

Values-Based Decision Making
In the Real World of Dementia and Truth

Ethical crises rarely evolve with a step-by-step precision whereby all the facts are known, all the necessary information to make intelligent decisions is obtained and considered, all the parties are consulted, all the implications of the alternatives are understood, and all of these data present themselves in perfect chronological order. In real life, critical ethical decisions, like the conditions that compel them, are often encountered in the fog of confusion, are beset by emotional outbursts, and are subject to all-too-pressing and unyielding deadlines.

The crisis described below was no exception, with uncertainties and emotions seeming, in some perverse way, to vie with each other on a daily basis to see which factor could most obscure reason and foment failure. Unlike its real-life development, however, the story below is told with some semblance of order, benefiting, as it does, from the virtue of hindsight. Though conveyed for the most part in the present tense, the crisis actually occurred some five years or so ago, well before I began my rabbinical school studies. At the time, I was more conversant with the daily complexities of the business world (in which I had already worked for 25-plus years) than I was with the procedures associated with ethical decision-making. While values-based decision making was something I had heard about in a corporate setting, it was not a part of the procedures I would knowingly bring to bear on personal moral dilemmas. Reflecting these many years later on the crisis described below, and on the decision I ultimately made, it is clear to me now that the process of values-based decision making is of critical importance if the forces of emotion, the burden of overwhelming time constraints, and the awful fear of doing irreparable damage – all of which are so prevalent in ethical crises – are to be forestalled long enough to allow for clear thinking and grounded, ethical decisions. Thus, in the telling of this crisis I have retroactively superimposed the values-based decision making process as if it were applied at the time. In hindsight, I wish that such had been the case.

Where to begin? There are so many people you need to know, so many emotions that need to be factored in, that it's difficult for me to sort it all out. Let me tell you about the primary players.

It all begins with Dad. He is 88 years old, living in a Jewish agency apartment building in Ventnor, NJ. It's an independent living arrangement; Dad has his own one-bedroom apartment with full kitchen. He is perhaps five feet tall (I know his height doesn't figure into the equation but I want you to see him in your mind as you read this), down from an imposing 5'4" at his prime. He is legally blind, beset with macular degeneration that allows him blurry vision at best, limited only to the periphery, and requires him to use binocular-type glasses to read. But that's almost irrelevant because he also has dementia – not the kind that changes a parent into a paranoid stranger, but the kind that has turned him soft and sweet. He has not the slightest memory, neither long-term nor short-term, so he literally lives in this moment only, with no remembrance of what was and no concept of what might be. His ability to recognize people, such as it is, seems to be more instinctive than cognitive (it's certainly not visual), almost as if cells lying deep in his DNA quietly vibrate when someone he knows is with him. He is still in touch with the vibration, as faint as it might be, but his knowledge of the person doesn't seem to extend much beyond the fact that the person's presence has jangled those cells. He's come a long way from being the top-dog CPA he was during a 40-year career.

He lives by himself but is not alone. His friend is Evelyn, and she, too, is part of the current ethical dilemma. She is the third in a string of "E" women in Dad's life, starting with Eve, my mother, to whom Dad was married for 30 years, and continuing with Edythe, my step-mother whom Dad married the year after my mother's death and to whom he was married for 20 years, so Dad always has had a woman at his side, going on 60 years now.

The other players are my sister, my step-sister (Edythe's daughter) and I. I am in my mid-50's, my sister in her late-50's and my step-sister in her early-60's. Despite my being the youngest, the decision falls to me. It may be because Dad will soon be living nearest to me – in fact, just ten minutes from my house – while being at least an hour from either sister. But I think it also is because I am the son, and somehow the Jewish

tradition that it is a son's filial obligation to handle these things has mysteriously taken hold. Or perhaps it is just a reflection of the continuing attitude of male dominance in America – and in my generation – that has made it my decision to make, my angel with which to wrestle.

