

Walking in the Shadow

Stories of
DEATH, LOSS,
and REMEMBRANCE

Editor's note: Sooner or later, everyone of us will face death—the death of someone we love and eventually our own death. Earlier this year, we asked Companion readers to share their stories from funerals with us, both the bitter and the sweet. Stories of loss but also stories of the joy we find in remembering the lives those who have died.

Burying Bertha Maude

by Jim Harrelson

I remember walking along the sidewalk that day—in a daze really, emotionally exhausted. It was a new experience for me. I felt guilty, as though I ought to be able to move on with the rest of the day. It was too early to quit, but I just couldn't motivate myself to do anything. We had just buried Bertha Maude.

It had all started four days before, with the phone ringing at 5 a.m. A new pastor, my first year had taught me that early morning phone calls never conveyed good news. And this one didn't. It was Diane, Bertha Maude's daughter-in-law. Very matter-of-factly she reported that Bertha Maude had died.

"What happened?"

"She and Lloyd were having coffee," she said. "She went into the kitchen and he heard her fall."

"O.K. I'll be right there."

Ten minutes later I was in the car. It was a fifteen-minute trip out into the country. I pulled up. There was no ambulance. I went in and was brought up short. Bertha Maude's husband, Lloyd, was sitting in the dining room, pale and unresponsive. Then I realized that her son Tom was still working on her. I went over to see Lloyd. The screen door opened again and in walked the paramedics.

To Bertha Maude, I was simply "Preacher!" She had seen so many come and go that I guess it was just easier than remembering all the names.

The church that she and Lloyd had poured their lives into was a little, one-room frame structure that was nearly 100 years old when I arrived as pastor. It was literally my first church. The charge I served had three churches, but this one came first every Sunday morning. They were always there before me. Most Sundays there were fifteen of us. But it wasn't uncommon to have as many as five small children. And Bertha Maude was always ready for them.

Bertha Maude was a large woman in girth, but hardly more than five feet tall. She always wore a gingham print dress and carried a huge handbag. And



Lloyd and Bertha Maude Beatty

in that bag, every child knew, she carried treats, kept there just for them. She never failed them, not even once.

Bertha Maude and Lloyd were the chief drivers behind the fierce tenacity shown by this little country church made up of "poor dirt farmers" as they called themselves. It wasn't a matter of poor-mouthing. It was simply accurate. They were farmers. They didn't irrigate, and they were poor. But it never affected their generosity. If there was candy in the big black bag every

Sunday, then there were also eggs or jelly or vegetables in the preacher's car when he left for the next stop on the morning circuit—the city church (in a city of 250 people).

Bertha Maude and Lloyd also made sure that the annual Christmas Eve program was done. Everyone who lived in the old Amherst farming community turned out for Christmas Eve—all seventy-five of us. To the right of the platform was the Christmas tree, cut from a windbreak—decorated with mostly homemade ornaments and popcorn and berries. We kept it from falling over by nailing a wooden cross-piece into the bottom of the tree and then fixing a small length of board to the trunk, which was then nailed to the woodwork of the closest window. The final touch was a nail driven through the cross-piece into the old wooden floor.

After each child had said or played his or her Christmas piece, everybody passed out the gifts—plates of cookies, handmade potholders, fly-swatters with yarn patterns woven into them, a lumberyard yardstick in a holder of stitched flannel to hang on the kitchen wall. And this was in 1981!

But that was all in the background, as we carried Bertha Maude out to the ambulance. Tom rode with the paramedics. I drove Lloyd the thirty minutes to the county seat hospital, where, after a brief examination, Bertha Maude was pronounced dead.

Hank, the mortician, and I had worked together before. We both knew that this would be a big funeral. That's why it was held at the mortuary rather than in her beloved Amherst Church—the church just wasn't big enough. The grace, generosity, wisdom, and open-hearted way of life that Bertha Maude and Lloyd had practiced gave birth to an incredible response in the people of the area.

What she had given so freely was

brought back for her husband and son to experience. People of all sorts came to pay homage to her.

