

The Power of Goodbye

by Mavis Linnemann

As a funeral director's daughter, I always thought I knew the funeral business. I've even lived above the funeral home.

However, not until recently have I come to understand the importance and emotional value of the funeral itself.

Last week, my 17 year-old cousin, Andy, died in a car accident and my family was absolutely devastated. Andy died early Saturday morning and by noon there were over 50 aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and neighbors gathered at my Uncle Greg and Aunt Michele's house. The immediate family was a bit hysterical, but the elaborate support system that had formed at my aunt's house was grounded in faith, love, and shared suffering.

By four o'clock Wednesday evening, the night of the funeral, the support system had multiplied fourfold. The line to see Andy and to greet and hug my aunt and uncle went out of the church narthex, through the door, and out into the parking lot. Never before had I seen such an amazing display of love and support. Emotions were running high, but Andy's visitation was our chance to cry on each others' shoulders and share stories – the good, the bad and the ugly.

My aunt and uncle looked exhausted when the line to see Andy was cut off so the funeral could start on time, but for some reason, they also looked a little better than before. They were surrounded by love.

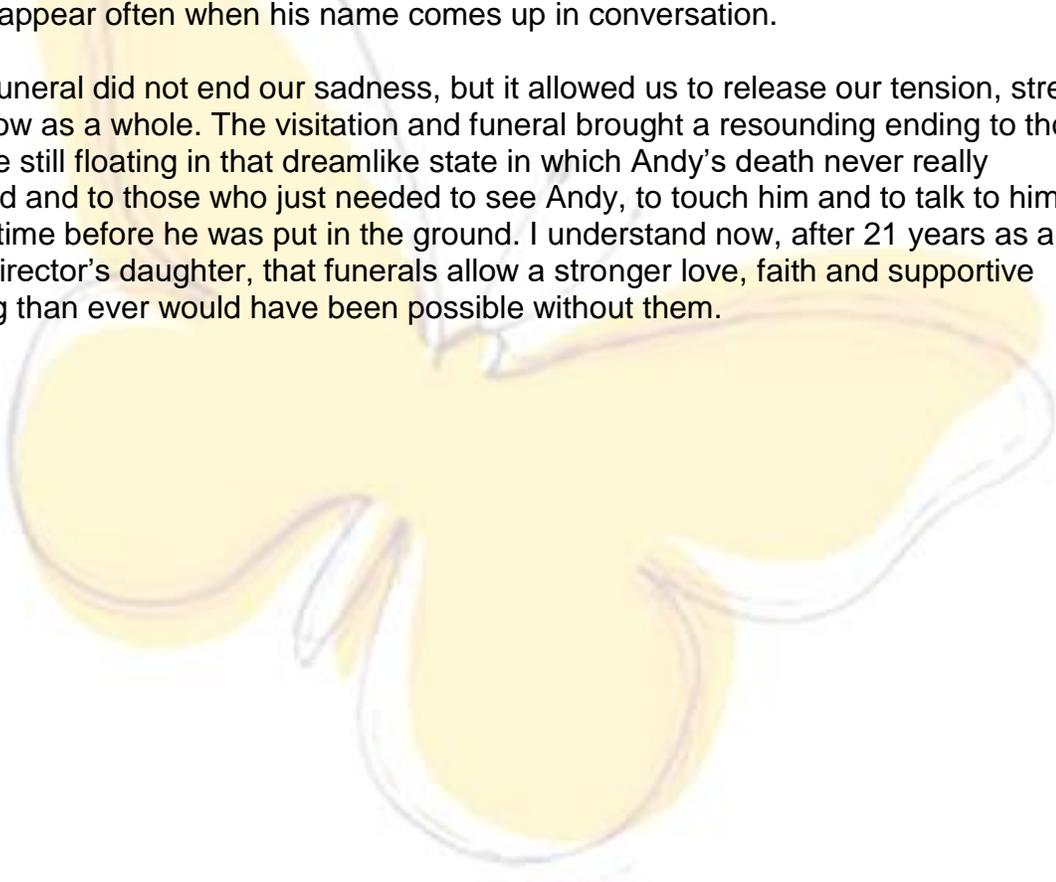
As the family writer (though my dad pretends he's one too) and one of the cousin's closest to Andy, I was the designated eulogy writer. It was one of the hardest tasks I've been asked to do. I just sat at the Cracker Barrel, with my boyfriend beside me, drinking coffee, sobbing as I tried to put all my thoughts together. As soon as I finished writing it later that night, my stomach finally stopped aching and I literally felt a wave of relief wash over me.

When I stood up during the funeral to read my remembrances, I knew I had to do it right. No talking too fast. No mumbling. No losing control until I had finished. My words needed to bring comfort and they needed to let those who never knew Andy get a glimpse of who he was and what he was all about.

When I finished reading that day, I knew I had done the best I could. As the funeral drew to a close, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Just walking from the church to the gathering room for sandwiches, you could feel the difference in the crowd of saddened people. We had hugged and cried, celebrated Andy's life and we were ready to work through the next days, weeks and months together.

At the burial the next morning, my mom organized a butterfly release. Standing around the grave, arms around each other, we listened to one of Andy's favorite songs. Everyone was given a tiny envelope and an orange slice. When the song was over, everyone opened their envelopes, letting the fragile, hungry Monarch butterflies out to feast on the oranges. After they had eaten, the butterflies took their leave. We could only watch in awe as a hundred Monarch butterflies hovered in the air above Andy's grave. To this day, butterflies will always remind us of Andy and everyone got a butterfly pin to wear and remember. Butterflies now serve as our way of knowing that Andy is looking down on us – we still see butterflies around his grave when we visit and they seem to appear often when his name comes up in conversation.

No, the funeral did not end our sadness, but it allowed us to release our tension, stress and sorrow as a whole. The visitation and funeral brought a resounding ending to those who were still floating in that dreamlike state in which Andy's death never really happened and to those who just needed to see Andy, to touch him and to talk to him one last time before he was put in the ground. I understand now, after 21 years as a funeral director's daughter, that funerals allow a stronger love, faith and supportive mourning than ever would have been possible without them.



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