

CEREMONY

JANE HUGHES GIGNOUX



The Power of Community one celebrant's story

I had the sad honor to facilitate the memorial service for my daughter Peggy's younger child, 20-year-old Miles. He was killed while driving to work one Tuesday morning when his car swerved into the left lane and he struck a large truck. Mercifully, the truck driver was uninjured; Miles was killed instantly. The following day, his body was retrieved from Asheville, N.C., where Miles had been a student at the University of North Carolina, by Walker's Funeral Home in Chapel Hill, where it remained and was prepared for burial. Our family is most appreciative of the many ways that the Walker's staff was accommodating of our needs and requests. The following Sunday, more than 500 people came to Miles' memorial service at the Carrboro Community Century Center.

As people arrived, a continuous loop of Miles' pictures – from infancy to the present – were shown on a large screen at the back of the stage, accompanied by Miles' favorite music. A steady stream of people poured into the Century Center, so many that people were standing against walls. So many young people.

Sam showed up and wanted to sing a song. My previous hunch about needing to be flexible at the ceremony proved accurate. Sam and his song were added to the list of offerings.

"I have all these strips of paper and pens. I thought we might invite people to write wishes for Miles and then collect them," Molly, a family friend, offered. This last-minute idea seemed

daunting at first, until I realized we could enroll the young cousins in the distribution and collection. Another insertion.

Everyone became silent with the beautiful, clear tone of a singing bowl.

"Thank you all for coming this afternoon," I began. "I'm Miles' granny, and Peggy has asked me to facilitate this service today. I think that just about everyone here would agree: To know Miles was to love Miles.

"Nine years ago, Miles' great-grandma died in her 94th year. We all gathered on a bitter cold January weekend in Newport, R.I., to say goodbye and celebrate her life. The next day some of us were wandering around downtown Newport when

Miles remarked, 'That was a pretty good funeral! There was lots of laughter.' I hope we will not disappoint Miles this afternoon. I hope we can have what he would consider a 'pretty good funeral.'"

From there, a number of Miles' family and friends participated in the service, beginning with his father.

Dennis

Miles' father, Dennis, told three stories about his son.

He began, "One evening, when I was putting Miles to bed when he was 8 or 9, he asked me, 'Dad, what do you believe in?' I was taken aback by the question and started rambling on about how I believed in the love our family shared, I believed in Mom and I believed in Emily, and I believed in Granny and Grandpa and in our friends and in our aunts and uncles and

Above: Miles' burial site at dusk. (photo courtesy of Jane Hughes Gignoux)

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“ What if every family you served had a funded prearrangement on file with you? Think of it. Your primary function would be to help them tell a great story about a great person who lived a great life and made a difference in the lives of others. The focus would be on the memories of life rather than the details of the death. Wouldn't that be ... great? ”

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cousins ... and so on and so forth. Finally, Miles interrupted me. He looked up and said, “Yeah, Dad, but do you believe in dinosaurs?”

The first lesson Dennis learned was not to take things too seriously or you’ll miss out on the fun.

He continued, “One evening, I was driving with Miles, and the sky was clear, moonless and full of stars. I thought he was sleeping. But suddenly Miles piped up from the backseat and said, ‘Dad, what’s in that black space between the stars?’ I didn’t know, I told him. After a pause, Miles responded to his own answer, ‘Then I think you can make that space whatever you want it to be.’”

Another lesson: Life is full of stars and other stuff you can’t control but also full of space you can make up any way you’d like.

“I was going through an especially stressful period in my work life,” said Dennis. “Miles made a little peapod out of bright green modeling clay. There were four peas nestled inside, each with a smiley face etched on its surface. Miles told me, ‘Dad, when you don’t feel good, you can look at this, and it’ll make you feel happy.’”

Lesson three is really two lessons in one. First, a peapod sculpted from bright green modeling clay is a horribly underrated tool for healing. And second, if you knew Miles, you don’t really need a peapod sculpted from bright green modeling clay. You can think of him and feel happy.

Emily

Next, Miles’ sister, Emily, came to the podium to read a short story, printed in the program, that Miles had written when he was eight. “Stand with me, Granny, please!” she whispered. “This is a tough assignment.”

