



Lima Cemetery near Volga River State Park, Fayette County, Iowa. 1989.

DEATH



Joe M. Reigelsberger (1989 – 2012)

As of 2019, the most tragic news I can think of for the neighborhood during the last few decades regards young Joe Reigelsberger and Debra Lundt, mother of Joe's fiancée, Anastasia Lundt. On the night of the 2012 Winter Solstice, Joe had been driving a Ford Escape station wagon near John F. Kennedy Memorial Park north of Fort Dodge (some 40 miles away from Rolfe). Also in the car were Anastasia, who was a student at the University of Iowa, and Debra, owner of Princess City Floral in Pocahontas. A 21-year-old Fort Dodge man, who was texting and on a mix of three drugs while driving, crossed the center line and crashed head on into their car, killing both Joe and Debra.

In 2014, a judge sentenced the driver to 10 years in prison and to pay restitution to the Reigelsberger and Lundt families and to the Crime Victim Assistance Division of the Iowa Attorney General's Office. According to Joe's obituary, he and Anastasia had been together since they were 16. They were each other's first love and were excited to begin their married lives together.

I was impressed when I observed his parents, Sue and Mick, slowly walking with the liturgical leaders and other family members down the center aisle of the ornate Resurrection Catholic Church with a high ceiling in Pocahontas for the funeral mass with the eyes of so many people upon them. They walked arm in arm, understandably heavy in grief, seemingly fragile, and supportive of each other. I am reminded of the song, "Lean on Me." Mick's father, Joe, followed them. Mick's mother, Norine, had died earlier that year in March after a 14-month battle with lung cancer. Although senior Joe had the first of several bouts with cancer in the 1990s and was in compromised health for decades, he outlived Norine and did not die until 2017.

At one point during the mass, Crosby Krischel (boyfriend of young Joe's twin sister, Kaitlin) stepped quietly to the lectern, while Mick took a seat behind him. Mick had written some thoughts for the occasion. Crosby read them. Most notable were Mick's thoughts in relation to how young Joe had been killed on the Solstice. In the weeks prior to the Solstice, there had been international news coverage of something Wikipedia now calls the "2012

Phenomenon.” The apocalyptic view was based on a range of beliefs, including those from Mayan culture, that the world would undergo a major transformation on the day of the 2012 Winter Solstice. Some prophets had claimed the world would end that day. Mick wrote, “No one took the prediction of the world ending on December 21 seriously. But I can tell you for our family, in our hearts, part of our world did end that day.”

Joe’s grandmother, Norine, had been correct when she told me in the 1990s that young Joe was called to be a farmer. It is as though Norine had written the obituary. Joe attended Kirkwood College then came back to the Rolfe area, living on an acreage he had bought north of town. The obituary said, “Joe was meant to be a farmer. From the time he was a young boy, he loved to work with his dad in the dirt. He could operate any piece of machinery and would do any job asked of him without complaint. He was a very important part of Reigelsberger Seed; he ran the sprayer for the family custom operation; and helped any neighbor with both manual and technical help.”

Joe’s twin sister, Kaitlin, married Crosby in 2014. They have three children, Graham Joseph born in 2016, Jack Michael born in 2017, and Evie Sue born in 2019. Kaitlin has a business degree from the University of Northern Iowa and works for Ag Partners based in Albert City. She and Crosby live south of Havelock, where he raises hogs and does other work. Joe’s mother, Sue, is the Pocahontas County assessor.

For a short time, perhaps six or seven years ago, I had a Facebook account. Kaitlin was one of the first people to friend me. I don’t know if that was intentional or by accident on her part. We did not correspond much, if at all, but I had a window into her life. Most notably, I recall the times when she talked about going through Norine’s closet and trying on some of her grandmother’s clothes and accessories. Indeed, both Norine and Kaitlin could be described as having an interest in fashion and dressing quite stunningly. What was most endearing in her Facebook posts was the time when she posted photos and thoughts about learning to make cinnamon rolls, using Norine’s award-winning recipe.

I did not have many close encounters with Joe and Kaitlin. However, when reviewing journals this winter, I saw an entry that reminded me of what perhaps had been my closest connection with the twins. They were born in August 1989, which would be thirty years ago, the same fall that I started this project. By 1994, they were in kindergarten. On a mid-November day in 1994, I had traveled the road and Rolfe area early in the morning, filling plastic gallon milk jugs full of well water at my parents’ place to take to my Des Moines Township farmstead. I felt proud and wholesome as I finished planting trees there. Still feeling invigorated, I went to Velma and Verle Howard’s farm where I saw both of their cars parked next to the house—an indication they were home. I went to the door and was surprised when young Joe greeted me at the door. The twins did not have school because Pocahontas High School, which included students from Rolfe, starting in 1990, was in a state football playoff game at Cedar Falls, and classes had been cancelled that day so teachers, students, and other fans could travel to the game. Pocahontas would finally lose to Hudson in the Division 1A championship game.

