

REMEMBER ME?
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When Judith Barker first asked me to do a sermon on memorial services, I was very reluctant. About three years ago I presented a course called “Planning Your Own Memorial Service”. Seventeen people attended. I had prepared a folder of resource material for everyone and an envelope with their name on it for each participant to put their finished service in so it could be filed in the office. Only one person, John Mayer, did their homework! Hence, my reluctance. But Judith persuaded me that it was timely and that I had lots of experience to share, having officiated at about 50 Memorial services in seventeen years. In fact, I also gave that workshop at the Thunder Bay Unitarian Church to a group of Chaplains.

Memorial services are one of the best public services we do as a denomination. Instead of a service by rote, right out of “the book” with the name of the dead person plugged into the blank, Unitarians approach this occasion as a celebration of that person’s life, a unique event that reflects the way they lived and their legacy to their family and community. Family and friends have a chance to participate. Time and again, people from other denominations who attend a UU Memorial Service are impressed by its warmth and its personal nature. Once I attended an Anglican service where the priest said: “Those of you who were baptized will see Elsie in heaven.” I was shocked and appalled.

How do you wish to be remembered?

Each of us is going to die at some point. It’s not an “if”, it’s a “when”. What is important is what we do with this gift of life and time between birth and death.

Let me tell you about two vastly different services. The first was my father's funeral in 1976. A minister who didn't know him said the Lord's prayer and the 23rd psalm, neither of which were relevant to me. I don't remember my Dad's name being mentioned. There was no music, no eulogy (my mother's decision). I badly wanted to get up and talk about him, about his skill at woodworking, his affinity with animals (cats in particular), his gardening and fishing, his love of opera. I used to spend hours with him in the basement watching him make intricate inlaid cribbage boards. My husband also had felt the urge to talk about him, but neither of us did, out of respect for my mother's decision and choices. Afterwards, my children who were 12 and 14 said: "Is that all there is for Grandpa?"

The second was a Memorial service for Dr. Mabel Nebel, conducted in this church by John Mayer and Jim Gibson. It was my first experience with a Unitarian Memorial service. I had only met her once, a lady in her 80's with long gray braids down to her bum. What I remember are the stories told about her at the service. As the sickly one of a large family growing up on the prairies, she had been allowed to get an education, becoming a bio-geneticist who developed the rust-free strain of wheat. She wrote a book about growing up on the prairies and someone read a chapter of that book. Winifred Sankey talked about her herb garden grown from cuttings from Mabel's herbs. June Gibbs talked about organizing an 80th birthday party, at Mabel's request, for the children who used to visit her at Heidehof. And lastly, her son Kai told about his family visiting with their twin little girls. Mabel took her granddaughters for a walk along the canal. When they didn't return as soon as their parents expected, they went looking for them. They found Mabel, a small girl by either hand, all jumping up and down in a puddle and laughing their heads off! Mabel came alive in that service. I felt that I knew her and have never forgotten her. Ever since, when I have been preparing a

Memorial service, I have told both those stories to the family and promised that I do every Memorial service as if it were my Dad's – or as my Dad's should have been.

My first task as a Chaplain was the Memorial service for Doug Borden, a friend I had known for 30 years, ever since I was a student at McGill. Fortunately, I had about ten days to prepare it. He had a gift for cultivating friendships and there were friends in attendance who had known him for 75 years. As a young student electrical engineer, he worked on building the Adam Beck I Generating Station. His first job after graduation was converting silent movie theatres to sound up and down the New England coast, in charge of a crew that came in after the last movie on Saturday and completed the job by Monday's movie. His own voice was heard in the service when I read what he had written about turning 80. He was so proud of my being a Chaplain in this church. This book which has held every service I have ever done was something I rescued from the trash when I helped his daughter, Blair, clear out his house in Niagara-on-the-Lake. Doug touched my life deeply, as a friend and a mentor. Finding him again by accident in this area and resuming our friendship on an adult level rather than as an adult/student was very rewarding. So my doing his final service was a gift both to him and to me.

One of the tasks of a Chaplain is to hold their emotions and the service together. One has to put their own grief and emotion in abeyance and concentrate on keeping the flow of the service going smoothly. You have just one chance to do everything right – remembering how to pronounce names, for instance. At a wedding when some little thing goes wrong, like the 3-year old ring bearer refusing to walk down the aisle and having a temper tantrum, it becomes part of the lore of the happy occasion. Not so at a Memorial service. If the Chaplain loses it, so too will many people there. Many new chaplains have expressed fear of doing a Memorial service. In fact, at meetings it's not uncommon for

Chaplains of several years' experience, especially in small communities, to say that they have never done a Memorial service.

One of the most difficult services I've done was for Margaret Jutting, one of my closest friends. Whenever a member of this church died, it was the custom for all of the Chaplains who were available to take part. Ever since I was appointed, I have written these services and John and Jim said they would do whatever I asked of them. For Margaret's service, I was able to get through the eulogy, ending with the words: "Margaret was one of my closest friends and she filled a unique place in my life." Then John took over and finished the readings. Friends in this church had given me hugs before the service and assured me that I could do it. The affirmation I've always been given here is so important to any success I've had in this role.

