

Mayflower Voices ~ A Readers' Theatre

“Life and Death: The Mysterious Threshold”

A collection of personal stories around the time of dying submitted by members and friends of the Mayflower congregation

**Presented on behalf of
The Threshold Ministry**

**Sunday, February 24th, 2019
8:30 AM and 11:00 AM**

**Readers:
Chris Gough
Phil Johnson
Mary Keepers
Marc Markell
Susan Thornton**

Edited, compiled and coordinated by Mary Keepers

**Ministers:
Reverend Sarah Campbell
Reverend Howard Bell**

**Mayflower United Church of Christ
106 E. Diamond Lake Road
Minneapolis, MN 55419**

INDEX: THE STORIES

- HOSPICE VOLUNTEER - Female
- DOULA TIME - Female
- MY MOTHER-IN-LAW, BETH - Male
- I WISH I HAD KNOWN - Female
- NANA'S STORY - Male
- SHAWN'S STORY - Female
- ANTHONY'S STORY - Female
- A CHRISTMAS LOVE STORY - Male
- MARRY ME - Female
- THE COOKIE JAR - Male
- GREAT AUNTIE - Female
- A GRANDSON'S STORY - Female
- MY MOM, MY ANGEL - Male
- A FINE MESS - Female
- PARENTS' STORIES - Female
- STRONG100 YEAR OLD GRIP - Female
- MY FATHER'S DEATH - Male
- A JOKE - M OR F
- THE KISS - Male
- OLIVIA'S STORY - Female
- CIRCLE OF FRIENDSHIP - Female

HOSPICE VOLUNTEER - Female

As a hospice volunteer, I have been honored to support people at the end of their lives. Every one and every story is unique .

One patient, a man I'll call Frank, was no longer verbal when I met him. I would visit twice a week and often sit with him in silence. The day he was actively dying I was asked to come to his home where his family was holding vigil. It was a comfortable atmosphere of sharing memories. I suggested we sing favorite hymns. What followed was a sweet sing-a-long that wrapped us all and seemed to ease Frank and allow his soul to leave his body.

It was a beautiful experience that remains with me to this day.

What also remains with me is the deep and gut wrenching grief that overcame me as I drove away from Frank's home. It caught me completely off guard. I had no real connection with him. I barely knew him. I had witnessed the death of many others who were connected to me that had not moved me so deeply. So why Frank? Was it a soul connection? A contract with a man I was destined to be with when he passed on? I will never know. All I know is that each death is so different.

So mysterious...So sacred.

DOULA TIME - Female

Doulas are non-medical birth companions who ensure that mothers and their partners feel safe and confident before, during, and after birth.

We were in the “doula” phase with dad. He was spending about an hour out of bed per day and much of his time in bed, was spent sleeping or resting. Even though his mind was still very sharp, it was more and more difficult for him to carry on conversations.

But, because Dad felt so supported in this transition he did not show any signs of fear. The hospice philosophy gave him confidence. So, like a well-prepared birth, he worked *with* the process rather than fighting it. One night he said, *“I can’t even find the words to describe how beautiful this dying experience is.”* He marveled at the changes in his body.

Thanks to this “doula” time, Dad was giving birth, not to a baby, but to a transformed being.

MY MOTHER-IN-LAW, BETH - Male

My former mother-in-law, Beth, had been in and out of treatment centers for years. When she came home from Hazelden the last time, she immediately started drinking again and prayed that death would end her tormented life.

Soon after, she was diagnosed with cancer. When it was clear that death was close, her family was called to her bedside. I remember thinking, *“What kind of meaning could a life like this have? A life blown apart by prescription pain killers and alcohol. Why would God allow such tragedy?”*

But, when we arrived, there was Beth, sitting up, wide awake, her eyes sparkling. *“I came back to tell you – the music and flowers – oh my! So beautiful! My old friends were there to meet me – so happy to see me. I couldn’t stay – I had to come back to tell you - don’t be afraid – never be afraid!”*

Beth died a week later. That was 1977 – 41 years ago. But I remember it like it was last week

I finally knew what God’s purpose was for Beth... to tell us not to be afraid. Her last words, *“Never be afraid,”* gave me the gift of hope and took away any fear I had about the mystery of death.

