

Religious truce: A funeral and a healing

by [Linda Mercadante Ph.D.](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

I think they lived their whole 55 years together feeling rejected by their respective religions. They met at a free concert in Central Park during World War II. He was a handsome young Catholic Italian-American in uniform, she a shy Jewish girl out with her friends for the evening. They were immediately attracted. She always would light up when telling that part of the story.

But the rest was not easy. They married in spite of strong parental objections, and she always felt the outsider. Today this would hardly qualify as a cross-cultural relationship. But a half century ago it was nearly akin to an interracial marriage.

To keep marital peace and harmony, neither practiced his or her faith. Indeed, the marriage ceremony itself was a secular one, setting the tone for the next five decades. This was not a matter of ethnic cleansing, however. She learned to make tomato sauce and he learned to eat bagels. They opened up an Italian-American pastry shop, and vacationed with Jews in Miami. They got the two families together for parties and everyone got along. Religion itself was bracketed, held below the surface in the tense half-light of the unspoken.

Yet they never stopped thinking of themselves as Catholic and Jewish. It seemed to me that they saw each other across a chasm, notwithstanding their deep love, extreme closeness and cooperative spirit. This tension was a strong but quiet undercurrent that broke through the surface in odd ways, in such things as family menu choices, the schools my brother and I could attend, the languages we could study, the friendships we made, the people we should date. A few times they talked briefly about the formation of Israel, and my mother made sure I understood the horror of the Holocaust. But religious beliefs were not discussed. When I asked questions, tentatively trying to probe below the surface, they would stiffen, and evade or rebuff my compelling need to understand. My questions seemed to upset them.

So I went elsewhere with my theological problems, becoming first a Roman Catholic at about age eight, and then a Protestant in young adulthood. I'm sure my own religious yearnings and searchings were deeply affected by the silence. I needed to know, but couldn't ask, why their religions disapproved of their love. I needed to know what that made me. My parents were not happy when I wanted to attend church with my cousins, but they didn't prevent me.

After much persistence on my part, they finally allowed me to get baptized and have a year or two of catechism class. But I was aware that my behavior troubled them and even caused arguments behind closed doors. It seemed to upset the marital balance. So I did much of my seeking furtively and with considerable guilt.

It was my father's funeral that got me thinking and speaking more openly about these issues. Many of the hard decisions that had to be made about the funeral were shot through with the "religious issue." Death has a way of forcing our hand spiritually. Avoidance doesn't work. We must, however briefly, contemplate the fate of the deceased and the meaning of his or her life. Moreover, spiritual beliefs affect all the necessary decisions, such as funeral arrangements, burial mode and location.

Even though my father had been in the end stages of congestive heart failure for some time, my mother had not thought about a funeral home, services or cemetery. Perhaps it was too much to expect during the medical emergency with all its required decisions, and she had been in bed herself for months with a back problem. But I think it was also hard for her to face the religious issue. In the end many of the difficult practical decisions were left to my brother, who lived nearby. At a distance, I had the space to contemplate the spiritual questions. I felt bad about not being more involved in the day-to-day affairs, but I also felt that this was a contribution I could make.

While visiting my parents some months before the final crisis, I had after mass, asked the parish priest if he would visit my father in the hospital. It was just a verbal request and neither of us had paper or pen. Although I had often attended the church while visiting my parents, the priest did not know me. He certainly did not know my father, who had perhaps been inside that church once. It made no ecclesiastical sense—an unidentified out-of-state Protestant minister asking for Catholic pastoral services for a nonmember—but I felt I had to do it. If he were to receive the last rites when it became necessary, I knew I would have to be the one to request them.

It felt familiarly furtive to make this request. I worried that my mother, if she were at the hospital, would not welcome the visit, and my father, if he were awake, would likely find it startling. Although the priest had no obligation to any of us, I hoped he would visit and would handle the situation with grace.

When my father's condition worsened, I was overseas. So I left several urgent messages on the answering machine of that same parish. I was never able to reach a live voice and did not expect a transatlantic return call. At first I called to request the last rites, but by the next morning it was too late. I did not know if the priest had received the messages and responded in time. My following calls were about funeral services.