When I am first notified of a death and asked to do the Memorial service, I assemble the considerable resources I have gathered, going through Carl Seaburg's book "Great Occasions" to look for suitable poetry and readings as a starting place. It contains readings for celebration of birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death. The section for death is by far the largest and is subject indexed to make it easy to find readings that fit that person, including one for "Difficult People". When I have chosen some suitable passages, I visit the family and do a lot of listening. I ask them for a chronology of the person's life, relevant dates and accomplishments, taking notes as I listen. I get them to tell me stories, again taking notes. Sometimes there has been alcoholism or abuse in the family or other difficult times. That needs to be recognized but not dwelt on, or those attending the service will wonder if they have come to the right place, not knowing the "angel" who is being described. It is important to be honest about that life. I read them what I chose from "Great Occasions" and get them to agree or not as suitable. We talk about music. We talk about whether they want people to share their memories in the

service, and whether family members wish to talk. If so, I advise them to write out what they will say, so that I can take over if they lose their composure.

The sharing of memories can be both wonderful, happy and laugh-provoking as well as difficult. Sometimes people will go on interminably and it's very hard to get them to stop. Usually I introduce that part of the service by asking people to briefly share a memory. I remember standing beside Ron Cartwright's thirteen year old grandson as he stood at this very lectern with his fingers crossed for luck, talking about playing chess with Ron. Years later I officiated at that grandson's wedding. On another occasion at a packed funeral for a man who had been born in Fonthill and lived there all his life, not a soul stood up to offer a memory. I paused and asked again. Still no one. So I went on with the rest of the service. Afterwards, his sister came up to me and asked if I knew why no one came up. I said that I didn't. She responded that it was because I had said it all. It was a relief to know that I had done my preparation well.

Another very memorable service was for a premature stillborn baby named Lillianne, one of twins whose mother was a colleague in the Craft Guild. The other twin, Benjamin, was delivered the day after his sister's birth. The family knew that Lillianne had several birth defects – a severe form of Down syndrome, a heart problem and organs forming outside her body. James, the 5-year old older brother had said, "But Mommy, we'll love her anyway." During the service James sat holding his new little brother. By sheer serendipity, I had dubbed a tape with Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze", Brahms "Lullaby" and Mendelssohn's "Nocturne" from Incidental Music to a Midsummer Night's Dream. Unbeknownst to me, the father was from a German background and Karen, the mother, had sung all of that music in choirs. Part of the eulogy was Karen's words that she felt "her little daughter was meant to be a swimmer, not an air-breather.

She had her time, limited though it was. Her family enjoyed her where she was, stretching, playing ping pong with Benjamin, responding to touching and stroking from the outside. Both babies were individuals with their own personalities.” One of the final readings was a poem by Elizabeth Jennings called “For a Child Born Dead”.

I did a Memorial Service for my mother in August 2002 in Winnipeg. It was in a United Church and the minister of that church was very helpful in assisting in the service, playing the tape that I had dubbed and reading the very Christian parts of the service, such as a prayer in my mother’s own handwriting found in her Bible. On a previous visit to Winnipeg, my mother had given me a chronology of her life, which I just had to put in sentences from my notes and add some other things. My mother had arranged to donate her body to the Anatomy Department of the University of Manitoba. She used to say that that was the only way she was going to get to university. Of course, I used that line in the service! My children were both there and Craig talked about the happy times they remembered with their grandparents in Orillia every summer. Craig and Janet handed out pink roses to everyone as a reminder of the wonderful garden my parents cultivated for nearly 40 years. Afterwards, when I got a letter from the university, I sent them a copy of the service with the request that they share it with the student doctors who learned from her body so that they would know something of her as a person. It was cathartic for me to do this service in a way that both honoured her beliefs and respected my own. In a way, it was a service for both my parents.

Memorial services are such an important way to honour someone’s life. It always saddens me when I read an obituary that says no service, no visitation. The family and friends are left unable to share stories and laughter and memories in a public way.

Several years ago George Darte organized a workshop on new trends in the funeral business to which he invited all the clergy in St. Catharines. There were Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans, Orthodox, United Church and John and me as Unitarians. When the subject of eulogies came up, the Monsignor from St. Julia's said that there would be a eulogy in his church over his dead body. In the short silence which followed, John said that in a Unitarian service, the eulogy was the main point. The priest from St. Barnabas said that after losing sleep over requests from families to have a eulogy, he had finally given in.

Some of you will remember Nap Kremer's service here, when the Blue Jay's song was played loudly at the end in a joyous celebration of his being a fan. There was Blue Jays memorabilia on display, the Blue Jays cap he wore to watch games on TV, as well as Nap's architectural drawings of improvements he planned for this building. His wife, Eva, had asked that Nap's statement about why he was a Unitarian be read, Dutch accent and grammar and all, so his own voice and beliefs came through loud and clear. In a very real way, he was present.

So why would you want to plan your own Memorial Service? One of the best reasons is so that your survivors will know your wishes. After all, the service is really for the survivors. Another reason is that you will now have the last word!