I never, ever, remember Bertha Maude's hair being done. She simply brushed the gray, grizzled hairs back until they were in some remote semblance of order and went on her way. Beneath her nails was the dirt of decades of devoted service to the Kansas plains that she coaxed until they gave up a living to her and her family. Her stockings hung below her knees and sagged around her ankles. Nobody cared about that. They didn't care because they didn't notice. All they knew was that they had been loved with a huge, consistent and faithful love that never quit.

At the end of the message I gave at her funeral, I quoted a passage from C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. In it, Lewis sees a woman in heaven, surrounded by a great court of admirers. He takes her to be the Blessed Virgin. His guide corrects him:

"Not at all," said he. "It's someone ye'll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green.

"She seems to be . . . well, a person of particular importance?"

"Aye. She is one of the great ones. Ye have heard that fame in this county and fame on Earth are two quite different things."

"And who are all these young men and women on each side?"

"They are her sons and daughters. . . . Every young man or boy that met her became her son—even if it was only the boy that brought the meat to her back door. Every girl that met her was her daughter."

So it was with Bertha Maude. Her sons and daughters sat before me on that warm spring morning. And what they remembered was the glory of her love.

Most of those attending the funeral made the drive twenty miles back to the little Amherst church. Tom had dug

the grave with a backhoe. We carried Bertha Maude into the little churchyard and committed her body back to the Kansas sod, into which so much of her sweat and so many of her tears had been poured.

All but a handful of the mourners went down into the cool basement of the one-room church. Then those that remained set to work, lowering the casket into the earth, and then, gently, ever so gently, filling the grave by hand—every shovelful of earth handled reverently, almost delicately. It was one of the holiest moments I had ever experienced.

When we finished we set our tools aside, went down into the cool basement, ate a sandwich, drank lemonade, and remembered Bertha Maude. □

Jim Harrelson is pastor of Stotler Covenant Church in Osage City, Kansas.

Jeremy's Funeral

by Carolyn Estes

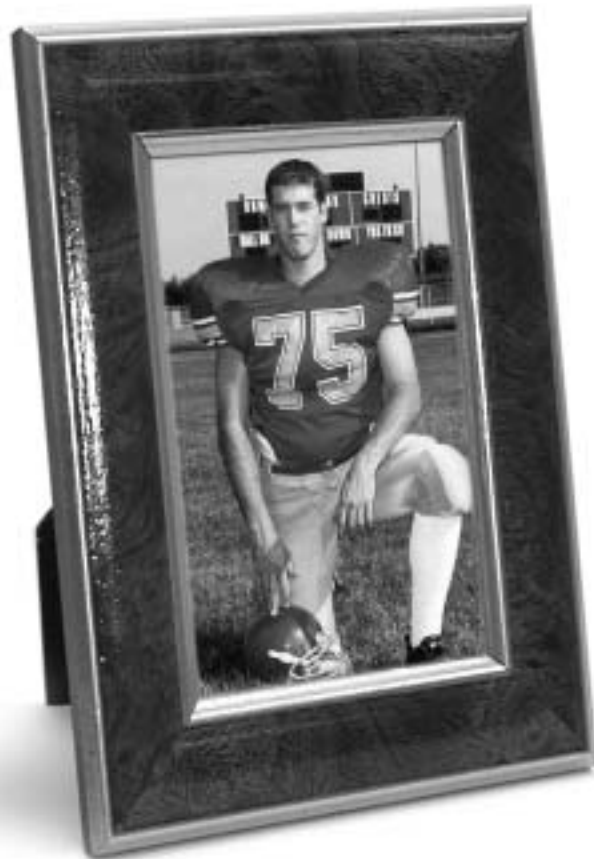
When a funeral is more than a memorial celebration and becomes an occasion where the mourners are invited to personally receive Christ, it becomes noteworthy. Such was the service for eighteen-year-old Jeremy Doyle, his life cut short on December 12, 1998, by a driver who fell asleep and hit Jeremy's car head on. The funeral director called it the largest funeral he had seen in the county. The line of cars to the cemetery was five miles long.

