

Deaths in my Family
by Ginger Wolnik
February 5, 2015

Thinking about death and mortality often becomes a philosophical exercise. Rather than dwell on the existential meaning of life, I'd like to share my memories of deaths in my family.

I was only four when my father's parents died just 10 days apart, both from strokes. Just nine months earlier, my mother's father died at age 75, so I grew up with just one living grandparent and the stories of the three big funerals from my earliest childhood. They were all traditional Polish funerals including full Catholic Masses and are my earliest memories. I don't recall many details, but I do remember that the funerals happened because my father talked about them throughout my childhood. He was an only child and his parents were his only relatives in this country, so to lose them both in unexpected succession was traumatic for him. I recently discovered old home movies of his parents within a year of their deaths and they appeared to be in poor health, probably due to the hard life they had as immigrants. His father was 73 and his mother was just 62 when she died, just a little older than I am now. However, she looked much older, or do I just look much younger because of a much easier life?

For the next 15 years, no one I knew died. It wasn't until I was in college that my aunt Lillian died from throat cancer in 1975. My mother was close to her and was very upset. I still lived at home and a few days later, I saw my mother going out the door all dressed up, so I asked if she was going to the funeral. She said yes but she didn't have time to wait for me. I had a driver's license and access to the car I drove to school, so I asked her where the funeral was so I could go myself, but she refused to tell me. I loved my aunt too and really wanted to attend, but didn't know how to find out what was going on as my mother controlled everything in my life at that time.

Many years later, my cousin Leslie told me that my mother stopped at Aunt Lil's house right after the funeral and helped herself to Lil's jewelry box. I believe Leslie's story because that explains some of my mother's very bizarre behavior at the time. My sister Michele later confirmed to me that our mother gave her some of the jewelry, although Michele didn't know at the time it was stolen. However, she also felt that Leslie's story was plausible because of the way my mother pushed it on her at the time. We decided there was no point in confronting our mother by then since she was ill with cancer and notorious for rationalizing and denying her bad behavior.

My cousin Joyce died the next year from liver cancer in 1976 at age 33. She was the first of my cousins to die and was the only one until recently, an unfortunate outlier in an otherwise long lifespan generation. She lived out of state at the time so no one in my immediate family attended a service. I was still living at home and didn't have the information or the means to independently attend. Thus, I managed to become an adult without any direct knowledge on how one deals with death.

In 1983, Marie Cook, the grandmother that I grew up with and who lived with us occasionally, finally passed away. It was a peaceful passing at age 92 of an apparent heart attack in her sleep. I was living in California by then and was a successful, independent adult. Would you believe that no one told me? My mother finally called me after the funeral was over and explained that she didn't want me feel I had to travel to Chicago on short notice. She didn't think I would want to go and she claimed this way I would not have to feel guilty about not attending. One of my brothers was visiting me at the time and she claimed that she didn't want to spoil his vacation with the bad news, so she decided not to tell us until it was too late. I was very angry with her for being so controlling, but today I realize that I should have been in closer contact with other relatives so they could have informed me.

A few months later, my aunt Gertrude died of breast cancer at age 73, which she had been battling for years. Although my mother told me this time, she assumed I would not be attending the funeral and didn't send me any details. Now I'm wondering what she might have taken from Aunt Gert.

Another 14 years passed before there was another family death. My Aunt Florence had battled lymphoma for 10 years and finally died in 1997 at age 81. However, I was close to her daughter Kathy, so this time I knew what was going on. Thus, at age 43, I finally participated in a funeral. I flew to Chicago and rented a car, which was part of the procession to the cemetery. There was a full Catholic Mass with a hired choir. I still remember part of the sermon that the priest gave. Afterwards, there was a sumptuous banquet at a Bohemian restaurant, the menu had been chosen by aunt Flo as part of her advance directive. I thought it was wonderful that she had planned out all the details and undoubtedly enjoyed thinking about how we would all react. I decided that was how I'd like to go, with a big memorial service so that people would think of me and remember me for years, just like I remember my Aunt Florence.

My Uncle Ramon died unexpectedly just 11 days after Aunt Florence, at age 79 of an aneurysm. However, this time it was his wife Emily who was the controller. There was no service and he was cremated. My mother never liked Emily but this was the final blow; she was livid! How dare Emily deprive her of the chance to say goodbye to her brother! My mother phoned me and ranted and raged over this, oblivious to the irony that she had deprived me of the chance to say goodbye to my Grandma Cook.

Perhaps it was karma that the next family death was my brother Wayne, who committed suicide on Mother's Day in 1998. We all saw it coming; he had become deeply depressed but refused to do anything for himself. My mother was undoubtedly feeling guilty because she arranged the biggest family funeral ever. She even bought 3 cemetery plots and put Wayne in between her and my father's plot, probably as a result of a funeral parlor sales pitch. Wayne had left a suicide note expressing the wish for cremation, but my mother ignored that and everything else specified in that note. I attended the service but felt some of it was an imitation of Aunt Florence's life celebration the year before. However, it was gratifying to say goodbye and receive the support of my many cousins who attended. I'm actually grateful that my mother insisted on an open casket service because seeing my brother peacefully lying there gave me real closure. The undertaker had advised against it because Wayne shot himself in the head, but my mother demanded that they do whatever necessary to make him look good and as usual, she won.

My mother battled lymphoma since about 1985 and had several remissions and reoccurrences. After Wayne's death she had increasing health problems with other issues, but managed to live until age 78, finally passing away in January 2005. Although she became very weak the last few months, she remained sharp and could even be critical and controlling, remaining the same person until the end. Her memory was selective but in a suspiciously self-serving way.

My father had a worse death, in my opinion. There was nothing physically wrong with him, his body was basically healthy to the end. However, he developed dementia and it was heartbreaking to lose him that way at age 80, just 10 months after my mother. My brother Keith cared for him far away so I did not see my father often; that made each visit more upsetting as he declined mentally. He had been a smart engineer so I wonder if he was able to at first mask his decline. In the end, he declined very rapidly, making me suspect that some people may be able to compensate for lost mental abilities but only up to a point. Even so, if I had a choice, I would rather go like my mother, slowly and painfully, but still ME.

The final member of my parents' generation of relatives died in 2007 at age 96 - my uncle Henry. Even though he smoked until age 60, he remained basically healthy in body and mind until the very end, when his kidneys started failing. So he died of old age like his mother, my Grandma Cook. His grandfather died in 1941 at age 85, which I interpret as also dying of old age, considering that great grandfather of mine was born in 1856! So I am heartened that I have some relatives with good genes.

I now realize I'm somewhat obsessed with the longevity and infirmities of my relatives. Although many developed cancer, most still lived long anyway. None of my close relatives or even my friends has ever died from accident or external violence. I like to visit cemeteries and think of those who are gone, even those I did not personally know when I read their markers. I plan to be buried and hope that many years after I'm gone, people will read about me and know that I existed too. That will be my legacy in lieu of having children.