The issue is not whether we should move Dad from his independent living arrangement to an assisted living facility (and, yes, I know that I've posited this act as one happening *to* Dad – *we* do the moving, *Dad* being the one moved – but such is the reality) because that need is clear. Dad sitting hours on end with Evelyn in the lobby of his bank, missing meals, wearing unclean clothes, not taking necessary medication with assured regularity, his all-too-obvious physical vulnerability, his undeniable and increasing mental confusion, all combined with Evelyn's accelerating decline in her ability to care for Dad, make the assisted living facility decision compelling.

No, that is not the issue. The issue – it's difficult to even say the words – is whether we *tell* Dad and Evelyn that we're moving him, or whether I whisk him off on a subterfuge, "... C'mon, Dad, let's just the two of us go out for lunch – no, not with her (her name is Evelyn, Dad), not this time, just the two of us – and, oh by the way, Dad, here's your new home, and, no, you're not going back to your old apartment and, no, you won't be able to see her, no, no, not any more...".

My heart breaks. My mind reels. If I tell Dad in advance, he will undoubtedly say no. He doesn't understand that the time has come to live in an environment where he will have 24-hour supervision, that he and Evelyn can no longer perform the basic tasks that assure safety and health. He will be frightened of leaving his home, of leaving Evelyn, of seeing his world reduced, his independence removed. His feelings are understandable and appropriate under the circumstances, as will be his anger and frustration as he senses the loss of his own authority (or simply intuitively change and is gripped by its corollary, fear).

Evelyn will surely resist as well, Dad having become the source of her daily activity, the focus of her caring. Theirs is not a relationship merely of symbiosis – he needing the care and companionship that she provides; she needing to care for and to be a companion to him – theirs is a relationship of real affection and regard. Evelyn has

trouble seeing, her memory is poor but at least marginally functional, and her balance is always a toss-up, but they still hold hands, they still laugh and hug. Her fear – of losing her person of focus, of losing her purpose – will cause her to dig in her heels, to be angry and insulted, “ ... What do you mean he needs more care than he’s getting here? I can still take care of him. No, no, no! ...”, and this can only push Dad’s few remaining buttons, his embedded instincts to protect Evelyn even if he has already forgotten what he’s protecting her from. I can see it happening, this escalating level of hysteria as each responds to the other’s hurt, and it scares me to death.

But maybe I’m wrong. If I tell them in advance, maybe Dad will recognize through the haze that this move is needed. Although Evelyn cannot move with Dad to the assisted living facility – we’ve examined that at some length and it is clearly impossible for a variety of reasons – maybe she, too, will recognize that this is in his best interest, will find the strength to encourage him and will love him enough to let him go. Maybe if given the opportunity, they will rise above the shattering scene I picture in my mind, perhaps embracing with resigned dignity. While I admit it’s a possibility, I don’t think that will be the case, I really don’t. Instead, I think that if I tell them in advance, it will be a truly horrible encounter that could easily send either or both of them quickly down the slippery slope of decline. And when it’s done, I still might not have gotten Dad where he needs to be. But I don’t know that for sure, not with absolute certainty.

If I don’t tell them, if I exercise my physical power to unilaterally effect a move unbeknownst to either of them, that also runs the risk of inflicting physical and emotional torment, of starting them down the slippery slope, although at least Dad *will* be moved, at least that most critical part of this process will be done. But will their hearts be broken? Will they ever recover? Will the abruptness of it all be too much for their fragile psyches? Will I accomplish the bottom-line result – to have Dad in a facility where he can be properly cared for – but in a way that almost assures his unhappiness and the ultimate failure of the endeavor? Or will Dad’s lack of memory actually work in our favor this one time? Will he forget about his old life, about Evelyn, just as quickly and surely as he forgets what he just said, the food he just ate, the greetings that were just given? Who knows, and how can I make a decision without knowing?

