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At last, she is ready to go

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Feb. 15, 2012 My Table Is Spread

My mother was a faithful woman, but she was not a pious woman. In the weeks before her death on Dec. 22, her speech became increasingly infrequent. When she did speak, she was hard to understand. Repeated strokes had left her mouth slack, her tongue seemingly too large for its space. Usually crisp sounds sagged and stretched beyond recognition.

One day, as she labored to speak, I labored to make sense of the sounds she was making. I had lapsed into a therapeutic tone my mother hated. Coaxing her in a manner meant to sound gentle and encouraging, it landed on my mother?s ears as the wheedling note a mother uses to encourage the baby to eat her rice cereal.

Holding her hand (perhaps a little too tightly) and leaning in (perhaps a little too closely), I said, ?Mother, what are you trying to say?? I said it loudly (for she was deaf) and slowly, so loudly and so slowly, so head-cheerleader-turned-counselor, that something in my mother awakened. She turned to me, a look of pure disgust on her face, and said, clearly and with familiar, if diminished, gusto, ?Oh, hell! I don?t know.?

I started laughing and turned to the hospice nurse sitting with us. ?Now, that?s my mother,? I said. And, indeed, for those five words, she was with us, making plain her irritation with my tone and manner. She might be bedridden and mute and confused and incontinent, but she was still, thank you very much, Betty Curry Musick, who was known to announce coolly, of certain fools, ?I wouldn?t spit on him if he was burning.?

So when my mother died and we began to organize her wake and funeral, I knew what we could not have: one of those sweet funeral-home-provided memorial cards with a picture of a coiffed Jesus holding a scrubbed lamb in his arms as the sun sets gently over what appears to be a pasture in eastern Iowa. In these illustrations, Jesus is always gazing at the setting sun (perhaps wondering which direction to take to get back home to Palestine). There is a verse from scripture, though never, as I used to point out to my mother (who was an easy laugh and whose laughter I delighted in provoking), ?And Judas went and hanged himself,? however apropos that particular line from the Gospels might be.

And always, always, there was a reference (eight-point type in a soothing font) to the name of the sponsoring funeral home, the black-suited staff of which awaits your every mourning need.

There were things about which my mother had been insistent. She wanted to be waked at home, near the west windows in the dining room. She did not want to be cremated and have her ashes placed in what looked to her like a spice tin in the walls of our parish columbarium. She wanted Fr. Andrew Ciferni, a friend of many years, to preside at her funeral.

But we had never discussed the memorial card, with her name and the dates of her birth and death printed on it.

I went online, for it is now possible, at sites like the unfortunately named ?Memory Inc.,? to design one?s own memorial card. The resources are uniformly as sweet and sticky as a box of fudge, but without the restraining hand of a ?grief professional,? who has, at the very least, done this design enough times to know what a single card can bear.

So I turned to my daughter, Mary Margaret, a poet and a printmaker. I asked her if she would design the memorial card. She agreed. I offered several choices for the text -- all austere, all beautiful, many obscure -- and not one, my daughter told me, right for her beloved Atoo. I?m glad I listened, for, while my mother had her own beauty, she was never austere, and never, ever obscure.

For the front, my daughter made a linoleum block print. It is the figure of a woman, shown from mid-torso to mid-calf. She is dressed in a ?30s-era suit, wearing gloves. On her wrist hangs the strap of a carrying case. Not a backpack, not a duffel, a hard-sided carrying case. Her hands are clasped, not hanging loose at her sides. Her mother would be proud. She looks ready to go. She looks, as my own mother would say, ?like somebody.?

Mary Margaret chose for the text a poem by Linda Pastan called ?Departures.?

They seemed to all take off
at once: Aunt Grace
whose kidneys closed shop;
Cousin Rose who fed sugar
to diabetes;
my grandmother?s friend
who postponed going so long
we thought she?d stay.

It was like the summer years
  ago
when they all set out on trains
and ships, wearing hats with
  veils
and the proper gloves,
because everybody was going
someplace that year,
and they didn?t want
to be left behind.

My last words to my mother as her body was lowered into the ground were mine, not hers; my cadence, my style and not my mother?s. A little too obscure, a little too austere, but it is my prayer. It is my hope. ?And where Lazarus is poor no longer, may you find eternal rest.?

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