

## An Adolescent's First Recollection of Death

When I was 14, I learned in October that my beloved Uncle Dee (who'd taught me how to fish and recognize poison ivy and track deer...) had lung cancer. He'd just taken me fishing in August that year and was every bit the picture of strength, robust health, and vigor. Now, only 2 months later, my mother informed me that "He was very sick." We wouldn't be making our annual Christmas vacation to Star City, Arkansas to visit family that year because "we'd need to go *when the time came*." (I should mention here that this would be the first funeral I ever attended.)

*The time* came on a cold, January night. My parents called my teachers to explain my absence for the remainder of the week and told me to pack my suitcase, making sure to include my "Sunday dress." We arrived at my aunt Mimi's house in Star City in early evening, but in the dark of night. Mimi (Uncle Dee's widow) had spent the day cooking in preparation for our family, as well as other aunts, uncles, and cousins who would be gathering for the funeral. Upon our arrival, she laid out a banquet of true Southern fare that defied description. The epitome of hospitality, Mimi had prepared our rooms with fresh bed linens, unopened boxes of tissues, and freshly baked cookies. Her husband had been dead less than 24 hours. My brother (2 years younger than I) and I didn't go to visitation, but Mom and Dad immediately changed into "dress-up" suits and went.

The funeral the next day was held in the small sanctuary of First Baptist Church of Star City. Our family arrived and entered through the front door. The pews were packed on both sides of the center aisle, leaving the gold-corded roped-off middle section available for family. Aunts and uncles and cousins by the dozens already lined the pews and turned to greet us - the "Northern" relatives. (We lived in Owensboro, KY but that was still below the "grit line!") Somehow, as our family of four came down the aisle from the back of the church - I don't recall how it happened - my brother and I were separated from our parents as we entered the pews. Mom and Dad wound up on the far right side of the pew in front of us.

I'd grown up going to church and knew how to behave myself "in God's house" so I was no stranger to church protocol. The funeral scriptures, read by the preacher, were familiar and comforting. I knew the songs being played on the organ. I prayed along with the preacher. So far, so good. A few aunts and older cousins were tearful and sniffing, but that was to be expected. I kept my attention focused on my Mom whose attention was focused on her sister, the grieving widow. Daddy put his arm around her and her shoulders visibly trembled with an occasional sob. My brother sat aloof beside me, absorbed in drawing airplanes and rockets on paper he'd been given. Neither of us noticed that pall bearers had moved to open the casket.

Suddenly, people on the side sections of the sanctuary were filing *out*. Our section just sat. I watched Mom and Dad for cues as to what we were supposed to do - and they just sat, mom with her head down and Daddy looking at the preacher who came down from the pulpit and was standing at the foot of the casket. "My God! That thing was OPEN! How did THAT happen?"

Now it was "just us" in the church. Just the family. All 60-something of us. Mimi, who was sitting on the first row, dressed in black everything including a hat with a "mosquito net" (my brother's description), stood first. Her sons and daughter flanked her and together they approached the OPEN casket. I heard her sobs... and those of my cousins as they said final "good-byes." My heart ached as I watched their displays of sorrow. I fought the feeling of my throat being pinched. My face flushed and my eyes stung as hot tears spilled down my cheeks.

Now the aunts, uncles, and cousins in the next row were standing – and beginning to walk toward the casket as Mimi and "the kids" took their original places on the front row. WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? Two rows later, my parents stood and walked forward holding hands. Mom leaned in to Daddy who used his handkerchief to wipe his eyes and nose. As they came back to their place in the pew in front of us, Daddy leaned in and whispered to me, "You two don't have to go. You should stay here."

