Palliative and Supportive Care

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A funeral and a birthday

Rebecca David, B.ARCH., B.A. and Simon Wein, M.D.

Pain and Palliative Care Service, Davidoff Cancer Center, Petach Tikvah, Israel

Essay/Personal Reflection

Cite this article: David R, Wein S (2021). A funeral and a birthday. *Palliative and Supportive Care* **19**, 772. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951521001553

Received: 27 July 2021
Accepted: 29 August 2021

Author for correspondence:
Simon Wein, Pain and Palliative Care Service, Davidoff Cancer Center, Petach Tikvah 4910000, Israel.
E-mail: simonwe@clalit.org.il

My husband's grandmother died on the same day as my mother's birthday. I was to host my family for dinner. Several hours before dinner, we were notified of the Grandmother's death.

The Grandmother was 93 with 2 children and many descendants; my mother is 64 with 5 children and several descendants.

The thing is we had planned a birthday party for my mother which turned out to be the same time as the funeral.

So we had a conflict, we were conflicted.

Should we cancel the party for the sake of the funeral? The dead before the living? But that is not right. The dead are at best asleep, fully resting, perhaps in another world, or at worst non-existent.

Thus, even the funeral is for the living, a kind of ode or theater to help the living live on without the recently deceased.

Funerals are for the living until forgotten.

I had a great, great, great grandmother.

There are no living eye-witnesses; there is no one alive today who knew her.

Indeed from dust to dust. Know from where you came and to where you shall go.

So how to resolve the problem or more precisely how to define the conflict? Is it wrong to celebrate life while mourning the dead? Some cultures do not have morbid funerals but have a wake, a sort of a party, to celebrate the life of the recently dead. Other cultures have strict rules about enjoying life — or rather limiting enjoyment — in the period after the death of a close family member. Is it a relevant question to ask what the dead person would have thought? Would grandma have wanted life to go on joyously or would she have preferred a little solemnity to remember a hard life of loss and suffering and later on love and a new family? Would my mother have been offended to have her 64th birthday party cancelled for a funeral?

Reason and reasonableness ruled. The party was delayed a little. The dead grandmother was vailed. My mother was celebrated.

The grandmother's long life was eulogized and also celebrated. She had grown up in a small poor village in Eastern Europe, was carted off to Auschwitz, numbered, starved, and was the only member of her immediate family to survive. She immediately started life anew. Found a man, also a survivor, and they made the long arduous journey to Palestine. Only to be stopped again, this time by the British and interred in another camp, this time in Cyprus, where a new life came, a new generation was born.

My mother, of 64 years, was honored. Surrounded by her family. She too had made a long journey from cold northerly animistic Sweden to the hot deistic middle-eastern land with its stiff-necked people. She drove in a small blue Volkswagen from Scandinavia all the way to Israel, and then followed her man to his people and family at the other end of the earth and back again. Home.

Both celebrating a life well lived, a life of brave decisions, and loving descendants in an ancient land.

Conflict of interest. There are no conflicts of interest.

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