I WISH I HAD KNOWN - Female

While she was alive I easily washed her, combed her hair, put lotion on her, diapered her. This I could do...not happily...but with ease.

When she died, and she was alone, they called me. I went to the nursing home. My brother came. We sat beside her and looked at her. We didn't touch her. I didn't know what to do. As a nurse I had dealt with other dead bodies. But this was my mother's dead body.

It's not easy being intimate with the body of the one who birthed and fed and diapered you.

When the mortuary staff arrived, they dragged my poor dead mother from the bed onto the litter like a rag doll. I stood to help. The urge was to support her head, make her more comfortable. But I just stood there unable to intrude on what these people were doing with my mother.

Years later, I am still unable to forgive myself for not being with her when she died, for not touching her, holding her hand, helping to ease her onto that litter, covering her and walking beside her to that last ride.

I wish I had known then, what I know now. I wish I had prepared, thought ahead. With some help I might have been able to be with her at the end. It has been years and I still feel guilty that I wasn't able to do for my mother what I have easily done for someone else's mother.

NANA'S STORY - Male

Nana, my beloved New England born and bred grandmother, was my first teacher about dying and death and I could have no one finer! She was a force; a true Renaissance woman. She approached her final journey the way she approached most things in life – with thoughtfulness, independence and hope. 'Death' was not a topic to be avoided, but to be explored. She was ready to die before death was ready for her. In 1971, her ninetieth year, she suffered a major stroke. She had long made it clear to her daughters that she was ready to die, but did **not** want to die in a hospital. She continued to be a strong-willed, stubborn woman...refusing to eat...taking only water.

When asked whether she feared death, she responded with her usual clarity, *“Not at all. I'm curious what God has in store for me. There have always been surprises, so why should this be any different?”*

SHAWN'S WAKE - Female

Shawn was a member of my first Congregation. He had contracted HIV/AIDS in his teens. When I met him, he was in his mid 20s and in the final stages of his life. Having been raised in a good Irish Catholic family, he wanted us to hold a Wake in the apartment he shared with his partner. And we all agreed!

We worked with the funeral home to make the arrangements and get the proper permits. But, when the time came we had to figure out how to get the casket into the apartment. It was an old-style building with no easy access to get it in. So, we settled on bringing it through a window. We were grateful the apartment was on the first floor. However, getting it through the window was not so easy! We had to remove the window and the frame to make the opening wide enough. While we were doing that, a neighbor called the police! We were really glad the funeral home staff was there with the permit! After much work, we finally got the casket into the apartment. We laughed thinking of Shawn watching all this from his heavenly perch. We ate and drank, shared memories and touched the casket to embrace our Shawn. In the end, the Wake was a full-blown celebration of his life and his death.

ANTHONY'S STORY - Female

The last day of my husband's life, after 9 years battling brain cancer, was dreadful. He had been in hospice at home for several months. The doctor had suggested that he would just get quieter and quieter and then peacefully fade away. That is not what happened!

The morning of October 15, 2010, Anthony started taking gasping breaths. He wasn't really present anymore but his young body was fighting hard to resist death. Huge breaths that jerked his body across the bed, over and over and over again.

This went on for 6 hours. SIX. HOURS. There was no peaceful fading away. Just awfulness. His mother and brother, my sister, our friends and I all begged him to let go. We assured him that we would be ok, that he could just move on. But that awful sound and movement continued.

One of his dear friends, Tom, was unable to be there due to a work trip he'd put off for weeks...knowing Anthony would be gone when he returned. However, Tom's wife was there. This couple had been there for 9 years, by our sides, for each scan, middle of the night hospital runs and health crises.

They'd also been there for the joys of our lives, like our kids' births.

During all this, our kids, 6 and 9 at the time, and exhausted by the stress of it all, were outside on the swing-set loudly singing songs to distract themselves. It was a beautiful and tender moment with such life outside while death shrouded our bedroom.

Seeing that Anthony couldn't let go, Tom's wife called him in Asia and held the phone to Anthony's ear as his body continued to lurch and gasp. Tom assured Anthony that he would be there for us.

And Anthony heard him.