Mick and Sue had gone to Des Moines for a Pioneer Hi-Bred Seed meeting, standing in for Joe and Norine, who normally would have gone, but the older Joe was scheduled for surgery. Normally, the twins would have stayed with Joe and Norine. Instead, the youngsters were spending the day with Velma and Verle. They invited me to sit with them around the round oak table in the kitchen. Verle served me some of his hard-core coffee. We talked, and I drew pictures of rabbits, cats, and football players with Joe and Kaitlin. Later, I recorded in my journal, “This ties things together—to sit around the table and be part of this generational experience. It is more than a mere coincidence, more than special. It has a transcendent feel to it.”

When I headed for my car, Verle handed me a bag of black walnuts. I had gathered them that fall along the streets near the house where I had often stayed with Ruth and Charlie Ahlrichs in Pocahontas west of the courthouse. I had left the walnuts with Verle, who said he could hull them, a difficult and messy job without the right equipment, by running them through an heirloom crank-style ear corn sheller. Verle also gave me a piece of iron that I could use like an anvil in a setup he had demonstrated where I could safely use a hammer to crack the shells of the walnuts before picking out the meat. It was a clever system, and yet, the work was tedious with little success.

The Reigelsberger family started a scholarship in young Joe's name for graduates of the Pocahontas Area Community High School. Sue said, "To date, we have given over \$10,000 to PAC grads. With the help of Joe's friends, who hold a golf tourney every summer, the scholarship should continue for quite a while."



Left photo: Verle (1924-2009) and Velma (1925-2017) Howard. Right: Joe (1926-2017) and Norine (1930-2012) Reigelsberger. Both photos taken in 1996.

Velma and Verle Howard and Joseph and Norine Reigelsberger

The weekend of November 9, 2017, was a significant and emotional one in many ways. Velma Howard and Joe Reigelsberger, both in their early 90s and the last of the people of my parents' generation who had lived on my road when I started my project in 1989, had died within days of each other that week. Velma's husband, Verle, had died in 2009, and Velma had eventually moved to an assisted living facility in Burt. Joe's wife, Norine, had died in 2012, and he had still been living at the home they had moved to in Rolfe in 1992. Without my own car since 2009, I rented one to go to her memorial service at the Shared Ministries of Rolfe on Saturday and his funeral mass at Resurrection Catholic Church in Pocahontas on Monday.

At the luncheon following Velma's service, I took four quarts of my homemade bread and butter pickles to the women working in the kitchen. I lingered and told them that the passing of these two longtime neighbors truly was a milestone, marking the passing of an era. One woman, Diane Smith Sandvig, replied yes, however, in her mind, the demolition of the



Bread and butter pickles. 2012.

Gunderson house would be an even greater milestone. It was built alongside our old house on the farm in 1956, when I was 11. My parents continued to live there until Mother's death in 2004 and Dad's death in 2010. Sister Clara, who had inherited the farmstead, had finally decided in December 2018 to have the house razed late in the winter.



The Rolfe Methodist and Presbyterian churches merged in the 1990s to become the Shared Ministry of Rolfe and make their home in the Methodist building, 1982.

When I first arrived at Shared Ministries of Rolfe sanctuary for the memorial service, then sat in a back pew and looked around, I was disappointed, thinking that I had not seen Paul Harrold. He was six years behind me in school, still lived at his family farm a mile west of where my parents had lived, and was about the only person still living who I had interviewed for my road project. However, as I looked far to my left, I could see this "older" man in the back pew on the other side of the room. I wondered if that might be Paul. But if it was, he had changed a lot since I had seen him at his mother's funeral in 2012. Bald with no dark brown hair. His physique was not as strong, and he walked with a limp when he stood after the service ended. I would learn that in previous months, he had been helping a friend wash the windows of her house, standing on a ladder atop a deck when the deck collapsed, and fell and broke his leg.