And note how I slip erratically here between expressing concern for “him” and for “them,” knowing in my heart that my real concern is Dad despite my not being quite able to shake the feeling that I have some responsibility for Evelyn as well. She has her own family of grown children to care for her, but I can’t just set her aside, can I?

I focus again on Dad: what about issues like dignity and honesty, like truthfulness, like honor and reverence of mother and father? This is my father, and yet I’m seriously considering sweeping him away and installing him in a new environment, not even allowing for goodbyes, for an opportunity to reconcile his own fate. What do I owe Dad when all the alternatives are fraught with disaster?

And how much of my concern about Dad’s and Evelyn’s reactions are really concerns about myself? How do I identify and separate my own fears from fears for their health and safety? I don’t like confrontation and conflict; I avoid it as best I can in my everyday life. How do I know that my consideration of this surreptitious alternative is not based on what is most comfortable for me, regardless of what’s best for Dad?

Have I set the stage for you? Do you understand my anguish? No middle ground here: either talk with them in advance or just do it. Oh, sure, maybe there are nuances within each category: if I tell them in advance, perhaps I could tell them separately and appeal to Evelyn for help in making this happen. But if this doesn’t work, how do I then accomplish Dad’s move? If I don’t tell them, maybe I can nonetheless arrange for Evelyn to visit Dad the very next day, allow them to maintain a relationship long distance or with frequent visits so as to soften the blow, but might that not prolong the agony, constantly recreating the scene in a bizarre version of the movie “Groundhog Day,” forcing them to relive the separation anew with each day’s goodbye, neither one of them remembering why Dad is here and Evelyn there? But these are details, not the crux, namely, how best to get Dad from there to here. And what is “best?” And whose “best” are we talking about?

How is such a decision to be made? What process do I go through to arrive at a conclusion that has something more substantive to it than a gut feeling? And how do I make a decision that will ultimately be based on values, for, if nothing else, this decision will unsparingly spotlight those values that I truly hold, as compared to those that I merely recite. And then I remember “values-based decision making” (VBDM),

something that I had heard discussed with regard to corporate issues for the past several years, and am now reading about more and more in the personal sphere.

With a little research I learn that there are eight specific steps associated with the process, something I find comforting, for it suggests a formula: put in information in the following sequence, and something definitive will emerge. It's got a name, an impressive one, which also is comforting, like finally hearing from a specialist that there's a name for the mysterious headache you've been having for the past couple of months: it suggests that you're not the first one to have dealt with this, that others have gone before you and know what to do.

But as I examine the eight steps, I realize that some of them don't seem to fit my situation, that they may be more appropriate for community-type decisions. So I find another VBDM guide, this one directed to chaplains dealing with end-of-life issues for an individual patient. Maybe that's more applicable since it's focused on an individual, or perhaps a combination of the two fits the bill. I mix and match and come up with the following seven-step process.

Step 1: Determine the facts, alternative actions and their outcomes, including the individual's context and sources of meaning and pleasure. Does what I've said in this paper up to now address this step? What else needs to be said? Here's a little old man, wearing (picture him now, see him in your mind's eye) his bright green Philadelphia Eagles jacket, no longer knowing who the Eagles are or even knowing what football is, but wearing his jacket nonetheless, smiling and hugging when you come to see him, his DNA-like cells of recognition vibrating faintly but faithfully, and I am going to break his heart – and maybe his spirit and possibly even his will to live – no matter what I do. Such is the landscape of my ethical decision, the environment in which a yes/no, this way/that way decision has to be made.

I've given you the players, the stakeholders in the decision, the ones who will have to carry it out and who will be most impacted by it. I've given you the facts and alternative actions, with their results, as I see them. Is the presentation of fact imperfect? Absolutely! And that's what makes this so hard. I don't really know all the facts – no one does – because they won't be known in their entirety until a course of action has

been decided on and irretrievably implemented, and therefore the ultimate outcomes are, within certain reasonable boundaries of likelihood, anybody's guess.