The story starts, “Dozens of eggs fell from the sky on Easter morning while everybody was asleep.” Throughout the story, Emily’s voice never broke, and her words were clear with emphasis in all the right places.

Rob Greenberg

Miles’ high school science teacher, Rob Greenberg, shared a bit about

what went on during seventh period after lunch.

“This was a class of extremely enthusiastic learners – all very bright and driven,” he began. “However, as you might expect, trying to teach a senior in the spring of his or her graduating year is akin to lecturing to a fluttering moth, which has entered your kitchen late on a summer night. The thing I remember most about Miles is how he stayed calm and focused, at least most of the time, amid the occasional chaos of seventh period in the spring of that year. Many times we would have eye contact during one of those moments of classroom-wide exuberance. Miles would look at me, smile and shrug his shoulders.”

Kane

Miles’ neighbor and friend, Kane, was up next.

“You always see fountains full of pennies. People always drop pennies that plop and barely churn the surface of the water with soft ripples,” she said. “Every once in a while a generous soul drops a quarter in that makes a giant splash and sends out little waves. Miles was a quarter, no doubt, and his presence has drowned everyone that knows him with tidal waves of laughter and love. I never knew a single kid who didn’t like Miles in high school. He has reached so many people with his kind, fun loving soul, and the waters he flooded us with will never recede.

“He had the best parents, and he knew it. You all had the best son, and you know it. Although I can’t ask you all not to be sad, I hope this fact can ease your pain and warm you a bit. Our pain will go away eventually, but the memories of Miles will never leave us.”

Aaron

Miles’ stepbrother, 18-year-old Aaron, told the group how very lucky he feels for having acquired an older brother at the start of his teenage years. With both affection and admiration, he described the way Miles was blissfully unaware of his movement through the world.

Aaron recalled the way Miles came

home late at night, slamming the car door, crunching across the drive, slamming the front door as he entered, clumping up the stairs, opening the door to their room to whisper, “Hey dude, I hope I didn’t wake you!”

Jane

Then I began my Miles story: “As I look over this impressive sea of people gathered here today to honor and celebrate Miles, I am reminded of an incident from about 10 years ago. I was sitting at my computer opening emails. Suddenly a suspicious email showed up, forwarded from Miles. I didn’t open it, but I shot off an email to both his parents: ‘Why do you suppose I’m receiving pornographic emails from Miles?’ I asked them. Thirty seconds later, my phone rang, and it was Dennis, assuring me that Miles wasn’t able to open those emails.

“It seems there was a family council called that evening, and shortly thereafter, I had an email from Miles saying, ‘Dear Granny, I’m so ashamed...’ I wrote back at once. ‘Dear Miles: Please don’t waste one more minute feeling ashamed. The only thing that matters is for you to know that you have parents who love you very much and want you to be safe.’”

Sam

After my story, Miles’ high school friend, Sam, took center stage to perform his song. Quietly, modestly, Sam held his banjo and skillfully enchanted the crowd with a beautiful melody, “Foggy Mountain Breakdown,” a song that is both lively and haunting.

When Sam’s song was finished, I explained that we would spend the next 15 minutes continuing to share our stories. I invited each person to turn to someone they didn’t know and tell a story.

The room came alive with a buzz of remembering. People got up, moved around, friends sought out friends and strangers connected.

At the time, I wondered if I had made a mistake. Would I ever be able to bring them back? However, when I rang the singing bowl, people broke off



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their conversations, returned to their seats, and silence prevailed.

I restored them into one group by reading a piece from the Toltec people of central Mexico.

Our life is shorter than flowers.

Then shall we mourn?

No! We shall dance,

Plant gardens,

Dress in colors,

And teach our children

To make the world more beautiful.

Because — our life

Is shorter than flowers.

After the poem, I distributed Molly's strips of paper, inviting everyone to write a wish for Miles.

A gentle quiet, spawned by loving intention, filled the room.

There are hundreds of wishes, including these:

"Sending love to you across the universe."

"Miles — man, you know how to do it — nobody can deny that you know how to enjoy life. Take it easy, man. I love you, and I'll be hoping for you to keep an eye on me and make sure I'm having fun."