As the funeral service began there were no seats left in the Covenant church in Lafayette, Indiana. Jeremy's father, Richard, is an assistant fire chief for the city, and fire fighters lined the left aisle and stood during the funeral. Police officers stood in solidarity in the right aisle. Jeremy's football and bas-

ketball teammates were there, and more than 600 high-school students watched the service in the nearby Family Life Center via video hookup.

Jeremy's football coach spoke through his tears, and his youth pastor recalled incidents showing Jeremy's personality and character. Pastor John Martz's message was full of hope—Jeremy was not gone from us forever, some day those he loved would be reunited with him in heaven.

In closing, Pastor Martz invited those in the congregation who wished to receive Christ as Savior to raise their



Jeremy Doyle

hands. Of the 1,500 present, somewhere around 300 people prayed to receive Christ. Later, at a youth event, another 300 made commitments. Many of these students later worked on the first of two Habitat for Humanity homes built in Jeremy's memory (with four more built overseas). In the

months that followed, Jeremy's parents, Richard and Sandy, received hundreds of cards and letters from people sharing how God had used Jeremy's tragic death to change their lives.

What sort of person elicits this kind of love and has this kind of influence? Those who knew Jeremy best agreed that he had a huge impact on many people. Of course, he shared some of the insecurities that all teens have. He was not a candidate for canonization, for he had weaknesses and foibles, but there was something unusual about the way he related to others, especially his peers. He was a helper and friend to all because he was genuinely interested in everyone. He was kind to the outsiders and protected them from bullies. This was an easy role for him—at six feet, five inches, and 200 pounds, he commanded respect. And when he planted those special-order, size fifteen football shoes next to someone's locker, he got immediate attention.

His athletic ability also commanded respect. As a football defensive end, he received all-conference, all-area, and all-state awards, and was recruited to play in college. None of these honors made him boastful. He was genuinely surprised to be named homecoming king by his peers, and told his mother he was afraid he wouldn't get a date to the prom.

Jeremy was not afraid to share his faith. A few days before he died, Jeremy was hanging out with friends, watching TV when he suddenly asked them, "If you died tonight, do you know where you would go?" When they demurred, he said, "I'd go to heaven. You guys need to figure it out too."

Jeremy was also known for his humor. In his youth group he was always the first to volunteer for crazy skits, which usually ended in a wrestling match between him and his cousin Andrew. He once bought a terrible leisure suit at Goodwill to wear to a dance. He surprised his date by picking her up on a moped. Unfortunately,

he forgot to turn off the key when he parked and it ran out of gas. He had to push his date and the moped home. He loved pranks, loved to tease his mother, Sandy, and his brothers, Eric and Ben, and was known to indulge in the Hoosier sport of cow tipping.

Sandy said, "After Jeremy died the laughter was missing in our home, but now with our three adopted Haitian sisters, the laughter has returned to the dining table." While working on the Habitat houses built in Jeremy's memory, Richard learned of three girls recently orphaned in Haiti. Those girls—Junise, Fabienne, and Sandra—now live with Richard and Sandy in Lafayette. This family's grief was deep and broad yet God has brought them from tears in the night to joy in the morning.

Some people come into our lives and leave footprints on our hearts and we are never the same. Jeremy left big footprints on many hearts. □

Carolyn Estes is a retired English teacher and writer from Lafayette, Indiana, where she is a member of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Dave's Friends: Reflections from a steelworker's funeral *by John DeLancey*

This past March, I got a call from Frank Perman, our local funeral director. He called about Dave, a forty-four-year-old steel worker who was killed in an accident at work. Dave had no church connections, and Frank asked if I would do the funeral.

Dave was an only child. His parents had died, and the only survivors were his eleven-year-old daughter and his ex-wife. The funeral home was packed with friends of Dave's, including twenty of his fellow steelworkers. Not many of them had been to church—during

the congregational hymn, "Amazing Grace," I felt like I was singing a solo.

The service was fairly basic, with Scripture, prayer, a message of hope, and with some personal thoughts on Dave's life that I had gathered from his friends. When I do a funeral like this, I always attempt to clearly convey the hope of Christ to those present, offering the way of salvation, while leaving the departed's eternal status to God.