Paul offered me a ride to the cemetery just a mile outside of town. It was a sober ride, and yet, we were able to visit quietly. I told him about how the Howard gravestones were near my parents. However, I had forgotten how near. As we got out of the car, I left Paul and walked across the mowed turf, looking at names and dates on the simple, small, flat-to-the-ground gravestones. The first names I saw were Mildred and Arlo Ives, parents of my friend Dallas Ives, whom I have known since childhood. We went to the Rolfe schools together and were at Iowa State during the same years. He spent his career doing computer programming at NASA in Houston, Texas. Mother has said that when she and Dad first moved from Waterloo, where he had worked for John Deere, back to the farm area in the early '40s (mind you that Mother was a city woman from Ogden, Utah, who had met Dad at Iowa State College), Mildred was the first one from the neighborhood to stop and visit with her. I noticed the birth and death dates on Mildred and Arlo's stones, confirming that Arlo had died at the age of 63. He had

seemed so old, and yet, he was quite young when he died. I suppose he had seemed old because of the effect that lingering emphysema had had on him.

The flock of people at the cemetery consisted mainly of Velma's extensive family—three surviving daughters, the two wives of Velma's late son, Randy, their offspring, and friends. It was a pleasant enough day—overcast with a slight glow of sunshine, but no shadows and fortunately, not bitterly cold and windy like the weather had been two days before. The funeral home had its large royal blue awning and chairs for the immediate family near the casket. I walked in the dusty grass, around the north end of the awning, and behind the group to continue my search. There, in the row of uniformly flat gravestones a few feet east of the awning were the markers for my grandparents (John and DeElda Gunderson), my parents (Deane and Marion Gunderson), and my parents' youngest son, Christian, who was born at the hospital but lived for only five minutes.

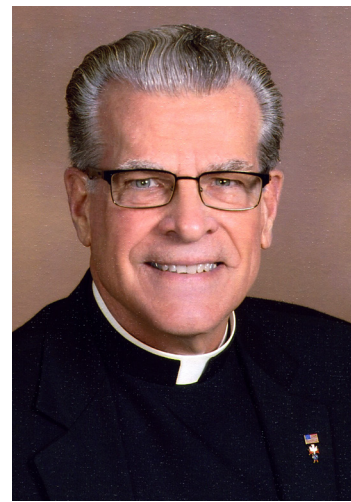
I did not feel I could linger long at the place where my favorite grandparents and my parents were buried. Nor did I want to ignore the gathering and the words of the minister or miss the chance to stand by Velma's casket and say goodbye. Even so, I stood still for about two minutes near the graves of my ancestors and felt a profound sense of wholeness and timelessness.

In attending Joe's service, I realized that two of the men there, Kenny Bennett and Denny Wagner, who happen to be brothers-in-law and close to my age, did not look well. I would later learn that Kenny Bennett had cancer and that Denny Wagner had other long-term health problems. It is hard not to wonder how much effect that chemical agriculture in the county has on the cancer rate of its residents.

Kenny could be both funny and compassionate: a gentle, understanding, and helpful soul—who, as co-op manager—supported me over the years, beginning in 1997, so that I learned to manage my land. It is hard to remember how many times I would see Kenny, even in a simple passing at the co-op or a social setting, when he would ask, "How's Helen?" in a way that made me believe that he cared—not only for me as a co-op client, but also as a person.

Kenny had grown to be a large, heavy man, but when I saw him the weekend of being in Pocahontas County for the two funerals, he was extremely thin and not as alert as I recall him being. Even so, Kenny oversaw the honor guard and its salute at the graveside rites for Joe. Kenny's voice was clear as he ordered the men to aim and fire their rifles, then he gingerly stepped forward and presented the folded flag to Joe's family, who were seated beside the casket and under a canopy. Later, I heard "Taps" and turned to see Kenny at a distance from the mourners, holding what is called a Ceremonial Bugle—not one that he played, but the kind that played on its own. The sound was clearer than I had ever heard from a high school trumpet player at a Memorial Day or graveside service. Clear, strong, cutting through the cold air, sending shivers down my spine. Yes, this was a passing of an era.

At the luncheon after Joe's service, I was able to sit across the table from Monsignor Mike Sernett, who had retired to Pocahontas. He is a year older than I, had grown up on a farm across the road from my grandparents' farm, studied in Rome where he earned a doctorate in canon law, served in many roles in the Diocese of Sioux City, and had always been an affable and handsome fellow. His family was of Bohemian descent, worked hard at farming, and loved to dance and drink beer. His mother, Monica, had been born in the same section and on the same day as my father. She was great at making kolaches (a fruit-filled pastry) and sometimes shared some with Mother and Dad. I always thought the Sernett family had more fun than our Norwegian Gunderson family. I dearly remember the time that Mike and his father, Bob, along with Jerry Zeman (also of Bohemian descent from the neighborhood and who became a priest) took Dad, Charles, and me fishing at Lost Island Lake near Ruthven. The Sernetts and the Zemans knew much more about fishing than Dad did, and we had a great time.