There is one thing I have not given you. I've not given you any definitions of terms, agreed-upon meanings so we can all understand what we're saying here. Maybe that's because the truly important terms are almost by their very nature impossible to define. How, for instance, do I define Dad's "cognitive impairment," a term so critical to this process? If I'm wrong and he has the ability to perceive what's at stake here, to understand what has happened to him and how this next step can so greatly benefit him, then I truly, truly, irreparably and unjustifiably wrong him if I deny him the opportunity to exercise his own choice, to share in his own destiny. And if I over-state his capabilities, I've lost whatever opportunity I might have to fool him and get him out of his apartment still trusting me. But I can't define his impairment or capabilities, no matter how important the stakes, nor do I look to a professional to quantify them for me; instead, I look to my own sense of this man who is, after all, *my father*, and I *infer* his abilities through the prism – as imperfect as it is – of that relationship.

Nor can I define the "relationship" between Dad and Evelyn, nor the extent of Evelyn's "caring skills", nor the "resilience" that might see them through this or fail them miserably. Some of these things I've had evaluated by a gerontology professional in the context of the decision regarding whether it is time for Dad to move to an assisted living facility – as I've said, that decision is not the hard one – but no one, not even the professionals, can know with any more prescience than I what will happen if I tell Dad of the move or if I do it without warning. We're all spouting guesses here – some more educated, some more instinctual – but guesses all the same. And so I stumble on.

Step 2: Examine relevant scientific and social scientific approaches to understanding these. Here I pause. Do I go looking in medical, social work and psychology journals – perhaps eldercare and gerontology studies – for articles on the impact that late-in-life housing moves have on the elderly, on the likely reactions by the elderly to the methods and extent of communication regarding such disruptions, and on which approaches typically minimize trauma? No, impractical and not likely to be helpful since I lack the training necessary to find and understand these no-doubt technical studies. Perhaps I consult a professional, maybe the gerontology counselor I spoke to

about the threshold decision to move Dad to an assisted living facility in the first place, a person who has made a career out of helping people in my situation and has seen first-hand what works best for all concerned. Yes, that's the right thing to do: inject some objective information into a scenario brimming with emotion. Let someone who has distilled the scientific and social scientific studies of similar situations offer me the executive summary, " ... this is what I and others who work with the elderly have found works best in these situations ... ". But I don't. In *this particular* situation, with regard to Dad and Evelyn and the implementation of *this* decision, the professionals don't *know* what will happen, any more than I do, so I plow ahead without this input, knowing full well that I might be making a mistake.

Step 3: Consider the historical and contemporary context, including the history and rationales of Jewish practice. Ah, now here's something I might be able to do. I like especially the reference to "the history and rationales of Jewish practice," because that history and those rationales have undoubtedly encountered and examined similar situations where a child has struggled with how to care for a parent with a severely limited command of reality. Certainly the issues I grapple with are ageless and no doubt the subject of helpful guidance.

But what, exactly, are these issues? I try to sort them out.

-- What do "honor" (Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16) and "respect" (Leviticus 19:3) for parents mean?

-- Under what circumstances is it permissible to deceive someone? More specifically, what obligations of truthfulness does a child owe a parent when the parent is unable to fully comprehend the implications of a situation?

-- How does one weigh a person's right to dignity and emotional closure against his or her health, especially when it is not absolutely clear what the person's physical or emotional reaction will be in a given situation?

-- What weight should one give to the impact of a decision on secondary, but nonetheless important, individuals (think Evelyn here) when making a decision regarding the person who is the primary focus of concern?

-- What is the relevance of the feelings and needs of the decision-maker (as compared to the person about whom the decision is being made) in difficult emotional situations?