Everyone else on our pew was already standing. And walking toward the casket. No way would I be the only one who didn't "pay my respects." So I followed my brother who followed a cousin who followed someone else. I felt my face flush and my heart beat wildly as I approached the shiny, wooden casket, knowing I'd have to look at my dead uncle. When it was my turn, I stepped up and peered into the open coffin and....THAT'S **NOT** UNCLE DEE! THAT man's neck is smaller than my leg! THAT man's BALD! THAT man's a funny color! THAT man's.....my uncle....who had cancer....who must've been v-e-r-y- sick before he died.... And I got sick. I remember swaying and hearing a deafening roar in my ears. Daddy's arms caught me and sat me down on the nearest pew. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't gasp enough air to breathe. I was in shock.

Our family rode to the cemetery in our own car. Mom and Dad kept asking if I felt ok and I numbly said that I was fine. Numbness was a good thing. The little country cemetery was quaint and beautiful – even in January. The grave site came into view and after stopping the car, Daddy turned around and looked me squarely in the eyes and said, "I think you'd better stay in the car."

I convinced them to let me stay with them – that I'd feel a lot better being with family. So the four of us walked to the grave site together, standing back a little way from the rest of the clan. The preacher took his place and pall bearers (all cousins) carried the casket from the hearse to the bier. More scriptures read. More prayers. And from somewhere nearby, on that cold, gray January day in southern Arkansas, came a low, resonate *moooooo!*

It was a country cemetery. Very rural. We're talking *southern* Mississippi Delta rural. The farmer whose land bordered the cemetery had let his cows out and one of them strode over to the fence just 15 feet away and was moo-ing - **loudly**. My brother and I looked at the cow – quite a magnificent animal she was. We looked back at our grieving family members. *MOOOOO!* We looked at each other – and then again at the cow who seemed intently focused on the two of us! My brother stifled a snicker. And I smiled, then grinned. We both tried to muffle our giggles that were now uncontrollable. I was older, so I felt I had to “shh!” my brother, but all that came out was a snort and gasp for air. Daddy turned to give us a glare, but when he saw the cow and its close proximity, the look of surprise overcame the lightening bolts he was poised to shoot us from his eyes. He strained to contain his amusement at the cow – and at us. *MOOO!* *MOOOOOO!* It continued!

By this time, other cousins glimpsed our inability to contain our selves and the ripples of snickers and giggles spread like the aroma of the pasture on a summer breeze. Everyone was tickled – even Mimi, who stood to place her corsage on Uncle Dee's casket. As though she'd received a silent signal, she began walking – straight! toward! us!

I just knew I had offended my precious, beloved aunt and she was now coming to reproach me for my disrespectful behavior. My tongue caught in my throat and the roaring began again in my ears. But she walked right up to me with arms outstretched and grinned broadly. “I'm so glad you came,” she said as she hugged me. “You meant so much to him and he loved hearing you laugh.”

Mom and Daddy joined us and we walked back to the car together. There'd be food at the house and all our cousins would play games on the floor in the living room and tell jokes. The women would be in the kitchen and the men in the family room watching news or sports.

I never got to say “good-bye” to my uncle and I'll always remember the shock of seeing the ravages of cancer on the human body. But I've learned that grieving is something that's “safe” to do – whether among loved ones or alone. The hurt comes. The shock wanes. And grief still has more to teach me.

If you've made it this far, I thank you for sharing this memory with me. I don't share it often, but call it to mind when I think about fishing – or childhood memories of my family in Arkansas. I hope I've honored my uncle in lending this perspective on my first experience with the death of someone I loved dearly.

- Is there an age at which a child should be exposed to the ritual of a funeral?
- How can chaplains and clergy acknowledge a child's anxiety and minister to them at the funeral or funeral home?
- What role do funeral directors have in easing the shock of a child or adolescent who is invited to "take one last look" at the deceased? Disease, automobile accidents, etc. often render the body "unfixable" by even the most adept mortician.
- Do you have words or phrases in your "toolbox" that offer age-appropriate consolation to a child/adolescent experiencing the shock of grief?

Written by Lisa Vestal Wood  
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