Top photo: Bob and Monica Sernett at their Century Farm. 1990. Lower row, left to right: Monica and Bob Sernett, 1990. Monsignor Michael Sernett. 2019. *Photo of Monsignor Sernett by Life Touch and from his collection.*

When Mike and I visited, he no longer had the tall, strong physique and wavy coal black hair like he had when I saw him at the reception for my father's 90th birthday in 2008. Instead, in April 2017, Mike had been driving back to Pocahontas from South Dakota when his car was hit head on by a Dodge Ram. He suffered a concussion, serious cuts, a broken leg, and broken ribs, and later developed a permanent problem with his balance. His hair is now salt-and-pepper gray.

I knew Mike, his parents, one brother, and three sisters had been great dancers, especially of the polka, and asked if he still danced. He said he could no longer dance but was quick to add something I have heard him and his parents, Monica and Bob Sernett, say years before—that after being ordained, Mike danced only with his mother and sisters. Mike went on to talk about how Bob and Monica had gathered his sisters, brother, and him in their house and

taught them all kinds of dances, including the waltz, schottische, polka, and even foxtrot. The last time I saw Bob and Monica was in 2004 at the Rolfe Care Center when I was leaving Mother's room and the two of them were sitting across from each other at a small square table in the dining room. They each had a glass of red wine with their dinner and offered me a glass. I declined the offer but enjoyed a short conversation with them.

It was wonderful to talk with Mike about memories of his parents and my grandparents. It was also touching to hear him talk about the suicide death of his younger brother, Chuck, who was born in 1949, had served in the military in Vietnam, and came home to marry, start a family, and farm. However, Chuck was not able to cope with the post-war stresses and took his life in 1978. Mike's youngest sister, Diane Spitzley, led an effort to have the military recognize that Chuck's death was a casualty of the war and add his name to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. Members of the Sernett family gathered at the wall, and Mike, as their representative, read Chuck's name at the induction ceremony.



It would be impossible to create a diagram, not even with a 3-D computerized software program, to show all the different people who have been angels in my life. Also, it would be difficult to define the variety of nuanced roles they have served and their level of significance. Admittedly, I have chosen to distance myself, for one reason or another, from some of those people whom I had been close to, and others have shut doors on me. Then there is the passage of time and the matter of death that have their ways of altering or dissolving relationships. However, I am grateful for those who have been angels in my life and those who continue to be.



Marion Abbott Gunderson (1919 – 2004)

The morning of November 29, 2003—the day after Thanksgiving—was the last time I saw Mother at her home on the farm. Her health had been failing in multiple ways for several years, and she had already stayed for a few weeks at the Rolfe Care Center earlier that fall. Mother had returned home, where she was not very mobile and for the most part sat in her recliner chair by the window at the end of the living room. Some family members moved her chair to the end of the dining table for the Thanksgiving meal. However, the next day she would move back to the Rolfe Care Center and spend the last year of her life there.

Clara, her husband, and Dad had gone to town with a TV, computer, and other furnishings to set up a room for Mother. Before they left, Clara told me Mother was freshening up in her bathroom, then would be in her bedroom where she would be okay on her own, but that I should listen if she needed help.

I lingered in the kitchen at the round oak table after finishing a late breakfast. I felt an intense, complex mixture of gratitude and resentment toward her. This was not a new mix of feelings, and one of my near life-long questions had been whether I would ever make amends with her. However, as I sat there, aware that the opportunity to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her would not last forever, I angrily admitted to myself, “I can’t just march into her room and say, ‘I am here to reconcile.’ She would not understand, and I am not prepared to do so.”

Mother called for me. I went to her room, where she was sitting on the edge of the bed and asked that I hook her brassiere. I sat beside her and reached out, not only hooking the bra, but feeling the tenderness of her back and shoulders. I could not recall being so physically intimate with Mother and was grateful to have the opportunity to serve her in such a tender way. I was also acutely aware of our great differences, especially regarding the roles of men and women, other issues related to gender, and the value of being candid. For sure, if it had been me who was about to enter a nursing home, wearing a bra would be the last thing on my mind. And yet, here she was with a new, beautiful, shiny white brassiere.