Note that I do not include in this list several issues that may be related and that I know are addressed in the literature: whether or not to tell a terminally ill individual the full truth of his or her prognosis; whether it is appropriate for a child to look to a “proxy” (as I have here, in the form of an assisted living facility) to fulfill his or her filial duties to a parent, especially when that parent has special physical or cognitive needs. While I might be able to analogize from those situations to mine, I choose instead to focus on the first two issues I’ve noted above, namely, honor and truth telling, with the hope that I will find myself feeling clearer about what to do in this particular situation.

What now? Even if I have accurately stated – and properly narrowed – the issues, I do not have the skills to research these questions in the Tanach or the Talmud. I am a businessman, a Jewish son hoping to do right by his father, not a student comfortable with the texts of his people. My world is my family, my job, the bills, although the decision I face cries out for wisdom far beyond those things. So I do the next best thing, namely, look to secondary texts and rely on others who have done the original research and have already brought to the issues the knowledge and experience that I lack. Accordingly, I look to Telushkin ([A Code of Jewish Ethics, Volume I](#)), Teutsch ([Ethics of Speech](#)), Rose ([Jewish Ethics of Speech: Disclosure to the Terminally Ill: An Adult Education Module](#)) and Blidstein ([Honor Thy Father and Mother](#)). My inclination is to begin by examining the indexes in the back of these books, looking for nothing less on-point than “Dad (subset: and Evelyn), (subset: dementia and the need to go to assisted living facility), see lying to/telling the truth about, page ...”. Of course, nothing of the sort exists, so I grab at whatever seems applicable and begin to glean insights. Since I am using secondary sources I will not attempt to replicate here what was presented by the various authors, but instead try to find the cumulative essence of their analyses as they apply to my decision.

I read of the distinction between the commandment to “fear” and to “honor” one’s parents, with the former referring to negative pronouncements generally applicable to younger children, and the latter referring to positive requirements more applicable to grown children interacting with aged parents, things like providing sustenance and shelter and helping to “lead him in and out” (*Kiddushin* 11b, my references tell me). I am especially touched by this last reference, to “lead him in and out,” as I remember my

feelings when taking Dad and Evelyn to the delicatessen near their apartment building each weekend for lunch, sometimes with them on either side of me, trying to keep them both erect and pointed in the right direction as we would move *ever so slowly* from the car to the entrance and then *ever so slowly* to our table. Sometimes I would position Evelyn in the middle of us as we walked so Dad could enjoy the feeling of having a woman “on his arm”, as his old-school style of manners would put it, but I worried with every step whether I would be able to maneuver around Evelyn quickly enough to catch him if he fell, without sending Evelyn to the ground in the process. Clearly this “honor” requirement applies to me, but simply recognizing it as a commandment doesn’t help me determine what *particular* action in the *current* situation constitutes “honor”.

Then on to the matter of truth-telling, and here I am frustrated because *Judaism gets it right*. Yes, of course it starts out exactly where you’d expect: The Torah says, “Stay far away from falsehood” (Exodus 23:7); “You shall not lie to one another” (Leviticus 19:11); “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs 12:22). Rose says, “the Torah regards lying to be among the most grievous of sins.” As if that were not clear enough, Telushkin says that “the Talmud teaches that ‘the seal of God is truth’ (*Shabbat* 55a; *Sanhedrin* 64a).” I like this. I’m getting a clear directive: tell Dad and Evelyn in advance of the move because to do otherwise – that is, to knowingly tell a falsehood -- is to violate one of the thirteen attributes of God, in whose image we are made.

If the tradition stopped there, the input from this step in the VBDM process would be unambiguous. But it doesn’t; it insists on inserting reality into the equation by recognizing that *there are times when lying is not wrong*. Unlike some historical figures – say, Saint Augustine or Immanuel Kant – who posited a zero-tolerance policy for falsehoods, “in at least six circumstances, Jewish law permits, or even obligates us to lie, exaggerate, or otherwise mislead another” (Telushkin). These circumstances range from the expected – when your life or someone else’s is at risk – to the less dramatic – lying “when the effect of telling the truth will cause unnecessary hurt”.