About a week earlier, I had had an inclination to find my old sheet music to the James Taylor song, "You've Got a Friend." It's a secular song from the seventies, but it can have a spiritual application. While I was at the viewing, trying to find out what songs might be appropriate for Dave's funeral, two of his friends asked me if I knew "You've Got a Friend" by James Taylor.

At the funeral, I sang the song. The funeral director's mother told me she could not believe how many of these "rough and tough" steel workers were in tears while I sang. She was in the back handing out tissues. I had pointed out the spiritual connection before singing the song, and I trust God used it to touch people with hope.

The lunch after the funeral was held at a smoke-filled tavern owned by one of Dave's close friends. Most people headed straight for the bar. Many of them also approached me and thanked me for the service.

There I was, in a suit, being called "Rev." or "Father," eating standing up because it was so crowded. When I finally found find a chair, I sat next to some of the same guys who were all choked up during the funeral.

As the two next to me toasted a shot of whiskey in memory to Dave, I thought to myself, "This is exactly where Jesus would be hanging out. He would be hanging out with the lost, the least, the lonely, and the looking." I shared the gospel with some of them right there, again, helping them make the spiritual connection to the James

Taylor song.

As I look back at that experience, I am left with this thought. Evangelism is simply that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things. That's it. The lost, the least, the looking, and the lonely are people all around us, perhaps just waiting for ordinary people to hang out with them, building bridges with them, allowing Christ to walk across into their lives in an extraordinary way. □

John DeLancey is pastor of Stoneridge Covenant Church in Allison Park, Pennsylvania.

Each Day Is a Gift

by Marolyn Carlson

In the October 1997 *Covenant Companion*, my friend Louise Dausch shared her story of friendship evangelism in my honor. Now it's my turn to pay tribute to Louise, who passed away on April 3 following a massive stroke. Since that 1997 article, we continued in a very special relationship.

While I introduced Louise to the Covenant, she introduced me to a new and deeper appreciation of living each day to the fullest.

Six years ago, when former *Companion* editor Jim Hawkinson was speaking at a meeting held at Covenant Village of Florida, I was in the intensive care unit (ICU) at our hospital. Louise attended the meetings and told me that Jim suggested that we sing the doxology at the close of each day. After we sang, Louise proceeded to say, "God bless, keep you safe, watch over you, and give you a good night of rest, so that in the morning that little voice will say, 'This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.'"

Louise was a deeply spiritual friend and we were blessed to share so many good times, to laugh and cry, to pray

together. We acknowledged that each day was a gift from God to enjoy.

It's ironic that our friendship deepened when I was seriously ill and she showed compassion and concern for me, and now our friendship here on earth has ended with her illness and death. The day following her stroke, when Louise could still respond, I was alone with her in ICU. I said to her, "This is the day that the Lord has



Marolyn Carlson and Louise Dausch

made," and I must have paused for a moment, as Louise finished by saying, "and we will rejoice and be glad in it."

As it turns out, those were the last words she spoke to me. The next day the doctor told her daughter and me that Louise wouldn't get well. My only rejoicing is that she didn't live to suffer or be in a paralyzed condition.

I miss my special friend every day, and what we shared together. My faith continues strong as God watches over me each new day as I trust in him. Every step of the way I was encouraged by my friend Louise. □

Marolyn Carlson lives at Covenant Village in Plantation, Florida.

The Miracle of Dying

by Karin Ropp

My aunt Kay Peterson died December 27, 2000, at age eighty-three, after a fifteen-year struggle with mouth cancer. Multiple surgeries and radiation had halted the cancer's progress for a time, but when the cancer recurred in the fall of 2000, Aunt Kay chose not to pursue further treatment. At that time she weighed no more than eighty pounds and she weakened rapidly.

Kay had no children—my family and I were her next-of-kin. My husband, Darrell, and I, with the help of one hired practical nurse, cared for her in her Rockford, Illinois, apartment. The actual time span of round-the-clock hospice care was three weeks. However, for several weeks before we'd been with her on a part-time basis.