A few minutes after Tom's call, Anthony let go into death, trusting that his friend would be there (as he indeed has been). Surrounded by people who loved him, Anthony finally was silent...and still...while his babies filled the air with their voices.

I will never forget the awfulness and the wonder of that last day.

A CHRISTMAS LOVE STORY - Male

My Mother died on December 14th, 1985. Losing a loved one right before the holidays is difficult. Plus, the day before, I had driven to New Ulm for a conference. Shortly after we got there it began to snow...heavily. Around 8pm I got a call from my sister telling me mom was in the hospital and it wasn't good. The Doctor had advised the family to come. I tried to leave but the roads were closed.

Sleep did not come to me that night. When morning came, the snow had stopped. I called the hospital to tell them I was on my way but my mother had passed away a few minutes before. I left the room to sit in a common area. Sorrow and grief enveloped me. Tears flowed. A young woman I had just met heard about my situation. She came over and gave me a big hug. She sat down and listened to me talk about my mother. She held my hand and patted my shoulder. I thanked her for being there!

The days that followed were filled with making funeral arrangements which included choosing music for the service. My Mother loved Christmas so naturally a few Christmas carols were chosen. For many years I couldn't sing those carols because of the memories they would bring up.

Years later, though, here at Mayflower, a Holiday sermon focusing on the season as a time for rejoicing and honoring the birth of Jesus as a celebration of life struck a chord with me! I was able to sing those Carols again.

Oh, and as for the young woman who comforted me that day?
We were married at Mayflower in 1988.

MARRY ME - Female

My beloved partner Herb had a very brief illness with pancreatic cancer. On his death bed, I asked him what I could do for him, and he said "Marry Me". So we carried out his final wish with a beautiful non-legal spiritual ceremony, conducted by his best friend and witnessed by close friends and family!

Thank you, Herb!

THE COOKIE JAR - Male

I was seven years old on a warm spring day when I prepared to enter the room where my mother was dying of cancer. At Cub Scouts, I had converted a coffee can into a cookie jar for a Mother's Day gift. Earlier in the day, I went to the store and bought some Lorna Doones, my favorite cookie; I figured a cookie jar was pretty useless without cookies.

The room I entered was dark to protect my mother's jaundiced eyes. She was very thin and I was uncomfortable. I took a deep breath and gave her the cookies. She smiled and reached for something she wanted to give me; it was a belt that she made me while she was in the hospital. I ran, sobbing, from the room. That's the last time I remember seeing my mother alive.

That day immediately began to haunt me. What a failure on my part! Why couldn't I have been stronger? What must she have thought?

Decades later, I told my therapist the cookie story. He quietly asked me a question that hadn't occurred to me. *"Don't you think she understood?"*

A GREAT AUNT' S STORY - Female

It was the early 1950s. I was 3 or 4 years old. My elderly aunt had died. My parents and I went to the "lying in" at Auntie's daughter's farmhouse where she lived. The trunk of the car was loaded with home made goodies since friends and neighbors would be coming to pay their respects. My Mom and Dad were helping host the "lying in" and I was entrusted with the extremely important job of "*staying out from underfoot.*" I was very good at the job. I stayed behind or under pieces of furniture often peering out with curiosity at my first exposure to this mysterious thing called "death."

Auntie's body was lying in front of the windows that overlooked the front yard. I sneaked closer to get a better look. Auntie was dressed in her best dark blue dress. She looked peaceful, and, not understanding, I tiptoed away so I wouldn't wake her. Across the room from her was a large wooden dining table laden with the food. I only took one sugar cookie, then settled into my hiding spot under the table to enjoy the treat while staying "*out from underfoot.*"

As people filled their plates above me, I listened to their conversations. I began to understand that something had happened and Auntie could not use her body anymore. I learned Auntie's family had laid her on that very table to lovingly care for the body she didn't need anymore. I could not express my new understanding at that time, but I know, that since then, I have not been afraid of death. It is part of being alive, it is part of the story of family life. It is with the kindness of people who care that we deal with life, the good and the sad of it... by gathering around the family table, sharing, remembering, patting hands and reaching down to the little child hidden under the table to hand her another cookie and saying, "*You are such a good helper, Sweetheart.*"

A GRANDSON'S STORY - Female

It was 2010 and my son was 8 years old. His grandfather died on a Tuesday evening and because of the late hour, and the fact that he was already in bed when we got home from the hospital, we did not tell him the news until the next morning. He still has not forgiven us for that! So 2 years later, when I received a call that his grandmother had died, my partner and I went immediately to his school to tell him. When he came into the school office, he knew why we were there. He cried. My partner and I cried. The office staff cried. We then took off for the hospital to see my mom, his grandma, one more time. We weren't really sure what to expect since this was new territory for our son. When we walked in and stood by my mom's bedside, my son said, "*It's OK, Grandma, I'm here now*".