Herein lies the source of both my admiration and frustration about what the tradition says with regard to this most critical component in my particular ethical dilemma: admiration for the real-life awareness that Judaism brings to the topic, and frustration because such awareness brings ambiguity to, and recognizes nuance in, the decision-making process,

two things which I am really not looking for right now. In seeking to strike a balance between the ideal of absolute truthfulness and the reality of real people making real decisions in real life, the traditional sources only serve to validate my uncertainty by acknowledging and authenticating the subtle shades of gray that can confuse an up-or-down decision. (By the way, as I read through Telushkin, Teutsch, Rose and Blidstein, I am amazed by the number of Biblical instances of lying, and not just minor white lies among secondary characters, but whoppers in critical moments involving many of the major players (such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Saul, David, Jeremiah), and *including God*, no less! The tug between truth-telling and lying seems to be absolutely ingrained in our founding stories, no less so than it is in our daily lives.)

So I examine the circumstances under which lying is permissible – in the above noted Torah incidents and in the excerpts from the Talmud included in my secondary resources – and I see that such is the case only if it is in the service of another principle, one that, in the particular situation then under consideration, is a clearly greater, more compelling principle. Thus, lying to preserve a life is permissible because it is a violation of truthfulness *with the intent* of furthering the sanctity of life, a principle that supersedes the duty of truthfulness (see, for example, Abraham’s lie about Sarah being his sister in order to save his own life). In a similar fashion, lying to avoid unnecessarily hurting another’s feelings – famously debated between the schools of Hillel and Shammai in the context of a homely bride – is permissible because it is a violation of truthfulness *with the intent* of preserving the dignity of another person (as God lies to Abraham by not accurately reporting Sarah’s comments when she contemplated having a child “with my husband so old”). *Judaism gets it right* and thereby refuses to make it simple, and it forces you to look at *kavanah*, at intent, at each and all of our motives, so many of which are so easily obscured by fancy words and evasive phrasing.

So where does this leave me? It gives me permission to lie (it might actually *obligate* me to lie) if, and only if, it is an unavoidable and necessary way of achieving a greater goal, one even more fundamental than truth telling – itself a pillar of the world – and if, and only if, it is committed with the *intent* of furthering that greater goal. So I ask again, where does this leave me? Perhaps the most I can say is that our tradition allows me to move forward with the VBDM process – that is, it does not impose an absolute answer and thereby preclude examination of the two competing actions I am considering. But

what it really does is leave me where I began – albeit considerably more thoughtful and cautious about being untruthful, more concerned about the intention of my actions – but no more inclined one way or the other by virtue of the tradition’s input, so I move on.

Step 4: Within the choices that are possible without violating the patient’s norms, assemble and weigh relevant values, beliefs and attitudes. This step forces me to articulate and examine the drivers of my thoughts and behavior, namely, my values, beliefs and attitudes. But not only my own; I have to try to determine what Dad’s values, beliefs and attitudes are and then, in the event of conflict, decide which should govern. I think through the morass.

Values. The top three values seem clear: Dad’s safety, health and comfort/happiness, in that order. My primary responsibility is to keep him safe, free from the risk of physical injury and mental or emotional stress or abuse. A close second is my need to do whatever is appropriate, consistent with Dad’s wishes expressed in a living will, to maintain his health. And last on this list – important, of course, but last nonetheless – is the need to keep Dad as comfortable and as happy as possible. I put this last only because without Dad’s safety and health, happiness is not even a possibility.

A fourth value is honesty. I have an obligation as a child to a parent – as one person to another, but especially as a child to a parent – to be as honest as I can be in my dealings with Dad. As my second-hand examination of the texts suggests (now that those texts are coming into contact with my stated values and are being applied to my fact situation), lying should be permitted only to the extent that it furthers the top priorities of safety, health and comfort/happiness, or perhaps said more accurately, dishonesty should be allowed only when honesty jeopardizes safety or health, and in most, but not necessarily all cases, comfort/happiness.