Mother dismissed me and finished dressing on her own, then Clara and the others returned home. They moved Mother to the care center that afternoon.

At the end of February, she was admitted to the Pocahontas Community Hospital, where I visited her on March 1. There had not been much conversation between the two of us for a long time. Fortunately, her mind was still somewhat sharp.

I reminded her of the book she had once given me, *The Christian Agnostic*, and asked if she had given it just to me or to all of us siblings. She said that she gave it just to me. I said I had never read the whole book, but that I appreciated knowing that it was okay to be an agnostic. She seemed to resonate but did not remember much about the book. I didn't especially want to talk with her in depth, but I didn't want her to leave this world closed off. What hidden secrets, what sorrows, what regrets does she have on her mind that she will take to the grave? My throat was tight and my eyes shed tears.

I mentioned that I had given Charles a copy of my book about the road I grew up on and that he had read it. Mother had never expressed interest in reading the book, although when I first started the road project she had wondered if I was going to write a book. I had to excuse her, partially because even if she were healthier, she would probably be defensive about what I had written, considering it would not fit into the family motif, the family way of being, the family way of keeping secrets. But now with her low energy and poor eyesight, it seemed understandable that she would not want to ask to see a copy of the book. I scolded myself, "Besides, Helen, you just gotta do it. You gotta do it. It's your book. It's your life. It's not your mother's life, it's your life. And it's what you do with your life. It's between you and your God, Helen. Where do I come to terms with God? Or is it the Goddess?"

When I drove away from the hospital and toward the homeplace farm, the hymns that came to me included "Lift High the Cross" and "Come All Ye Who Labor."

Then as I sat in my white Honda Civic next to the homeplace barn and wrote in my journal, I found myself humming, "Our God, our help in ages past, our help in years to come, and our eternal home."

Mother and I had a short but sweet visit at the care center on Monday, April 18, 2004. I held her hand, kissed her forehead, and stroked her hair. I said I loved her. She said she loved me.

On Tuesday morning, I had breakfast at the farm with Clara and Dad. Clara and I had eggs, oatmeal, prunes, and oranges. I would have been happy to cook for Dad, but he was a fussy eater and had his typical breakfast, which for decades consisted of Carnation Instant Breakfast. I was deeply touched when Clara, even though her throat was dry and voice raspy that morning, sang "Happy Birthday." Dad chimed in at the end. Soon I took off for Ames, but was angry with myself, when a few miles out of town, I realized I had forgotten to stop by to see Mother. I prayed that she did not feel hurt that I had not visited her on my birthday.

On Tuesday, April 27, I visited Mother at the care center, getting to her room at about 8:30 in the evening. She was more willing than usual to allow me to linger. We were not saying much. Then something shifted as though a spirit moved through the room. I quietly but with clear words apologized to her for the ways in which I had been a difficult daughter to raise, the ways in which I had not appreciated her role as a mother, and how I may have hurt her over the years. She replied in a reflective manner that she did not know if she truly understood what it meant to be a mother and that she had not thought of herself as a good mother. Instead of arguing the merits or deficiencies in her parenting, I simply said, "I forgive you for the ways in which you did not meet my expectations of what a Mother should be." I also told her I loved her. She gently responded, "I love you and have always loved all of who you are."

At the time, I did not want to analyze the moment but simply wanted to cherish the opening to the spirit and to each other. Looking back after nearly 15 years have lapsed, I still cherish the experience. However, I have not wanted to talk with other siblings about it as if I was comparing our end-of-life visits with Mother. Nor have I naively thought that our conversation washed away all the issues that had existed between us. Nor have I ignored that her tender and affirming disposition may never have occurred if she had not been worn down physically and her ego had not been so diminished.

I rejoice that our conversation did happen. When I have dreamt or thought of Mother, significant insights slip into my consciousness, and I more fully appreciate the challenges she faced and the contributions she offered the family and community. Certainly, I am often reminded of the ways that she went out of her way to support me even though it did not seem like she understood me. I feel sad in some respects for the ways in which I took her for granted and was a jerk toward her. In other respects, I was defensive as well as sad for her. For instance, I resent how Dad could be a real jerk in the way he treated Mother regarding food. I recall when I visited her when she first entered the Rolfe Care Center in September 2003. She was there for a month before returning home then back to the care center after Thanksgiving. I had never heard her say anything disparaging about Dad, but that day, she said she thought she could get well enough to return home and be able to cook for herself but emphatically with a tone of resentment said, "But not for him."

