



Schuler-Lefebvre

FUNERAL CHAPEL

Dedicated To Those We Serve

Caring Connections:

After the funeral

Getting through the first weeks *after* the funeral

My sisters and brothers and I met at the house the day after Mom's funeral. With both Mom and Dad now gone, we needed to clean the house and sort through personal items before everyone returned home to various parts of the country. Soon we would need to deal with the selling of the house and the settling of the estate as well. Emotions were charged. Half an hour into the work of cleaning and sorting, one of the family members broke down in tears. The complaint was made that this was all going too fast. Mom's possessions should not be disposed of so quickly. Others agreed, but pointed out that "the work had to be done." Tensions started to rise. Finally, someone suggested going to a local restaurant for an early lunch. There, in a different setting, we decided to discontinue the chores for two weeks. Meanwhile, we agreed to stay in touch with each other in the days ahead.

Working your way through

For many people, the first weeks and months following the funeral of a loved one are more difficult than the funeral home visitation or the funeral service. Friends and supporters have gone home. Life gets back to normal rather quickly for everyone else. For the immediate family, however, the grieving has just started. If you find yourself caught between grief and obligations during the first messy weeks and months after your loss, perhaps the following suggestions will help. Forget "normal" for a while. I learned from my own recent experience that the death of a loved one can bring much additional work to the survivors. Affairs often need to be settled quickly and efficiently. At the same time, grief is demanding attention and the realization of deep and permanent change is just settling in. In addition, family members grieve in different and sometimes surprising ways. Tensions and misunderstandings often arise. This demands a good deal of toleration on the part of the survivors. Many folks put unreasonable pressure on themselves, caused by the expectation that they should somehow be freed from the pain of what has happened, that life should return to normal rather quickly. When this doesn't happen, they feel shame, as if something is wrong with them. But nothing is wrong except the expectation that life should be normal again so quickly.

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Work through the “messy” details with patience.

A family often must divide up belongings and mementos of the deceased. If a will was not drawn up, this can become a struggle of “who gets what.” Try to work out differences fairly, giving one another the benefit of the doubt. Drawing up a list of possessions and sending a copy to immediate family members so they can express their preferences can be the first step in clarifying wishes and working toward compromise.

Since I have a number of brothers and sisters, I had the opportunity to observe how differently each of us responded to memorabilia. Although almost everyone wanted some little item that Mom treasured, we reacted quite differently to what we felt we needed to have. The fact that we did not all care what happened to every item did not mean that we were cold or uncaring. Each of us had a unique set of memories, a unique emotional investment in various items. Be sensitive to each other’s feelings and respect the uniqueness of one another’s experiences. I have discovered that the routine tasks of maintaining my job and family have helped restore in my life that familiar structure which the chaos of grief threatened to destroy. - Dr. Robert DiGiulio

Know what to hang on to, and what to let go of.

Sometimes, in an attempt to hang on to the person who has died, family members have an overwhelming desire to hang on to everything that belonged to that person. It can be easier to let go when memories and stories are shared. Little anecdotes often get passed around at the funeral home. Of even greater value, however, are the stories and remembrances that come in the weeks and months that follow. Every so often, I call someone to tell them a story of Mom that I have just thought of, or to imagine what Mom’s response would be to the early spring, the late snowfall, or a grandchild’s accomplishment. Don’t be afraid to hold on to your memories – they can be a source of healing and comfort at this time.

“Every substance of a grief hath twenty shadows.” - William Shakespeare, Richard II

Acknowledge the many levels of loss. If you had experienced only one loss, the death of someone very special to you, that would have been enough for full-time grief work. But losses come in layers. The person you love is gone, but in addition there can be the loss of a home, the loss of a way of relating to others in the family, and the loss of a certain way of thinking about yourself. It is sometimes hard to know which layer of loss you are dealing with at any given time.

In my case, the house itself was deeply meaningful. It had been our family’s home for over a century, having been built by my great-grandparents. Moreover, because of a severe snowstorm that prevented my parents from going to the hospital, I had been born in that very house. As a priest, I often stayed over with my mother in order to get a good night’s rest.

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To admit that you are experiencing multiple losses frees you to work on them one at a time and in different ways. It also helps you guard against the “rapid recovery” syndrome that says it’s best to bounce right back and get on with life. Don’t be fooled by the numbness that often sets in during the first few days and weeks. It is not the same as recovery, and if you move back into your routine too quickly, you will only delay the grief work you need to do.

Recognize and deal with feelings of guilt and betrayal. In the busy weeks after the funeral, cleaning out the house, selling property, trying to get back to work, or even smiling or laughing again may seem like a betrayal of the person who has died.

But ask yourself what the deceased person would have wanted. He or she most likely would have wanted you to do whatever is necessary as you deal with the challenges that loss brings. The many obligations that come with the death of a loved one are never easy, but they are better carried out without the additional burden of unnecessary feelings of guilt or betrayal. Also realize that feelings of guilt or betrayal may signal deeper feelings of incompleteness or imperfection in your relationship with your loved one. In other words, such feelings can actually be another form of grief, and need to be respected and dealt with accordingly.

Know what you need from others. I recall my sister describing her anger when she went to the supermarket shortly after Mom’s death. To her amazement, other people were still smiling and laughing as if nothing tragic had happened. She knew her response was irrational, but she wanted the whole world to stop as it had for her. Didn’t others know she was suffering?

It’s not that friends and colleagues aren’t willing to help, but they often have to be told what you need. They may assume, for example, that you “need to get out more”. But there are times when it is necessary to be alone. I remember taking long walks by myself in the months after Mom’s death. The solitude was what I needed most. At other times, I needed to share little stories about Mom with my pastoral team. They listened attentively. Once or twice I called friends and told them I wanted to stop by just to talk or share some memories. They were always willing to lend an ear if I asked. As time passes, it will become even more important to let others know what you need. When the death certificate arrives, when the house is being sold, when the lawyer needs to be contacted, when the estate is finalized, when the gravestone arrives – at such times you will feel a confusing ball of emotions welling up inside. When this confusion wells up, let others know you are “having a tough day” so they can give you the space and the support you need.

Take Heart

The early weeks and months after the funeral of a loved one are a time for both grieving and rebuilding. As you work through the obligations and the grief, and slowly give yourself permission to move ahead, you will notice that your loved one lives on in your memory, but even more importantly, in the spirit within you. And as you enter this new cycle of your life, you will realize that your willingness to recover and rebuild reflects the very best of what your loved one has given you. (Written by Herbert Weber)