



## A Pre-Death Ritual for Mable

By O. Duane Weeks, PhD, CT, CFSP

### **In memory of Mable Thomforde, on the 10th anniversary of her death.**

Our family matriarch was dying. She was suffering from congestive heart failure, physicians explained, and we should expect her death within the next few months. The dying woman was my mother-in-law, a woman who had quietly reared her two children and steadfastly supported my wife and me in the rearing of our four children. In preparation for her impending death, we decided to participate in a rite common to liturgical Christian churches, "Communion for the Dying."

Because we had been told to expect Mable's death at any moment, her Communion for the Dying ritual was held in her home. Participating in the ceremony with Mable were two pastors, Mable's two children, four of her grandchildren and me.

The pastors represented two branches of the Lutheran faith. The pastor at Mable's church was not helpful during her dying. He seldom visited her unless we called him and strongly reminded him of his responsibility to his members. He did, however, participate in the communion ritual willingly. Our pastor, a young man fairly new in his work, provided wonderful support to our immediate family, including Mable, during the last weeks of her life. He often visited Mable, was with us in her hospital room when she died, and grieved with us following her death in June 1995.

One January afternoon, we met in Mable's home where we all sat in a circle in her living room. We began with her pastor's prayer. Then our pastor asked Mable to explain her faith. In a quiet but strong voice, she told about her upbringing in the Lutheran church, her belief in God and Jesus and how important her faith was to her. This frail little woman, who had probably never before spoken publicly, enthralled us as she clarified her beliefs of more than 80 years.

Following Mable's poignant talk, we went around the circle and each one explained what Mable met to her or him. This was a wonderful opportunity to share intimate thoughts and feelings with the dying person. Not only is such sharing unusual, but it also revealed to Mable how much we loved her. Usually, of course, such conversations are held around the casket where it is too late for the dead person to participate or hear. What a rich and wonderful memory this ritual provided for Mable.

One of our sons told his grandmother how he always enjoyed visiting her and knew he was always welcome in her home. He went on to describe why he felt she was such a wonderful grandmother. In all the 32 years I had known her, I had never told Mable I loved her. When it was my turn to talk, I did tell her that I loved her. I also explained how grateful I was for the way she and her husband had influenced their daughter, providing me with a fantastic wife and mother for my children.

When it was our daughter's turn to talk, she said: *Grandma, I remember when you and Grandpa lived on the farm. Often at night, when I was leaving, I would see you standing in the door light behind you. You stood there waving goodbye to me, and wishing me a safe trip home. Now Grandma, it's my turn to stay behind and see you leave, and as difficult as it is for me to say "goodbye," I have to wish you a safe journey home.*

By the time Karla had finished, nearly everyone was crying, and it was hard for others to continue with their comments. It is also difficult to remember what was said by those who followed Karla. When everyone had an opportunity to share thoughts and feelings, the pastors served communion to us. This seemed especially appropriate given Mable's strong religious faith and her enthusiasm to pass that faith along to her family. It was a fitting way to complete this very personal ritual.

The next morning, I visited Mable and asked her what she thought about the ritual we had shared the previous day. Her response was succinct: "Remembering it is almost as good as the experience itself." Interestingly, Mable regained her stamina following the communion ritual, and lived another five months.

Our oldest son, Doug, had worried about his grandmother's health for several months and experienced difficulty sleeping. He woke during the night, nearly every night, thinking about his grandmother. The night following our communion ritual, he slept soundly and completely throughout the night.

Several years after Mable's death, our pastor accepted a call to a church in Los Angeles. When he left our town, he wrote a letter to my wife and me. The letter included this reflection, "I will always remember the communion service we held for Mable. In my years of ministry, this stands out as my fondest experience." What made this communion ritual such a great ritual, a warm memory, a wonderful experience? Why was it any different from any other ritual?

First, the ability to tell someone how much you really love and appreciate her, or him, is often lost in today's western civilization. How often, outside of the throes of passion, do we tell people we love them and really mean it? The communion ritual was our opportunity to tell Mable how we loved her.

Second, we funeral directors often witness the sad experience of family members standing beside the casket, expressing their love to the dead person long after that person is capable of hearing the heartfelt, but belated, emotions. This ritual provides a lesson in expressing love today, in the here and now.

Third, not only was Mable able to hear and appreciate what we had to say, but she also participated in the pre-death ritual. All of us present that day participated and experienced the family love articulated during the afternoon.

Can anyone use a similar pre-death ritual? Certainly. A comparable ritual can be designed for anyone, whether or not that person is Christian. Family and friends can gather to express their feelings toward the dying person and say “goodbye” as poignantly as Karla did. Refreshments or a meal can be shared and any of the other elements of the communion service can be duplicated in a non-Christian setting.

As we begin the 21st century, more and more Americans attempt to deny death, disassociating themselves from funerary rituals that should be helpful. In the words of our colleague, Harold Ivan Smith, “Americans do death lite.” Pre-death rituals, like “Communion for the Dying,” can involve both the dying person and the survivors. They are an opportunity to disrupt such foolish denials and disassociations.

**About the Author**

*A licensed funeral director for 46 years, O. Duane Weeks has owned and operated funeral homes since 1966. He completed his doctorate in sociology at the University of Minnesota in 1994. In 1999, Dr. Weeks retired as director of New England Institute at Mount Ida College in Newton Center, Mass. Together with Catherine Johnson, he edited When All the Friends Have Gone: A Guide for Aftercare Providers (2001, Baywood, Amityville, New York).*

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