On November 27, two days after Thanksgiving, I visited Mother at the nursing home and was surprised she wasn't watching *Wheel of Fortune* or *Jeopardy*. The TV was on, but she wasn't paying attention to it. She wanted help getting from her chair to the bed, but I was unable to help her with the move. When I reached for her hand, it was warm. Her face was thinner than usual, and she looked frail. I told her about the family, including Dad, playing dominoes at the kitchen table the previous night. She smiled, glad that the family made the effort to visit Dad. I told her how I had looked at her baby book at the farmhouse and saw a picture of her that looked like a Gerber baby and another of her in a tap dance outfit.

I told her I loved her and gave her a kiss on the forehead. She said, "Oh, Helen, you are a good girl." And I replied, "Well, not perfect." I knew it was important to be present with her and not try to avoid conversation but not try to force it. In any case, her thought processes didn't track well. She wanted to call home, but I reminded her that Dad and the others were in Ames for a football game.

Soon she said, "Well, Helen, it is time for you to say, 'Adieu.'" I started to say goodbye, then asked if she was ready to make the transition. She asked, "From what, the chair to the bed?" I replied, "No, the big transition to the end of life." She didn't resent my bringing up the topic and told me about Charmaine from the nursing home staff reading to her from the Bible and telling about how God had sent Jesus. Mother had said to Charmaine, "Well, there is one thing you haven't talked about." It took Mother a long time to find her words and tell me more, but she had said to Charmaine, "You haven't mentioned, if God sent Jesus, where did God come from?" I replied that there is a lot of mystery to life. Our conversation lasted longer than usual.

I wanted to ask whether this was one of many goodbyes or the last goodbye, but I did not push the conversation further. Fortunately, we already had a conversation in the past several months when I told her she didn't have to hang on for me—that I would be okay.

Mother still inhabited her body and this world. She might have been greatly diminished, she might have been dying, but she was still here, even if not in the capacity that I have known her. And yet, for better or worse, she still had vestiges of control. She talked as though she had gotten the last word in the conversation with Charmaine, and she had told me it was time for me to say, "Adieu." It wasn't like she said, "Thanks for coming and visiting. I need some time for myself, so let's say good night."

Fortunately, Mother did not experience Alzheimer's disease or show signs of dementia. Yet, her mind was off-kilter that day. Certainly, her many ailments, medications, and months in the care center had taken their toll. On one hand, knowing she was so worn down and medicated made it easy for me to go with the flow and accept her style. On the other hand, I did feel an element of being dismissed. However, in years to come, I mentioned the conversation to my sister Clara, thinking that certainly, since she had spent more time with Mother and

had more ease of being with her, their conversations would have been different. I was wrong. Clara said that most of her visits with Mother had ended with Mother dismissing her, often with the word “adieu.”

All these years later, I still wonder what Mother intended when she told me to say, “Adieu.” Did she realize we would never see each other again? It seems to be a conundrum and not necessary to fully parse the conversation.

In her book *Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up in America*, author Natalie Goldberg of Santa Fe, New Mexico, tells about the death of her mentor, Katagari Dainan Roshi, head of the Minnesota Zen Center in Minneapolis, on Thursday, March 1, 1990. “Roshi” means “old teacher.” Members of the Zen community had taken turns sitting with Katagari Roshi through his last breath and beyond. They washed his body, preserved it with herbs, and placed it in a plain pine box surrounded by candles and flowers in the zendo (meditation hall). People could visit any time for the next three days with the windows open and the cold Minnesota air filling the room. There was a short ceremony, the box was closed, carried to the hearse, and taken to a funeral home for another ceremony. Then the disciples carried the casket away to the cremation oven. Other mourners moved to a waiting room and drank tea.

With family members present, disciples put the body in the oven and turned on the gas to start the flames. Natalie went with friends to a restaurant where all she could think of ordering was french fries, an uncommon food for her. She returned to the funeral home and walked down a long basement hall to a small, hot concrete room filled with intense noise from the furnace. She sat with three others next to the oven. Goldberg writes, “Fifty minutes before the cremation was finished—it takes five hours to burn the body completely—I opened the door of the oven and looked in. Through the heat and intense flames, I saw two small ribs—that was all. They were the last of my great teacher.”

I had often thought about how to be present to death in a manner similar to that of the Zen community, but I had not researched options. Mother’s death seemed imminent, although no one can predict the exact schedule of the Grim Reaper. On Monday, November 29, I dug in a drawer at my apartment in Gilbert and found a pamphlet from the Iowa Cremation Society and called the number. It turned out the place was a marketing arm of a funeral home and not an organization. However, the woman who spoke with me was wonderfully understanding and helpful, giving me ideas and suggesting I call my local funeral home.

