

A Family Communion

When someone dies those who are left must find out what to do. There are many things to decide. Differences in belief, traditions and ideas may arise, across generations and between siblings and friends. Patience is required as the important things emerge and the ceremony is designed to take everyone into account. All generations can be included and the family enriched thereby.

We gather in the older daughter's sitting room, where her sister sits close to her dad. He talks of his wife's last days in hospital and at home, before her big stroke. They had often remarked to each other that they were waiting to see who would go first, and how wrong it felt when they heard of young folk dying when here they were ready to go and would happily have gone in their stead. His daughters comfort him as he vividly re-lives the moments of her last big stroke and weeps his sorrow. The sisters assure him several times, gently and firmly, that she died as she had wanted to, with no resuscitation, in her own time. It is still very hard, though it is good that they knew what she wanted. What a relief that her passing was peaceful and they were all there together.

We begin to think about the funeral. There is a paradox for them. How can they do this when she, their wife and mother, is so alive in them? The sisters are protective of their father. They have not had a funeral in their family here before, not in Australia. He is worried about his grand children seeing the adults crying and upset. He doesn't want them to be upset as well and thinks they shouldn't come to the funeral, though they all adored their 'Granma' as she did them. They will miss her. We must take care for the children, he says. The sisters are the generation in the middle, needing to care for both their elders and the younger generations, taking everyone into account.

We speak of religion. Something happened in their church and their mum stopped attending church many years ago, dismissing Catholicism with scorn. She was very clear she didn't want a mass. Their dad still holds his own faith deeply, though he also left the church. Every night, as they all know, he prays for each one of his family, asking God for blessing and protection. He is unable to imagine what could happen without a Mass, and fears it could become a circus. Just then the funeral director arrives and they choose a plain light coloured wooden casket. She would like that, simple and light, no fuss. The first decision has been made and brings relief. They want the ceremony to be right for everyone. I suggest the funeral may be for family only. They could call it a Funeral Ceremony of Family Communion. They greet this proposal with relief also. It will make it easier to include the children in a careful way.

They set the date, so her mother's brother can come from Sydney with his wife in good time. I compose and send my first draft of the ceremony, which they edit together and the ceremony emerges between us. The sisters and I visit the chapel to choreograph the ceremonial space together. The attendant is helpful. We can arrange the whole space to suit ourselves. The younger children are preparing drawings and poems for their Granma. We go for coffee and talk further about how they are all going: their father, their grownup children, the great grandchildren, their uncle who is in his mid eighties and whose wife has been very ill. Everyone is included.

The funeral service staff help to prepare the space. This is tremendously valuable. We curve the benches around and add chairs on each side to make a graceful shape. We arrange a little table for the basket of flowers on one side, place the coffin in the middle with her photograph and the lectern next to her on the other side. There are two rows of seats. The sisters will be in the front, in the middle on either side of their father, facing the coffin. He arrives on the arm of a grandson, sits between them

and they link arms with him. The children are all together in the second row, flanked by parents. Early in the service the oldest daughter speaks especially to the great grandchildren. She tells them how much their Granma loved them, that she held each of them in her arms (she rocks her arms as she speaks) when they were little babies and watched them grow with loving eyes. She shared their joys and sorrows, challenges and successes. She loved them very, very much and would be pleased they are here today with all the family, all together. She says that most of the adults will probably cry today, because that is what happens when someone you love dies. You are sad and it's ok. They may cry too and that also is ok. Several of the younger children tell funny stories and jokes from their Granma and hold their pictures up for all to see.

Their uncle, her mother's brother, speaks of her very movingly as a family woman who was funny, strong, loving and fiercely protective. I had asked him to tell a story for the children. He pauses as tears come to his eyes when he speaks of their childhood in middle England. He was a mischievous lad, younger than her, always getting into trouble. One day some of the older lads, bullies, grabbed him and dragged him to a disused quarry. They tore off all his clothes, 'tarred' him in mud, rolled him in kapok ripped from an old mattress there and left him alone shivering, humiliated, in the freezing cold. "She found me," he said, "She came and took me home." He tells the story beautifully. The pictures are strong and vivid. You know she noticed pretty soon that he was missing, found out where he was as quick as a wink and went straight to him, that she would do this no matter where he was and battle anyone who wanted to harm him. He concluded by addressing the great grand children particularly, "You know your Granma has gone and we are all very sad, for we will miss her always. But you need to know this also. She died just as she wanted to and that was a very good thing, for her and for us. You know she loved you very much and your memories of her will be with you always as they will be with me." The grandchildren, adults now, speak. One remembers how

much fun she was in their childhood and how she felt herself bereft when *her Nana* transferred her attention to the next generation of children. Her cousin weeps as he is preparing to speak and turns toward his seat. I stand beside him for support and address the family: "Sometimes when we want to speak of one we love very much, we feel overwhelmed with grief and tears and we need to take some time to just feel that, right here. We know it will pass, so we can pause for a little and then proceed." Another of his cousins speaks, and then he is ready to speak.

We bow our heads and say together the final prayer, her father's favourite, *Hail Mary full of Grace*. Sarah Brightman and Andrea Bocelli sing "*It's Time to Say Goodbye*" twice, so there is plenty of time for everyone to sit for as long as they want to, then take a flower and place it on the coffin. Her dad is first with one daughter on each arm. He kneels and crosses himself with one hand on the coffin as they stand with him, saying a further prayer as he gazes at her picture and speaks to her for quite a while in a soft voice.

Later the oldest daughter says, "I have not had someone die before. I did not know what to do at all. I did not know how I felt or what was required. I felt numb. Everyone else was crying and they thought it strange that I wasn't. I'm so glad you were able to be there with us as we sorted things out, and the way you stayed with us and met with us again, went with us to the chapel, and talked with us on the phone and listened to what we wanted and wrote the words just right, just as we wanted them. We were able to decide which ones we wanted to keep and which ones we wanted to change and how and when we wanted to say and do things. By then we knew. And then at the funeral we could know it would all be all right, and it was. It was beautiful. Everyone said so. In the end we could just put it in your hands. It was lovely on the day going along and we didn't have to worry about who was doing what and how. I love the quality of fidelity in the warm-up and preparations when we worked out what would happen and it did."