

Why I agreed to officiate my grandmother's funeral after all

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I knew it was coming.

I was visiting my grandmother a few years ago. Grammy was making banana splits, a ritual I'd witnessed many times—the way she sliced the banana, not lengthwise like at the ice-cream parlor, but like thick quarters; how they fell into the bowl, piling up in the middle; how she dropped one large scoop of ice cream on top, then poured the Hershey's syrup and sprinkled the peanuts. No fancy extras—cherries, whipped cream, pineapple. How many of these had I eaten?

I lived with my grandparents one summer in college. Some people gain the freshman 15; I gained the grandparent 20.

This ritual of making banana splits—it carried so many conversations over the years, and it opened the door for this one.

"I want you to do my funeral," she said.

I'm the only ordained minister in my family, and I'm the youngest grandchild. Of course she would ask me. I don't remember what I said, only a sense of ambivalence. Did I really want to be a pastor to my *family*?

So I wasn't surprised when, on the day Grammy died last June, my mother told me, "She wants you to do the funeral."

I had a ready answer: "I'll preach, but I'd like to find another minister to do the rest, so I can sit with the family." I'd made my choice: family member, not pastor. Even though I preached at my father's funeral, I remembered how meaningful it was for me to sit in the front row between my brother and mother, to sing and pray *with* them. I wanted to do that again.

The next day I changed my mind.

Through my first years of ministry, I was amazed at how often someone would say to me after I officiated a funeral, “That was the most beautiful funeral service I’ve been to.” I only followed my denomination’s book of worship, making a few appropriate adjustments here and there. What was so special about that?

And then I learned how often people abandon the worship book—that collection of accumulated Christian wisdom about how to worship well in times of celebration and grief—so that funerals for their loved ones could be “special.” Spurning the book, they build funerals from scratch.

What’s lost is the power of Christian liturgy to carry us to places we don’t know how to get to on our own; to give voice to our deepest desire for God and our love for the one we’ve lost at a time when we don’t know what to say; to put our lives in a posture of praise to the God who conquered death when praise is the last thing we thought we needed.

At 98, my grandmother didn’t have a church in the city where she lived the last years of her life. The service was going to be in a funeral home. I didn’t know any pastors in that city, and I feared the service we might get if a pastor was chosen from the funeral director’s short list. I also didn’t want to tell a pastor I’d never met how to do it “right.”

So, I had a change of heart. Instead of satisfying my desire to be “one of the family” by sitting with them, I gave my family the one gift I could offer: the liturgy of the church, well led—a container for our grief, a rhythm of prayer and praise that supports us when we are weak, a structure to shape our conversation with God and one another in a very difficult time.

When I stood in front of the congregation a few days later and said words I’d said a hundred times, with one painful difference—*Friends, we have gathered here to praise God and to witness to our faith as we celebrate the life of Kathryn “Grammy” Franklin*—when I let myself at that moment be a priest to those gathered, I discovered something: I was more *with* them, more fully one with my family through this role, than I could have been any other way.