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Relationships

JOANIE'S TWO FUNERALS

Of all the send-offs I've attended, nothing compares to my mom's

by Elise Seyfried | Saturday, January 20, 2018

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Silly us! We thought one memorial service was quite enough; her brothers, my uncles, had other plans. You see, they were Catholics with a capital C and we—well, we had, as the saying goes, "fallen away" years before. But heck, we hadn't fallen THAT far. We weren't Zoroastrians. We weren't Swedenborgians. We're Lutherans.

Mom's family, on the other hand, was old school and never quite understood why we did the falling away thing. Mom was living with us for three years before she died, came to church with us most Sundays and was beloved by the congregation. But then she would come home, make a cup of tea and flip on the mass on television to cover her bases, just in case God was really leaning the Catholic way. She paid absolutely no attention to the TV while mass was on, yet still believed that this religious equivalent of a chaser was required, in addition to the Lutheran worship she had just finished.

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Anyway, in September of 2006, Joanie breathed her last breath and it was time to plan her memorial. Now, I have to tell you this about Lutherans: they're pretty flexible when it comes to things like funerals. We were given free rein to choose the music, scripture readings, prayers—basically, whatever we wanted.

Joanie's Big Fat Lutheran Funeral, therefore, would include her grandson Evan playing her favorite song on the piano, which happened to be Rodgers and Hart's poignant but really unspiritual "My Funny Valentine," and remarks by her 13-year-old granddaughter Julie. We even made a video with pictures from her entire life, which we played during the service.

My New York uncles were informed of our plan and decided that this was not funeral enough to get Mom passage through the pearly gates. Like their sister Joanie and her TV masses, this was to be a Lutheran funeral with a Catholic chaser, just in case.

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We decided on an evening service at Christ's Lutheran Church. Amazingly, no divine lightning struck the church when a Broadway show tune replaced "Amazing Grace." Julie got through her tribute to her Nana. The church was filled with friends who had come to love my mom over the years. The only thing that would have made the night perfect was a toast, preferably with Old-Fashioneds, Joanie's cocktail of choice. We had to make do with super sweet communion wine.

But mom's casket still had many miles and another complete funeral service to go before her final rest. Early the next morning, the hearse began its 100-mile trip from Philadelphia up to Gate

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we met Father Whatshisname, who would conduct Funeral Two. Not only had the priest no idea who the deceased was, he kept calling her by the wrong name—her real first name, Marie, which had been abandoned by the time she was 4. She was, always and forever and to everyone, Joan.

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There were a couple of readings, a couple of prayers for "Marie" and a boilerplate sermon that could have worked as well for just about anyone else. Then, communion time! Now, Catholics have a difference with Lutherans in their understanding of communion. Catholics believe that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. We Lutherans say, yes, true, but it's still bread and wine too, whatever other holy transformation happens. Get it? Neither do I, not really.

But apparently, it's a real sticking point. The priest stood before Mom's grieving Lutheran family and said, and I quote, "All practicing Catholics in a state of grace may come forward to receive communion." Uh oh. We weren't practicing and who knows about the grace, but damn it, it was our Mom! So, up we went, sinful and out of practice, to chew those tasteless cardboard wafers. Our uncles gave us a funny look as we marched up the aisle. But we didn't care!

Mom was buried that afternoon, right there at Gate of Heaven, in a family crypt that included her parents and brother Don. So, I guess her body is where it should be, even though it's too far to visit often, and after all, Mom isn't really there. I believe Joanie is in heaven, still loving her 1940s show tunes, still drinking her nightly Old-Fashioneds. Catholic? Lutheran? Whoever's right in the end, with two funerals under her belt, my Mom's got it covered.

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