A fifth value is dignity. Whatever I do, however I conduct myself and whenever I interact with Dad or his world, I should be mindful of the need to maintain and, where possible, enhance Dad’s sense of dignity as a valued, independent and worthwhile individual.

Finally, I include the value of concern for others, with “others” in this case including all of those in the mix: Evelyn, my sister, step-sister and myself. Legitimate concern is due

the well being of each of these players, especially the needs of Evelyn, a loving and vulnerable woman entitled to considerations of safety, health, comfort/happiness, truthfulness and dignity.

Beliefs. Here I ask *why* these are the values that I bring to the decision-making process. What is the foundation of my values? I resist these inquiries as being too theological, too theoretical for a situation that demands immediate action, but I nonetheless recognize a compelling faith statement underlying my value system: that each person is created in the image of God, and thereby is deserving of being treated with concern for safety, health and comfort/happiness, and with honesty and dignity. Beyond that I do not go: the situation calls for a decision – to tell Dad or not – and to make the best of whatever path is taken.

Attitudes. I think about the attitude of sensitivity to all the impacted parties, sensitivity to their feelings and to their needs, whether they recognize those needs or not. I also think of the attitude of humility, that is, my need to recognize the complexity of the situation and the invariable fallibility of my own thinking. Finally, I recognize the attitude of decisiveness, for nothing is to be gained by allowing humility to go so far as to paralyze me from acting and taking responsibility for my action.

Harder still is trying to articulate *Dad's* values, beliefs and attitudes, trying to do what *he* would want done were he capable of truly understanding and driving the decision. And here I can only hope that I reflect Dad's values, beliefs and attitudes in mine, that, though I am my own person, somehow what I bring to the table nonetheless carries with it, at its core, the values, beliefs and attitudes that he instilled in me during my upbringing so that I reflect his thinking in mine.

Step 5: Formulate decision alternatives. Here I do not hesitate. I can do this, but, ironically, now I am concerned about the ease with which I view this step, the clarity with which I see the choices. Have I over-simplified them so that each can be set forth in a single sentence, or have I managed to distill the alternatives to their essence? The alternatives, as I see them, are:

-- Talking with Dad and Evelyn (together or separately) and allowing them the opportunity to respond, to resist, to reconcile, to participate in the process, to maintain some level of individual dignity, but by so doing possibly creating an intolerable situation whereby Dad cannot be moved to the facility that he so clearly and immediately needs or creating a situation which quickly devolves into a tragedy of crying, cajoling and ultimately coercion.

-- Lying to both Dad and Evelyn and bringing Dad away from his home by subterfuge, thereby assuring his physical relocation to the new facility but denying him the opportunity to have any input in the decision or the opportunity to have closure with Evelyn, possibly so upsetting him as to cause his fragile equilibrium to be jeopardized, and, further, possibly doing irreparable damage to Evelyn as well.

Step 6: Seek consensus (if a group is deciding). This step in the VBDM process shows up in both the community-oriented process and the chaplain-guidance process, but to some extent it doesn't apply in this case since getting buy-in from my sister and step-sister is pretty much a given. But perhaps this step reminds me of one other person in the group who needs consideration – other than Dad and Evelyn – namely me. I realize that I have a responsibility to myself to choose a path of action that is within my capabilities, that I am able to accept, both in the moment and for the years to come when I will have to live with the decision. This is especially true since Dad's relocation to a facility very near my home means that I will be the primary caregiver/visitor in the future and I must acknowledge the difficulty of that role and be as kind, if you will, to my own feelings and capabilities as possible. At the same time, I must be very careful not to allow my own wish for comfort and ease to intrude on the primacy of Dad's rights and needs.