As I spoke with my mother and brother and made plans to return, it became clear that if the religious issue remained repressed, it would constrict the funeral arrangements. My mother assumed she could not use a Catholic or Christian-identified funeral home or cemetery. She believed they would reject her and surely not allow her to buy plots for the two of them. My brother did not think the church would be willing to provide its services. There seemed no thought about finding someone to officiate or lead prayer.

Although I hoped I could persuade a Catholic church to perform a service and my brother agreed it was a good idea, it would have been hard to get my mother to accept the idea. She always felt extremely uncomfortable inside churches. In addition, she felt some urgency to have the funeral immediately—perhaps a reflection of her Jewish tradition. In my rush to pack and travel, I could not arrange a liturgy nor even find out if any spiritual leader would be present at the funeral home. My mother and brother assumed I would say a few words, and they made it clear that no one else would be able to do that.

When I arrived, I was relieved to learn that the funeral home had found a retired monsignor to "say a blessing" at the funeral. Since the monsignor did not know my father, I still felt the need to give some kind of eulogy. It was not right to live and die and have no one who knew you honor your memory. But after a night of jet lag and disorganized thoughts, I did not know if I could do it.

In desperation, I asked my ten-year-old son if he had any suggestions. "Read something from the Bible that will make everyone cry because this is a funeral," he said, not meaning to sound callous. But it helped. The "love" passage came

immediately to mind—it would probably not be old hat to this group. I didn't know how anyone in the family felt about God, eternal life or religion, but I did know that in my father we had all witnessed a loving, gentle, generous, trustworthy person. I wanted to say that these qualities endure, and 1 Corinthians 13 seemed to provide the link from enduring love to eternal life.

The Monsignor arrived a few minutes before we were to start. I hurriedly related the "religious issue"; my becoming a Protestant, a minister and a professor; the attempts to get pastoral care and last rites; the uncertainty but strong obligation I had felt. The man said, "You did what you could. Now we'll let the Lord worry about it." I felt deeply comforted by this unknown retired priest from a church that wouldn't bless an interfaith marriage and that was the cause of my parents' half-century-long feelings of rejection.

The priest put on his stole. He sprinkled holy water and prayed over the closed casket, asking God to honor the promises that had been made when my father was baptized as an infant, to take him home now and give him peace. I can't remember everything he said but it felt as relieving as cool rain after a hot day. The priest could have no idea about the emotional history that lay under his hand, but to me it was a closing of the circle, a reconciliation for something that should never have been disrupted in the first place. At this point it didn't matter who did what, and who rejected whom, and whether the feelings were right or wrong. It was over now. God had never let go.

I was able to read the Corinthians passage and make some comments. I noted all the ways we had been proud of my father, and I linked love with eternal life. It seemed crucial to say that God didn't create life so that it should flourish and fade and then have no meaning or continuity. I thanked my son for his suggestion, and sat down.

The priest's homily contained a surprise. He had served in the archdiocese in which our pastry shop was located, and he had known and visited it. He commented on the integrity, honesty and goodness of its product, reputation and people. He also said that when he himself died, he hoped such loving words could be said about him and that we should all live our lives with this in mind. Then he assured everyone that no matter how far we are from God, God is always there waiting for us.

The liturgy was physically calming to me. It gave me a visceral understanding of God's faithfulness through all those years. I wish I could say that others felt the same effects, but I don't know. When an issue remains unspoken for that long, it's very difficult to give it a voice. At least it would take more than an afternoon, and I had been a prisoner of the silence for too long to start breaking it that day. But I did realize more deeply what effect this silence had had on me.

All these years I had thought of myself as the religious remnant of the family. Carrying that banner had been a way to resolve the tension and open up to God. It had given me a life direction. But it had also been a very heavy weight and had initiated me into the predictable self-justifying temptations that religious people have.

The next day was Sunday. After mass I stopped to introduce myself to the parish priest. "I'm the one who left all those transatlantic messages," I said. "Did you have a chance to visit him?" The young priest laughed and said, only a little facetiously: "Oh, don't worry, he's in there—we got him in. I went the first time you asked, and after that too. He was more prayed over than anyone in that hospital."

I was very glad that weekend for my vocation. We know the sins of the church and our own frequent ineffectiveness as ministers. But spiritual leaders, backed by training, experience, prayer and the supporting witness of generations before them, can clear a path for God's grace as well as block it. In this case, the church that hurt became an agent of healing. That is the crazy way that God works things out sometimes.