The fact that events moved so fast served to intensify our experience. Each day brought new challenges and decisions. The hospice concept is to allow a person to die at home in the care of family. The hospice staff manage pain control under the doctor's supervision, and provide such things as personal care and light housekeeping. Volunteers provide friendly visits and assist the family in other ways.

On the first Sunday I returned to worship after Kay's death, I told our pastor, Don Holmertz, that we had experienced so many blessings with Aunt Kay. He encouraged me to share them in church. I find writing much easier than speaking, so I wrote my thoughts to share with the congregation. Here are some of them:

"As your days, so is your strength" (Deuteronomy 33:25). At one of the initial interviews with the hospice social



Karin Ropp and Kay Peterson

worker, I was asked if Darrell and I were in good health. I soon learned the reason for the question. We were busier than I could have imagined we would have been, and nights were seldom without interruption. Yet God gave us strength and continued good health.

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). We had to quickly learn to do bedside nursing and to dispense medicine, both of which were beyond our expertise. The hospice team taught us and gave us confidence.

There is no age limit on serving others. Kay’s ninety-one-year-old neighbor made regular deliveries of her legendary, super-soft tapioca pudding for Kay. She also made Sunday dinner for Darrell and me. Kay’s closest friends, both in their eighties, planned and served lunch after the funeral.

“Surely there’s someone else who can make the coffee,” we told one of them. “You’re such a close friend, you should be with the family.”

“No,” she replied. “We always do this. It’s the last thing we can do for a friend.”

Touch is important. I am not known for being a hugger. But this was a time for touching, for gentle hugs that meant

“I love you” as well as the words we said. We even found that touches brought soothing relief as the morphine pills were taking effect.

A Christian can witness even in dying. The word soon spread among the hospice team that Aunt Kay was “a sweetie.” Kay was at peace and eager to “go home.” She was constantly thanking all who cared for her.

The hospice social worker said she sees such a difference between those who have faith and those who don’t.

We speak of the miracle of birth—we saw what could be called the miracle of death. Kay was told of the things she would likely experience as she came closer to death. And we were given a booklet that explained and listed the usual changes the body makes in the process of dying. Although we were grieving at the thought that Kay was slipping away, we were seeing another affirmation that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14).

If there’s someone I should visit, call, or write, I need to do it now.

The evening following Kay’s death, we were in her apartment when a young friend called from downstairs and said, “Could I come up and see Katherine?” How I hated telling him that she was gone, but I asked him to come up anyway and visit with us. So he came, and told how he’d just learned that Kay was really sick. Kay’s illness progressed so rapidly it caught many of her friends by surprise. □

Karin Ropp is a member of Valley Covenant Church in Stillman Valley, Illinois.

An Evening with Grandma

by Charmaine Kyle

On Saturday March 9, just two days before Grandma died, my sister and I had the wonderful experience of spending four hours together with her. Her health was failing. We settled in to visit with her just as a snow and wind-storm started outside. The wind blew and howled, but we were warm and cozy as we pulled chairs close together so we could hold hands, pray, and just be together.

Grandma was very weak and had a hard time talking, but her spirit was bright. She was quick to smile or laugh at our jokes. Whenever she would smile, we could see the quick wit and brightness of her mind. We read some Scripture, joined together in saying the Lord’s Prayer, and then my sister, Alicia, read to her from a book called *The Kingdom Assignment*, by Denny and Leesa Bellesi.

After each chapter, we asked, “Should Alicia keep reading?” Grandma would respond, “Sure.” We got through three chapters of the book. It was quite evident that Grandma enjoyed our time together. It was a time we will never forget.

Alicia and I wanted to do something at Grandma’s funeral that would be lasting and meaningful. So we got several copies of the book, wrote a note about our time with Grandma, and pasted it in the front of each book. We gave every family that came to the funeral a copy of the book.

This book will always be special for us because of the time we had to share it with Grandma. We will miss her deeply, yet rest assured in the knowledge that we will be together in heaven for eternity. □

Charmaine Kyle is a member of Fruitland Evangelical Covenant Church in Whitehall, Michigan.