the impression that, in a kind of Thousand and One Nights way, he was writing to keep her alive. That he loved her was obvious. In some way, she was his dark and desperate muse. But after he died, and my uncle obtained his journals, I got a chance to read them. But when I read them, I found he had vanished. I looked for him in there, but I couldn’t find him. The entries were little more than brief notations about the weather, maybe a list of some gifts people had received at Christmas (which we did celebrate as a family holiday), maybe a few lines about what he had for lunch. But nothing else. It seemed that the truth of my grandfather could only be known through the details of the life he lived: he grew up in Chelan, he rode a horse to a one-room schoolhouse, he came to the city and worked in a Gentleman’s Club, received some education, worked in a large, corporate bakery for the rest of his life and retired with a pension, played golf, kept an immaculate garden, was good, beloved.

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What else did I need to know? What mystery was I trying to solve? I wanted to know what he thought about the big questions in life: Is there a god? What is the soul? What happens when we die? Is there rebirth, heaven, hell, nothing? How can there be evil? How can we know? Things I thought about. I couldn’t believe that even though my grandmother said they never talked about it, never saw any point to it, that he wasn’t thinking about these things. Doesn’t everybody? I was thinking about these things constantly. And I wanted to know what he thought. I wanted him to teach me something, to tell me what he had learned from living in the world.

When my grandfather was dying in the hospital, his body almost done with, he struggled mostly to breathe. He had been good and strong his whole life, never went into the hospital that I knew. Then something happened with his stomach. I was never sure what. He vomited and aspirated some of the vomit and developed a lung infection and that was it. Another doctor said it was emphysema. What difference does the name make at that point? I went to see him in the hospital, the last time I would ever see him, and like in a movie, when he saw me he took hold of my wrist and through his oxygen mask said, “Think good thoughts!”

I couldn’t be sure, though, just what he meant by that, “think good thoughts.” Did he mean not to worry, that he was going to be okay, so, don’t count him out yet and think good thoughts? Was it code for take care of each other after he passed? Was it as simple as an entry in his journals, as simple as not wanting a funeral, just think good thoughts, that’s all ye need to know? Did he in the deep vision space of dying look into my soul and see the snake pit there and so was giving me corrective measures to live by? Think good thoughts before it’s too late! Was that some clarity that just hit him, just a singular statement of truth like “Mu” given as his parting gift? Was it a cosmic, metaphysical nugget to be mulled over for its rich complexity? Was he even speaking to me?

I have no idea, but I’ve been mumbling it for years. *Think good thoughts.* As simple as pipe smoke. *Think good thoughts.* As beautiful and graceful as his garden. *Think good thoughts*—in the forest when there’s nobody to hear, as enigmatic as his life, his character, but elegant and clear as well — *think good thoughts.* It’s almost a kind of Zen koan. A pragmatic American pioneer law: *think good thoughts.* That’s all I know. And so I think, okay, I’ll try to think good thoughts. ❖