

RESPECTING THE RITUAL

BY GARY W. BOYLE

IN MEMORY OF
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It's very difficult to explain to children the odd traditions we adults practice upon the death of a loved one. I recently experienced this firsthand when my mother died.

My wife and I debated at length on whether we should take the children out-of-town with us to attend the funeral. We decided to bring them, more as a random choice than as a stroke of brilliance. As it turned out, we were glad we exposed them to the rituals associated with dying. They learned a great deal about death and, surprisingly, we learned a lot too.

We thought it was important the children understand what would occur at the funeral home. Much to my surprise, my wife decided to attack this touchy subject at breakfast. She explained Grandma would be in the casket but she was not really in her body anymore. She told the children people would come to the funeral home so they could look at Grandma and pay their last respects.

The children had looks on their faces as if to say, "You must be kidding. You won't even let us see Pg-13 movies but now you want to spend the next two days with a dead body?"

Their reaction seems logical in retrospect. The children dealt with the death of their grandmother admirably and probably better than me.

We assumed our 6-year-old daughter would not really comprehend what was taking place. But it was clear she had a better grip on the situation than I did.

"We won't ever see Grandma again, will we, Daddy?"

"That's right."

"At least she won't hurt any more."

"No, she won't."

"Which means we should be happy for her."

"But it's hard to be happy because we're going to miss her, aren't we, Daddy?"

It's obvious she not only understands death but knows how to deal with it in a healthy manner.

The 9-year-old's method of dealing with death was different but equally effective. At my mother's wake the casket was open. I didn't deal with that very well. I had fears Mac would have the same problem. Much to our surprise, he was neither frightened nor disgusted. He walked up close to the casket and looked at his grandmother several times during the wake. After looking at her he would sit nearby facing the casket and talk into midair complete with hand gestures and facial expressions.

I wasn't sure if he was talking to himself, his grandmother or God. I thought his coping mechanism was effective. It helped him deal with a difficult situation while maintaining his mental health. Little did I know he was actually acting out Darth Vader's death scene from "Return of the Jedi."

Our children taught me a lot about the way we deal with death. Each person must cope in his own personal way. And that way will be different for different people. What seems normal and helpful to one person will seem ridiculous to another. This is good and it applies to children as well as adults.

Children's reactions to death are educational but can also provide some comic relief. One parent tells of the careful explanation of death he shared with his child. He explained how their loved one had gone to another place that is wonderful and beautiful where everyone is good and there is no pain or anger. The child responded, "If Grandma is in a new place, what's her address?" How do you explain that someone who is in a different place doesn't have an address?

One family had been discussing superstitions. The children were especially interested in the one that says you have to hold your breath when you pass a funeral home. One curious child asked, "If you have to hold your breath when you go past a funeral home, what do you do when you go to a funeral?" Another question that's not really capable of being answered intelligently.

At the beginning of my mother's wake we told the children they had to be quiet. Their looks said, "Why? There's nobody here we can wake up."

After a full day of the vigil we became surprisingly more relaxed. Katie ended up doing cartwheels through the chapel. We didn't have the heart to tell her to stop after she said, "Grandma likes my cartwheels."

She was right. Grandma would have liked that.

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