MY MOM, THE ANGEL - Male

I lie in bed and think...and think.... because I cannot sleep. I think about my mother who passed away 4 months after my fifteenth birthday. I remember my time with her, the memories - so precious. I think about my future and where I came from. My travels. My life. How I've gotten to this point, pondering what she must think of me and who I've become. Hours later, I have worked myself into a fret. Thinking...thinking...of all the painful things in my life, both past and present.

It is then that my Mom comes to me. I can see her standing among the stars, beckoning me closer so that she can say something in my ear. As I move closer to her, I realize that I am getting younger, and when I finally reach her, I stand 4 feet tall and 10 years old. I hug her. I look up at her face and see a tear rolling down her cheek. It is then that she bends down and says: *"you are so loved and so chosen."* With this, she wishes me well and tells me that she'll see me soon and walks back into the darkness. I try to follow her but I am unable to move. Back in my body, the feelings of anger and frustration have diminished and I am finally able to fall asleep.

A FINE MESS - Female

In the final weeks of her life, my dearest friend often sat at her beautiful grand piano and played Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata or Bach's Prelude in C. When I'd visit, I'd hear stories...like the time she spent with Van Cliburn at Interlochen Music Camp - and when she gave him her ice cream cone.

On the day, when the end was near - we were summoned. In our grief, I felt grateful that we were invited to be there when she transitioned.

However, I knew I had to leave soon to conduct a BEER CHOIR event....where choirs gather to sing silly BEER songs and....drink beer. (I don't even LIKE beer!) BUT, she was clearly on her own time that sunny afternoon, and I knew I was NOT going to be with her.

So, off we unhappily went to the brewery and waited our turn to perform. While we waited, the phone rang. She had left us! I was devastated. However, even though I couldn't be with her, I knew her favorite pianist had come to play her home...with the music that was on the piano...Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata and Bach's Prelude in C. Those pieces gave her the permission she needed to let go....

I also knew that she would think it was HILARIOUS that I missed her big departure because I had to conduct at a BEER CHOIR event!

Over the years, we often said to each other,...."*another fine mess we've gotten ourselves into!*" Indeed, this had been our final 'fine mess'!

PARENTS' STORIES - Female

It was my mom who taught me how to die when she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Being a nurse had taught her a bit about life and death. She tried the chemo but decisively knew when she wanted no more of it. Her faith in God was steadfast and unwavering. She knew it was her time and had no fear - death was a part of the experience. She modeled this beautifully for me and my children. Hospice came to her house way before most people think of it. This allowed her to plan and enjoy the last months of her life. She relished our visits. She prayed with her pastor. She was content.

My father was lost without my mother. He was lonely and depressed. This was very difficult for my family. He was soon diagnosed with cancer as well and not given long to live. However, he was not as content as my mother! I spent as much time as possible with him and it is that time together I long for today. I learned it's important to always take the time!

I had more knowledge about the process of dying with my Dad. While planning his funeral, I was asked if I wanted to attend the cremation. I accepted the invitation as did my daughters. We met my Dad's body at Lakewood Cemetery. We were escorted into the crematorium in a most reverent way and were overwhelmed by the beauty of the room and the experience. We were invited to participate as much or as little as we wanted. I prayed with my hands on the box. I opened the door and helped push his body into the fire. I felt at peace. We stayed in the room for a long time feeling my dad's presence.

A STRONG GRIP AT 100 - Female

There he was lying in bed looking so small. It was hard to imagine because he was always so strong, even at a 100 years his grip of strength was noted by those who shook his hand. Should I touch him or hug him? He was gone and I felt helpless even though my brothers and sisters and I took care of him on a daily basis for 10 years. I just stared and cried over the loss of a man whose face would brighten whenever a small child entered the room or whose strong hands would always be busy helping those around him.