Step 7: Make the decision. And so the time has come. But now I switch the tense of my writing from the present – intended to convey the depth of my turmoil and the real-life complexity of the decision – to the past, because, as noted in my introduction, the decision was, in fact, made years ago. Now I can tell you what I did and why I did it, and perhaps assess it retroactively through the prism of VBDM and through the way in which it actually played out.

I lied to Dad and Evelyn, and I took him away by subterfuge. I coordinated with my sister and step-sister so that I could take Dad out of his apartment “for a ride” while they swept in and packed all of his essentials. Then my sister met us at the assisted living facility, and we began the wrenching process of trying to make the situation tolerable for him. He didn’t understand, he was confused, he didn’t know where “she” was (now I hesitated to remind him that “she” was Evelyn, trying not to reinforce her memory). Oh, how I struggled, beset with the burden of what I had done, not sure if it was right, but ... but what? ... I was as convinced as I could be under the circumstances that it was the better of the two approaches.

When all the analysis was said and done, I asked myself what my primary responsibility was, which goals and outcomes superseded all others, and it came down to this: bringing Dad to the facility he needed, assuring his safety and enhancing the prospects of his health trumped everything else, became the overarching value against which all else was measured. I asked myself what would most likely result in getting Dad where he needed to be in the shortest amount of time and – hopefully, hopefully – with the least amount of distress for him. And – I am still torn up about this, but let me say it once and for all – I did so without much regard for the impact of my decision on Evelyn. The only thing I did to help her was to call her daughter in advance and tell her the move was coming so she could be there to help her mother through the crisis. But other than that I did nothing for Evelyn. And in a decision that curtailed Dad’s autonomy even after the move, I went so far as to prohibit her from being in touch with Dad – either by phone or in person – lest her doing so would set Dad back on whatever progress he may have made to that point in becoming acclimated to his new home and severing his surviving connections with his prior life, and it bothers me to this day.

Dad suffered great depression for the first several months following his move, but whether it was a depression made more intense by the dishonest means of his move is something I will never know. It took many “talks” with Dad (those familiar with dementia patients know why there are quotes around the word), reminding him that he still had so much to show us – his children and grandchildren – about getting older with dignity, about how to deal gracefully with the difficulties he was facing, in order to bring him to the point where he could begin to build a new life for himself. And as it turned out he

found in his new world yet another friend, and, yes, she, too, had a name beginning with “E” – Eleanor, this time – his fourth and final woman in a life of being well loved.

Though I did not at the time employ the VBDM process *per se*, I nonetheless did a number of things consistent with VBDM. I recognized the importance of setting forth the facts and prospective outcomes as best I understood them, and I tried to articulate my primary values, beliefs and attitudes, although I regret not having injected into the decision the objectivity of the associated science and social science (believing more then than I do now that the sciences and professionals had no insights to offer me about *this particular decision*). And while I was neither able nor inclined at the time to examine the relevant Jewish sources (such was my alienation from my religious heritage at that point in my life), I was constantly aware of the need to bring honor and respect for Dad’s dignity to the decision-making process, not only out of love, but also because of my filial responsibility as a Jew.

As a roadmap, as a reminder of what’s important in decision making, VBDM offers the logic of sequential and comprehensive examination, as well as the calming assurance of structure, both of which are so critical in a high stakes, emotionally charged situation. What is equally clear, however, is that its ultimate usefulness, like that of any other procedure, depends entirely on how well it is implemented. In my case, my deep emotional involvement in the situation, and my lack of comfort with basic Jewish sources and texts, would have rendered its implementation imperfect indeed. Despite that, I do not doubt for a moment that I would have greatly benefited from rigorously following the VBDM process. What I am less clear about is whether my decision would have been different as a result of that process. While I think it would not have changed, I cannot say that with certainty. In fact, when all is said and done, the only thing that I can say with certainty is that it was my prayer then – as it is my prayer to this day – that my intent and reasoning were worthy of the honor and responsibility entrusted to me as my father’s son.