Putting the Fun Back into Funerals

By Mary Patrick Kavanaugh

That's a terrible title," said a trusted advisor.

"Why?"

"Because funerals are *not* fun."

She was right, of course. Funerals are almost never fun, even if the stiff, cold, and quiet person laid out at the front of the room was the life of everyone's party. It would be one thing if this rite of passage celebrated only the unique spirit of the deceased. But the pain of abandonment is a hungry beast. No matter how well intended, our thoughts, words, and deeds after a death usually feed on what we have lost, instead of all that was gained through knowing the dearly departed. Three days after a death, the ridiculously short period of time allotted to organize the event, it's more about the living than the dead. Having permission to publicly wallow in sorrow is in large part what helps us heal.

But what about the other things in our lives that die? Marriages, relationships, careers, artistic endeavors, businesses, youth, beauty, bank accounts—or in my immediate case, writing a best selling novel. When the lofty dreams for our lives tank, sometimes we're left feeling, well…what? Angry? Depressed? Bitter? Pitiful? Quashed? When a treasured dream has died, how do we avoid that urge to crawl into the coffin with it?

For the record: My plan is to have a funeral for a book I spent the last seven years writing, and the event is designed to be fun. The idea for this novel arrived after I sat at the respective deathbeds of my husband and his parents over a period of four years. My role as reluctant midwife to each of them as they made the mysterious passage also positioned me as repository of their secrets and stashes. In an attempt to keep these lovable characters alive, while sorting through the grief and the mess they left behind, I wrote *Family Plots: Love, Death, and Tax Evasion.*

Through most of the process, it seemed like my book had a fair shake at finding a publisher. A few local authors said it was a page turner, a New York literary agency signed me, and two psychics told me there would be a bidding war—one even claiming the book would be optioned for the big screen. Imagine my excitement…

But that's not what happened.

Nope. Instead, over a period of one year, I was rejected sixteen times. And I didn't take it well.

There was the shame. The humiliation. The fury. And when anyone asked me what was happening with the book? Not pretty.

I know what you're thinking. Sixteen lousy rejection letters and she's having a funeral? *Quitter.* But it isn't like that. This is not one of those stories you read about where an author gets an idea for a book, God dictates it to her in thirteen days, and then she miraculously meets a famous agent on a flight to Kalamazoo, who promises to sell the book. No, no, no. Labor and delivery of this baby was harder and possibly more expensive than the one I raised and sent off to college. I wrote four versions of the manuscript, over four years time. Before even finding an agent, I'd hired three professional editors who helped me cut, trim, revise, and re-pace. I spent another year finding the agents, who took me through two more revisions to polish the prose, and get it into the shape necessary to make it appeal to the commercial publishing world. The whole process took seven years—the time it takes for a human to replace every cell in its body. I'm not even the same person I was when I started. That girl is gone.

Perhaps that's why when anyone suggests I do anything else to the manuscript —tighten it, serialize it, turn it into a screen play, sell it to a smaller press, self-publish—an invisible curtain closes over my eyes and I chant *The Prayer of St. Francis.*

After the final rejection, I struggled to avoid wallowing in the black hole of shame that arrived with my failure. Many sleepless nights later, it occurred to me to stop struggling. Instead, I decided to nose dive right into the center of the black hole, and cuddle up with my misery (we spooned, in fact). Of course, that's when the miracle happened. Once I was deep inside that dark hole, a light bulb went off, and a chorus of angels sang. Not only would I embrace my failure—I would flaunt it.

I decided to do what I said I never would (never say never, eh?): Self-publish—and bring my dead book to life at its own funeral.

Planning the book's funeral has been more fun than any aspect of the creative process thus far. Plus, with my history of planning real family funerals, I have some skills and contacts. Oakland's famous Chapel of the Chimes even offered to donate the space. This event will have a fancy hearse, an open coffin, pallbearers, gay singers, dead flower girls, a Holy Roller preacher, dancing in the aisles, and a chocolate fountain at the buffet. Of course the dead book will be on sale, too, and it will raise money for my new dream, establishing a fund for community-unity art programs in my edgy Oakland neighborhood.

This experience makes me a huge proponent of "putting the fun back into funerals." Not by making light of the dead, but by acknowledging that grief and loss are our constant companions and we have to find a release. In the moment that I decided to let my dream die, bury it completely, I felt more empowered than I had throughout the entire process.

What am I really burying, after all? Not my book. Not the seven years of work. Not even my beloved dead husband and his family (again). All I'm burying is the idea that I can't have my dream without getting outside approval.

DID YOU HEAR THAT CRAZY CONTROLING PUBLISHING WORLD?

I'M NOT SITTING AROUND WAITING FOR YOU TO CALL ANYMORE.

By deciding to let my dream die, it seems I've given it new life. I get to publish my book, have a campy book launch party, and this time not care about how it turns out or what the acquisition editors in New York have to say. Not to leave them out. I have invited each of my rejecters to serve as a pallbearer. And the best part of launching a book at its own funeral is that good manners will preclude anyone from criticizing it. After all, it's rude to speak ill of the dead.

Is there anything in your life you need to bury? Those ready to let go of stale hopes, dreams, and desires that are dragging them down are invited to join my funeral party. Visit my website, www.mydreamisdeadbutimnot.com, where we help turn life's crap into compost one plot at a time. For more information or help, contact movingon@mydreamisdeadbutimnot.com.

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visit

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