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Essay Writing Group

March, 2019: Stepping Stones, Dreams or Potpourri

The Funeral

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the church, we chat as we watch men in dark suits and sunglasses file by, go up the stone steps and enter the anteroom to greet the sons of the recently deceased lawyer. We approach the boys with open arms and hugs and ask where their mother is seated before making our way down the aisle to find her. I am stopped by a woman who recognizes me and introduces her elderly mother who I've never met but have heard of for years through the boys' mother, the first wife of the deceased. My companion greets our friend and we take our seats behind her.

Our dear friend has Alzheimer's and everyone is on tenterhooks as to how she will handle this service for her ex-husband. His death was sudden and while she has been told, she is confused. She knows something sad happened and that maybe someone died but cannot track what or who that is. In the days before the service she would call, upset, not knowing why. I would gently explain what happened: that it was her first husband and repeat his name. She would say "Oh" and refer to him as her sons' father. She doesn't connect having been married to him. In one sense, short term memory loss is a blessing.

The boys and step-sister proceed down the aisle following the Priest to the altar with their father's ashes and take their places in the front pew with their young families. Our friend along with the second wife and a few family members sit behind them. She periodically cries and sobs whenever the music or prayers particularly move her. Her brother and sister-in-law do their best to console her. She takes communion even though she has not been a practicing Catholic for many years, if ever. I was concerned she might ask for more wine but she seems aware of the ritual, is appropriate and solemnly returns to her seat.

The funeral mass is extremely short and impersonal. Even my Catholic friend sitting with me is surprised how impersonal it seems. The Priest announces that there will be a reception downstairs to share memories and stories with the family. We wind our way down the stairs to the basement. The three children have set up a slide show along with mementos and photos of their father. Our friend is seated at a table with her two young grandsons. For the most part her sons and the other guests ignore her. After a while the children address and thank those present. Each of the sons shares a story or two of their life with their father. The young step-sister tries to speak. She begins sobbing uncontrollably, hugging herself. No one moves towards her except my dear friend who rises from the table and goes to her; embracing and sobbing with her. She may be losing her memory but not her heartfelt empathy for someone suffering such unbearable grief.

Addendum:



These are the flower arrangements from the funeral which my friend insisted on taking. As the reception was wrapping up she asked me again what had happened to her sons' father. I replied that his heart had simply stopped. She said "that's so sad". I commented that he left three beautiful children behind, to which she exclaimed: "and those two!", pointing to the flower arrangements that she wanted to take home. She is thoroughly enjoying the flowers with no comprehension as to where they came from. You have to love how the brain works.