Maybe I should have knelt down to give him a hug.

MY FATHER'S DEATH - Male

When I arrived at the hospital the nurse explained that he had been prepared and warned me that his eyes were not closed.

I entered the room and looked at him lying on the bed swaddled in a sheet. He was small. Rheumatoid Arthritis had diminished his frame. As I walked to the bed I looked at his eyes. They were clear and crystal blue.

Dad had developed Bells Palsy which left his face drooping on one side. He had been a very handsome man in his youth. He once said *"I came into this world looking like Paul Newman and I'm going out looking like Bela Lugosi"*.

But lying on his back with his eyes open I realized his face was perfectly symmetrical. Death had released the conflicting nerves and muscles and restored the attributes of his face. I leaned in and whispered *"You look great old man"*.

I told him I loved him, something we never said out loud, sat with him for a long while and made the call to the cremation service.

SOME LEVITY - M/F

Right before I die, I'm going to swallow a bag full of popcorn kernels. My cremation will be EPIC!

THE KISS - Male

In my memory, I only kissed my father once. The memory is no more distant than the man was when he was alive; his detached strength forged in Depression Era want and war's responsibility. But the kiss is important because he was dead. I was with him in the florescence of a bare hospital room during the final throes thinking, "*Jesus, old man. Are you trying to stay or fighting to leave?*"

I held his hand. When he finally fell back and I knew he was gone, I placed his hand on his chest, closed his eyes, and kissed his forehead. No final farewell, but a final touch. And I like to think that when I was over him, I took in a bit of my father's final breath. So that a few months later, when his last grandson was born and I bent to kiss those tiny lips, the boy's early breaths may have had some of the old man's last. I like to think that.

A breath may be as good as a memory. Good enough for me.

BABY OLIVIA'S STORY - Female

What surprised me was how long death took.

When our babies...Michael and Olivia...were born, too early and too tiny, I was terrified but still too sick myself to really understand.

Both were side-by-side in isolettes in the NICU...too small to be held. We were allowed to stroke their tiny hands with one finger. That's all.

After a few days, we got the news that large areas of Olivia's brain had died off in utero and had been reabsorbed by her body. It is my belief that my body was determined to miscarry her, even though there was another *healthy* baby beside her. The doctors were gentle, but realistic.

I will be forever grateful that we, her parents, never disagreed about the next steps. We wanted to have her baptized before taking her off the ventilator. We gathered our Minister and godparents in a private, windowless room in the hospital. The Minister had baptismal water in a paper cup and performed a short, sweet ceremony. Then everyone left the three of us alone. We had oxygen flowing through a tiny tube to keep her comfortable.

In my arms, she weighed nothing. Her breath was labored. She'd stop breathing and we were sure she was gone. But then there'd be another great huffing inhale. That went on for over three hours. I remember wondering how such a tiny body could last so long.

When she finally took her last breath, the doctor pronounced her time of death and we went home, stopping in the NICU to blow kisses to Michael.

The next morning, we returned to the hospital to visit Michael. His primary nurse, who'd been caring for tiny sick babies for 20 years, looked at us and said *"I am going against the Doctor's orders...But..You need to hold this baby."*

TIME: CIRCLE OF FRIENDSHIP - Female

"I thought we had more time" is what you hear people say when a loved one dies. This is my feeling, too: I thought we had more time.

But, the time had come, we knew. We left the house for a 15-minute trip to NC Little Hospice. Our two children and I wheeled him to the car in a transfer chair. He was able to get into the chair himself and out of it into the passenger seat of the car. But, about half way to the hospice, he said he didn't know if he would make it there. In 7-minutes time – between the house and the hospice – he stepped from *this* world into another, one from which he never fully returned. Thirty-three hours from the time we checked into the hospice, he died.

Nine and a half hours before he died, eight of us, all from Mayflower, stood in his room holding hands. I held his left hand, a friend his right and on around the circle linking us all. This circle represented 235 years of friendship. As we prayed, electric energy moved around, into and through us all.

To quote mystic Ram Das,
"Really, in the end, we're all just walking each other home."