"Lighter than air, like the crest of a wave — burst into eternity."

"Many wishes on your new journey. I can only hope that I have touched as many people as you have. Continue on..."

"Miles, I don't think anyone will ever fully understand how lucky we all are to have known you. I know I am blessed to have had you in my life. I hope today has happened like you would have wanted. Please take care of your friends and family — they need you."

Peggy

Miles' mom, Peggy, mounted the steps and faced the crowd. The young quietly passed out paper napkins. Peggy, a fiber artist, is centered and clear.

"There are several men who have been important to Miles throughout his life," she began. "They're here today, and I'd like them to stand now and face you so that you can see for yourselves the guides and mentors Miles has been privileged to know and enjoy."

"Twenty-plus years ago, I was given

an extraordinary gift — a gorgeous and impossible and irresistible poetic labyrinth to decode that arrived in the form of a beautiful baby boy. The moment that Miles was first tucked under my arm, wrapped tight as a football, I knew it was going to be fun. And maybe a little hard, and sometimes silly with plenty of places for perfection.

"Lying in that Providence Hospital room together, we set to work immediately, making up the language of mother and son. And today I want to share with you some of our vocabulary."

"Miles often didn't comply with what the rest of the human race was up to. He had his own timing, his peculiar pace, and he often didn't give a hoot if he fit into the system or not. He failed his kindergarten assessment, slept right through third grade Spanish and barely turned in his sixth grade leaf collection. Despite this and many other childhood transgressions, he somehow managed to graduate from high school. It wasn't altogether easy."

"From the start, Miles was incredibly sensitive to transitions and pesky things like scratchy labels in his shirts and the loud *grrr* of the coffee grinder. He was so open and so full of emotions that sometimes the simplest of things could make him fly apart. I saw that tears easily poured out of him along with big ideas and huge dollups of wonder. I loved this."

"Miles had such a deep and inquisitive nature. He had a way of getting to the center of things at a very young age. It was extraordinary to live with someone who was so spiritually evolved and altogether clumsy. This was my Miles."

"Miles is stitched into me as he is to all of you. Looking around this room, I see nothing but unbridled generosity. Miles has made an enormous impact on the patch of earth that we all know. I will be looking for him everywhere."

"I want to end by going back to the beginning. Food was one of my first responsibilities to Miles. Early on, Miles established what worked and what didn't: what could be swallowed, what had to be hurried, what must never be touched. As mother, it was my job to offer choices and listen to what

was possible. Allow me to direct you to Miles' food court. We pretty much have beige food here as Miles distinctly told me he wasn't starting vegetables until fifth grade."

Peg went on to describe Miles' food court: There was a table in one corner of the room displaying large bowls of Cheerios, chick peas, tuna and tiny Tootsie Rolls. She invited people to partake after she concluded with these words:

"Miles grew up in a house of the cloth napkin. But it was so much more. Cloth is my medium. I understand much of the world through the expressive nature of fabric and its potential to communicate."

At our house, we have been blessed by many, many wonderful meandering family dinners that went way beyond beige and invariably included the endless fiddling with the napkin. More nights than not Miles wore his napkin on his head.

"It is here in his superb sense of play that I find great solace. I am going to ask you to join in that exquisite impulse to nonconform. Please take a minute and put your napkin on your head. Feel what it is to be Miles. Miles is my hero."

With those words, more than 500 people placed a white napkin on their heads. It was a fitting end to our celebration.

But wait, at the very last minute, one of the attendees, Melva, came out of the front of the room and announced, "I have a music program on our community radio every Sunday from 7-9 p.m. I'm dedicating the entire program this evening to Miles. I hope you'll tune in and listen."

As people lingered before departing, I sensed a very different energy from the intense distress that was so evident when they arrived. They listened, laughed, wept, shared stories and connected with one another in their common resolve to celebrate Miles' life and offer comforting love to us and one another. •

Jane Hughes Gignoux is the author of "Some Folk Say: Stories of Life, Death, and Beyond," a storyteller, teacher, civil celebrant and a member of Celebrant USA Foundation.

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