

HELP & COMFORT



'FUNERALS ARE FOR THE LIVING' BY LOUISE DUNCAN

In my family, children were always spared the rituals of grief, but now I'm convinced that was a serious mistake.

The first funeral I ever attended was my mother's. I was an adult and the mother of three at the time. I grew up in a family that protected children from death. Three grandparents died while I was a child, but my brother and I didn't go to the funerals. Our parents didn't want us traumatized by seeing their grief.

My maternal grandmother died in Florida when I was twenty. By then I was married and living on the West Coast. I had just had a baby and my parents were strongly opposed to my making the long trip home.

"Grandma knew you loved her," Mother said. "You don't have to prove that by attending the funeral." She told me the service would be short and the casket closed. "Grandma would want us to remember her as she was alive."

These words echoed in my mind as I arranged my own mother's funeral. I never saw my mother's corpse - and I never allowed anyone else to. When well-meaning friends began arriving at the bereavement home to "view the remains," I was horrified. I insisted the casket be kept closed, the way I knew Mother would have wanted it. I was never totally convinced she was in it.

Today - over fifteen years later - I still am not convinced. I have frequent dreams of receiving a telegram announcing that Mother has "finally been located" and that the report of a fatal heart attack was incorrect. I awake from those dreams confused. Then as reality takes over, I am overwhelmed by a rush of pain as raw and all-consuming as it was on the day she died.

After Mother's death, my mother-in-law - always a good friend - became an even more important source of emotional support. We lived too far apart to see each other on a day-to-day basis, but we exchanged weekly letters and talked on the phone regularly.

Every summer my husband and I took our children to visit their grandmother, and we all spent two happy weeks being nurtured by "Nana."

Three years ago my mother-in-law died suddenly. My husband and I were in a state of shock when we flew to Michigan for her funeral. Our younger children, then nine and twelve, stayed at home with a sitter.

Conditioned as I was to restrained and private grieving, I was stunned by the extravaganza of funeral activities that my husband's family regarded as normal.

There was a mass turnout for the coffin selection. Mom's four sons, her daughter-in-law and most of her grandchildren trooped through the funeral parlour, squabbling over the relative merits of caskets. Then we went back to Mom's tiny house and everybody fought - about the wording of the obituary, how Mom's hair would be styled for the wake and whether a twelve-year-old grandson should be a pallbearer. All I could think was, "How barbaric!"

The formal farewell to my mother-in-law lasted three days. It started on a Monday when friends and relatives invaded the bereavement home. Especially distressing to me was the sight of small children, dressed in party clothes, being paraded past the open casket. Everybody sobbed for five hours. The saving grace, as I saw it, was that I had not subjected our children to such chaos.

On Tuesday the visitation process was repeated, but the turmoil was somewhat less; most people had wept themselves dry the night before. We talked fondly of Mom and how we'd miss her. Her cousins told funny stories about her childhood.

Eventually conversation turned to other subjects. Relatives who hadn't seen each other for years compared notes on marriages, births and divorces. The kids ran out to play tag in the entrance hall. At some point, each of us went to the casket to pay a duty call, but nobody lingered.

By Wednesday the bereavement home had developed an almost party like atmosphere. The adults stood around the casket discussing everything from politics to baseball. Mom's teenage grandchildren compared favourite rock bands, while her great-grandchildren used the edge of a coffin as a racetrack for Hot Wheels cars.

I went over to the casket and looked down at my mother-in-law. To my surprise, I felt in control of my emotions. I had grown used to the figure in the box - and to the fact that it was only a shell that once had encased a person I loved. I felt a bond with the others who had gathered to say good-bye. In three days, we had travelled together through the stages of grief - shock, denial, outrage, bitterness - and had come, at last, to the final one: acceptance.

My husband and I returned home and fell back easily into the normal pattern of our lives, I will not pretend that we didn't feel the loss. Every time I went to the mailbox, it seemed strangely empty. I kept thinking of things to share with my mother-in-law, particularly news about her grandchildren.

I felt frustrated by my inability to send her messages. I did not, however, awake shrieking her name in the night. And although my husband dreamed about his mother often, the dreams were not painful. They were, instead, pleasant interludes of nostalgic reminiscence in which Mom baked his favourite pie or played the piano at a family gathering. He was able to enjoy his memories for what they were - treasured recollections of times that would not recur.

For our children, this has not been the case. Their grandmother's death is not a reality to them. Last Christmas, our youngest daughter bought Nana a present - "I saw this and I know how much she likes blue."

Our teenage son, preparing to fly to Michigan for the wedding of a cousin said, "I hope he brings Nana to the airport." "Honey, Nana is dead," I said gently. "I forgot," he responded sheepishly.

Our children are not stupid. On an intellectual level, they know their grandmother is dead. On an emotional level, however, they "forget." In their hearts, they harbour the belief that she is in hiding and will someday pop out, shouting, "Surprise!"

Since my mother-in-law's death, I have discussed funerals with several psychologists, all of whom agree that their function is not just to honour the deceased but also to aid survivors in purging themselves of grief.

Like other rites of passage - graduations, weddings, and retirement parties - funerals help us adjust to major life transitions.

I now believe that I did our children an injustice by not giving them the opportunity to come to grips with the death of their grandmother at her funeral. In my effort to shelter them from pain, I may have left open an emotional door that they'll have to struggle for years to close. I do not intend to make the same mistake the next time a loved one dies.