

*Bob was a chemical engineer.* He had an outstanding academic record, and he climbed the ladder quickly. Anticipating sooner or later a job in management, he obtained a law degree through night school. He worked hard and went nearly to the very top. Then, after a disagreement, he left the manufacturing firm and entered, successfully, the practice of law. About age seventy, Bob began to lose ground. He became forgetful and his handwriting became less legible. He began to experience visual hallucinations. “I just saw a mouse run across the corner of the room.” His deterioration from Alzheimer’s was rapid. In that era, there were no drugs available to arrest the progression of the disease. As he became more demented, he began to experience incessant pruritis (itching).

Pruritis, as medical students of my generation were taught, is subliminal pain, and anyone who has endured the experience certainly knows that. There was little I could do for Bob’s discomfort. I left that in the hands of his dermatologist. He was treated with ultraviolet radiation and cortisone injections and creams, but in spite of the best efforts of his doctor, his itching did not get better—it got worse. Bob failed rapidly, but in his occasional moments of lucidity, he would tell me, “This itching is more than I can bear.” It broke my heart because Bob was very dear to me.

I thought about Bob a lot. Indeed, I could think of little else. I kept asking, why did this dreadful thing happen? Why did he experience such discomfort as his mind was deteriorating? Was there a connection?

Bob died after several months in a near-vegetative state. His death was a blessing, for his distress had been extreme. I am thankful for what I learned from him. He set me on a path that has led me to explore the role of the mind in the genesis of pain. He made me think, tentatively at first, perhaps, that his more-than-I-can-bear itching was one with his mind disease. I have learned much since that time, but nothing I have learned has dissuaded me from that belief. In suffering and dying, he taught me much, and I am grateful that what I learned so many years ago from him might be helpful to others.

Bob was the most wonderful man I have ever known. He was my father.