

# Last Lists

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The defining characteristic of a list du jour is that it is written on a yellow legal pad. Only this medium will serve. I learned this one of life's essential truths from my dad.

Most weekday mornings while I was growing up, Dad and I would have an early breakfast together while the rest of the household was yet asleep. Our biological clocks were set on "farmer's hours," he would say. And while Dad ate his breakfast (creamed chipped beef on toast; no kidding) and I drank mine (chocolate milk; Mom wasn't awake to catch me), we'd sit at the big blond wood table in the family room and compose our lists.

The tone of mine generally veered from breathless with excitement (cheerleading practice on north field; bring pompoms!) to speechless with terror (prep for math test: THIS FRIDAY). From time to time I would take a peek at his list too. Some of Dad's entries were happy ones (pick up tickets to Chargers game) and others were quite ominous (review Sherry's trig homework). During the latter occasions, the long table would become a cross between a battleground and a wailing wall - but that's another story.

Perhaps I should add here that my mom was also a committed list maker, but her methodology was quite different. She preferred a diffused yet thematic approach, with grocery lists created on the backs of brown bags near the fridge, and notes on films penciled along the margins of the newspaper's review.

When my dad died two years ago, one of the hardest things for me to see when I entered his house was his yellow legal pad. There it sat on his desk in the den, complete with his list for the day. All of his plans had been carefully written out, beginning with "Take vitamins." And that and several subsequent items had been neatly ruled through, right up to the moment when he walked out the front door, stumbled against the wheels on his suitcase, and fell down the porch steps.

It filled me with sorrow to read the unrealized plans for what would be his last day at home. How could this happen, I wondered, and raged, as the suddenly bereaved often do. At 85, he was still so vigorous, so engaged with life. At the memorial service, one of the neighbors mentioned that he'd spoken to him just the day before. Dad had been in the front yard on a scaffolding he'd built of sawhorses and plywood, upon which he'd placed an extension ladder, the better to hack at the highest treetops with his chain saw. This was a man who still had some things he wanted to finish!

Yet, over time, I have come to think about Dad's last list quite differently. What do most of us hope for, anyway? To live fully every day of our lives, I would imagine. To be able to take good care of

ourselves to the end. To make plans and enjoy having something fun to look forward to. What more can any of us wish for than that?

If I am able to leave behind me a list on a yellow pad, I hope it indicates that I was still taking my vitamins.

I rather doubt that I will have been planning to wield a chain saw.

I sure hope that math doesn't figure in the equation, anywhere.