



following from the Grande Prairie Herald-Tribune

Cemetery storytelling a loving way to reconnect generations

by: Sue Farrell Holler <http://suefarrellholler.com/>

My parents' remains are buried in a pretty little cemetery that's a stone's throw from the house my dad built, and where I grew up. It's on a side hill beside a river and this time of year is abloom with the pink blossoms of ornamental crab trees and the soft green of newly unfurled leaves that thrive on the wood-land border.

It's a quiet place, tucked away and unused for the most part. Most people who live in the area don't even know it's there.

When I spent the summer "at home" two years ago, I'd often take my morning coffee to the cemetery to sit with Mom and Dad. I didn't think about them really, or anything more than the ducks that swam at the water's edge. It was, rather, a place of contented silence. Being there wasn't morbid, or at all sad; there was just a serene type of comfort.

The cemetery was used for only a few years in the late 1950s when my eldest brother died in infancy. Except for the occasional foray with my best friend on damp and foggy nights when we'd hope to encounter ghosts, it wasn't somewhere I went as a child. It certainly wasn't a place I'd have thought to go for a few moments of quiet reflection. In my childhood, graveyards were creepy, and not something of my everyday experience.

Mine was a generation removed from death. The women no longer washed and prepared the bodies for burial, wakes were no longer held in front parlors, and funerals were no longer community events.

Death was remote. We seemed to know few people who died, and when someone in the family did, we were sheltered from the death as if it were a contagious disease. The adults would scurry off to take part in the grieving ceremonies, but we'd stay home - even when it came to close relatives such as an aunt, an uncle or a grandfather.

My parents kept us sheltered not out of malice, but out love. They thought it would be better for us not to be saddened, and perhaps not to be burdened by the sights, sounds and smells of death. It's something I wish they had let us experience, this understanding and normalizing of death as something every living thing will one day experience.

I was 'touched the other day to receive an email from one of my Mom's close friends, telling me she had visited Mom's grave with her grandchildren. While there, she told them about my mom and about their long friendship, and about others buried beneath the stones and crosses. I can picture them, walking hand-in-hand, she reminiscing about the people she once knew as she gently introduced the children to death and its customs.

The children will not likely remember the stories, but they will likely remember walking among the head-stones with their grandmother and the sound of her voice as she talked about old friends and neighbours. It's an image I know I'll hold for a long time.

In our culture, we don't like to think about dying and death, but grief is something children need to understand. It's a mistake to protect and remove them from the experience of death. They should be allowed to know it, to understand it and to be part of its rituals as much as they are a part of the rituals of life.

How much better to learn about death, and to understand it as a natural part of life, than to be faced with some day losing a friend or loved one without knowledge of grief and without any coping skills.

My mother's friend told me that when she was a child, the family went to the cemetery every Sunday to "visit" with people they once knew. The idea of a cemetery filled not with tears, but with families, stories shared, and the sound of children's questions is a loving way to be remembered.