

Remembering As A Community

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Most of us live rather unremarkable lives. We live unremarkable lives – and yet, to the people we love and who love us, we are each remarkable. This morning, several of us will be sharing our experiences with losing a friend, a spouse, a family member, an acquaintance in death. Many of you have experienced the death of someone dear and know the emptying wasted feeling when grieving occurs. We do not wish to revisit that grief or depression, but rather to talk about the need for remembering after one dies, and the importance of thinking and even planning for the event of death.

In the past 20 years, we have shared in the grieving and in the participation of services for members and friends of this congregation: Merle Brunk. Sylvia Clemmons. Peter Van Wingen. Burton Fretz. Bart Shapiro. Darlene Mann. Delton Franz. Marian Franz. Sally White. Nelson Good. Beth Foster.

Through each memorial service we honored each one's individuality and life. We continue to tell stories about them from time to time and we do laugh about humorous things we remember. But we do not have *one place* where we go to think about them; we do not have the old church cemetery out back. We do not have a memorial garden or a columbarium for ashes. Truthfully, we have not been together long enough as a community to even have living traditions around what a service should be.

I've lost several members of my family to death, but I am sharing specifically about my brother. Burt, received a diagnosis of acute myelogenous leukemia in mid-October of 2000 and passed away less than six months later on April 5, 2001. It was a disease we believed he could beat — despite the rather dismal statistics from searches on the internet. One of Burt's

closest friends had the same cancer and had been in remission for several years. We were all optimistic and hopeful until March when Burt was readmitted to the hospital for complications and not allowed to return home. On my drive home from the hospital one day, the reality suddenly hit me. Burt was going to die. He would not be around at any future family gatherings. He would no longer be *here*. I would have to call my brothers in other parts of the country to get them here quickly to say their good-byes. I would have to call my elderly parents and tell them their oldest son was not just seriously ill, but dying. This moment of truth was the letting go of hope. I share this because this emotional feeling of dread — this heavy weight of a psychological reality — is probably what held us all back from talking with Burt about dying, or his wishes after death. It is the catch 22 — family members do not want to bring up such topics because it might signal a lack of hope to the patient, and likewise, the patient doesn't bring it up to stifle hopes for the family. His wife, Anne, their two grown children, Rachel and Nathan, Peter and I all took turns the last three weeks sitting by his bedside since it was not medically possible for him to go home. In the last week, he went into unresponsive coma, and it became a gathering place for all of us to just be with him, sitting around his bed sharing stories. We were able to be there when he took his last breath. It was a time when I felt God was also in that space.

What prompts me to think about memorial services is that we — our family — did the best we could with how we knew Burt. Five close friends of his spoke (including Larry Smucker) and also two ministers — Mel Schmidt from Hyattsville and the pastor from Cedar Lane Unitarian church — where the service was held. Cindy and Lauren sang “Blowing in the Wind” since Rachel and Nathan remembered hearing the song repeatedly on family car trips. Eric played several Bach fugues. We sang the hymns in four-part harmony, which Burt appreciated from our Mennonite tradition. “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” This one still

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chokes me up. We did the best we could, but it still would have felt good to have Burt have some say in the matter. We decided to scatter some of Burt's ashes from a mountain in Maine that he loved to hike; Anne recently buried the other ashes in a cemetery in Northampton, Mass., where there is a plaque for both Burt and herself. We did the best we could, but...is this what he would have wanted? Mel Schmidt has frequently said that funerals/memorial services are for the living, not the dead, and yet meaning comes from the interaction of the dead with the living.

Who of us has not said at some point "Oh, I'd like that song played at my funeral"? A few weeks ago, Peter asked why I was talking about this topic. I asked "Would you know what I'd like shared at my memorial service?" He said, "Yeah, something from that female singer — what's her name?" Yes, my point exactly. Likewise, I know one jazz tune that he has requested over and over. "Round Midnight." Or is it "Song From my Father?" See? It is important to write these things down.

Another friend recently told me about her aunt who, before she died, said she didn't want any fuss made at her funeral, but she would like red carnations there. Imagine red carnations — *flowers* — playing such a memorable, meaningful part in a service!

As you listen to the others share this morning, I hope you might reflect on how you have been affected by the memories of friends and family you have lost in death. How do you continue to hold them up and remember them? What might you like to have shared at your memorial service? It does mean a great deal to those we leave behind.