I was apprehensive about whether Powers Funeral Home would understand and be supportive of what might be considered a wacky idea, but I decided I needed to make the call that day or never. I wanted to know the steps they took after somebody dies at the nursing home and what the options were for me doing something akin to the vigil that the Zen center community kept for Roshi. I was impressed with the funeral home director, Mike Loterbour. Not only was he understanding, but he said that when the time would come, I could follow the van carrying Mother’s body to Fort Dodge, where she would be cremated.

On Tuesday, November 30, Dad called mid-morning to say Mother had died before sunrise after a nursing home aide left her room. He had visited Mother during dinner hour of the previous night, then went home. She soon called and asked if he would come back to town and bring her an item, perhaps it was a box of Kleenex. He felt her request was not quite rational and that the trip could wait until morning.

On Wednesday, some of the family members met with Mike at the funeral home regarding plans for the memorial service. I asked him if we needed to follow the common protocol of all family members sitting in the front pews on the same side of the aisle. He was comfortable with latitude. I spoke about liking space and how I would be uncomfortable crowded with family in the customary pews, especially with all of us having to leave at the end of the service in a slow, bunched up fashion. He volunteered that anyone who wanted could sit in the pews

on the other side of the aisle, which often remained empty during funeral services. One sister said she preferred coziness. I would like to believe I held my tongue, and if I did respond, that I would have acknowledged how different folks have different needs.

After the meeting, I followed the white van that carried Mother's body from Rolfe to the Wilbert Vault Company in Fort Dodge, 40 miles away, where she would be cremated. The driver, Roger Kern, a farmer and licensed mortician from Plover, simply backed the van to the overhead door of the plain-looking, brown metal building as though he was a UPS driver making a delivery.

When Roger entered the building, he talked with Harry Summers, who was the lead vault company representative. Then Harry and his assistant, Travis Girard, pushed a transport table (somewhat like a gurney but with metal rollers instead of a mattress) to the van, rolled the large cardboard box that contained Mother's body onto the cart, and pushed the cart into a large area with a concrete floor inside the metal building. Roger gave Harry an envelope that contained official documents. I asked about the white plastic zip ties on the box, thinking they were part of an official seal that could not be disturbed. The men said the ties held the lid in place.



Photographs Helen took when she followed the funeral home van, carrying her mother's body to be cremated at the Wilbert Burial Vault Company in Fort Dodge. Lower left photo, Harry Summers. 2004.

Harry explained how the process works. The cardboard box would slide from the cart onto cardboard rollers into the furnace. A chimney would let in the fire, and holes on the bottom along the sides of the furnace would circulate the air. The optimum temperature range would be 1,400 to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit.

The gathering was so informal that I thought, "Well, heck, I could ask if I could see Mother's body again." Roger lifted the lid of the large box and pulled back the top of the sheets so I



Garden Gate at Wellspring Renewal Center, Philo, California. Circa 1980.

could see her face. It was not a pleasant sight but something I did not fear seeing, considering that during my chaplaincy internship at the UC San Francisco Medical Center in 1984, our group had visited the anatomy lab where medical students dissected human cadavers.

The anatomy lab consisted of several tables, each with a human body that was covered with a drape except for the specific area of dissection on a given day. It was hard to feel any reaction because it was such a controlled, scientific space. And yet, what triggered my emotions and existential wonder was something that might seem insignificant. The feet of one deceased woman were exposed, and I could see her boldly painted pink toenails. Admittedly, I knew nothing about who this woman had been, but the colored toenails were at least a small clue to her human nature. Indeed, the visit to the lab was not a morbid experience. It was empowering.

When I took that one last look at Mother, there really were no signs of her humanity. What was most vivid was how she lay in a frumpy nursing home gown with the soft white skin of her upper chest exposed and that her nose was sharply pointed in a way that I had never noticed. I had neither the imagination nor courage to stay while the box and her body were placed in the oven. In some ways, even though Roger and Harry seemed comfortable with my presence and requests, I felt I had already transgressed too many boundaries of Midwestern custom or “Midwestern nice.”

The experience of looking into the box reminded me of the time I was photographing a cicada sitting on a wooden garden gate at Wellspring Renewal Center in Northern California. A crystal-like drop of water moved slowly down the back of the fresh, damp, green body of

the large insect. The dead, dry, brown old body—the exoskeleton—was just an inch away. I took several photos, then reached for a different camera lens. When I turned back, the green cicada was nowhere to be seen. It was a moment of mystery, a numinous experience to ponder the existential question, “Where did it go?” I like to think a similar mysterious transition happens when a person dies.

Clara was probably right to remember Mother as smiling at her on the Sunday morning before she died. I still strive to remember the conversations, holding Mother’s warm hand, her smile when I said I loved her, and her telling me she had always loved me.

Roger got in the van and headed back to Rolfe. I talked more with Harry, took photos of the facility, and headed to Ames for space to regroup and design the bulletin for Mother’s memorial service. I was glad for the cooperation of the funeral home staff and the opportunity to accompany Mother’s body to that final destination and be close to the reality of what was happening. I thought of the mythological firebird, the phoenix, that rises from the ashes of its old self.



Clara Gunderson Hoover and Deane Gunderson. Memorial Day 2008.

The private memorial service for Mother began at 1 pm on Friday, December 3. Parlor lights lit the front of the room where Mother’s library basket sat on a table alongside a red and blue plaid Pendleton blanket that was wrapped around a can serving as an urn for her ashes. Nearby was an easel holding an 11x14 inch, black and white photo of Mother that I had shot in 1998 of her posing next to the Rolfe library sign. Pastor Charles Miller of the Shared Ministries led the service. Mother’s P.E.O. chapter conducted a short ritual, and each member left a daisy on Mother’s basket.

I drove to the cemetery in my Honda Civic, and my sister-in-law Gloria rode with me. As we approached the area of family gravesites, it was sweet to see Clara in her long black wool coat, huddling next to Dad on folding chairs. Having been the oldest sibling in our family, Clara was an only child until Charles was born 11 months later. She would have shared her Waterloo home with two others who had been the only children in their families—Mother and Dad. I believe that dynamic gave her a bond with them that is different than what the rest of us experienced. Clara had been so loyal to both of them, and also so caring for Dad, especially during the previous week.



Helen and dog at the farm where she grew up. Circa 1951.

When all family members had arrived at the graveside, Mike asked us to form a semicircle, and I went around to the far-left end of the group. I smiled and yet felt sad as I realized that I stood beside Grandpa and Grandma's tombstones—part of me felt like a young child.

Pastor Miller finished his words. The basket that contained the blanket and can of ashes was lowered into the grave. I picked up a shovel, approached a pile of soil, and said to the others that just as with healthy gardening, it is important to loosen the soil. Then I scooped soil over the basket. The others in turn took the shovel to scatter more soil, and I was grateful we got a chance to participate physically in this final ritual rather than be mere spectators.

As the committal service ended, a train moved across the landscape near the cemetery. Charles and Dad both commented on how Mother had grown up in a railroad town in Ogden, Utah, and would have traveled to Iowa State on the Union Pacific. Although the rail line near the cemetery was initially part of the Chicago Northwestern route, it is now a Union Pacific line.

The private graveside rites for Mother finished. After the other cars had gone back to town, I sat in my car in the older part of the Clinton-Garfield Cemetery. Not knowing what to do, I decided to swing back through the old part of the cemetery. It was soothing to drive along and see some of the old names.

I hadn't fully realized what Mother and her death meant. I knew she wasn't coming back to her home at the farm. And part of me knew she would not be in the nursing home forever—that she would die. But a person doesn't really grasp in advance—and probably not until after the passage of time—what it feels like or means for the very end to come.

The next morning, the appointed time arrived for the family to gather in the church basement with Pastor Miller. It was a crowded room with him, family, and pallbearers Dan and Roger Allen. I would rather have gone directly to the sanctuary to listen to the music by pianist Marilee Kleespies of Rolfe and violinist Laura Bernhardt of Storm Lake.

When the family entered the sanctuary and proceeded down the aisle, the others headed to pews on the right. I headed to a pew to my left where I realized I would be sitting in the row behind the pallbearers. Two young men sat beside me—my nephew Tim and my niece Christina's husband, Chris. Otherwise, the pews in that section were empty. It was a fine service, but I was appalled by the theology implied in a poem the minister read about how "God takes only the best."

It was cool to be sitting not far from Marilee and Laura, getting a close view of them, and clearly hearing their music. My most poignant memory occurred at the end of the service, when the minister, family members, pallbearers, and other congregants, including Tim and Chris, had left. I remained seated. My focus was on Marilee and Laura as I listened to the most exquisite music I had ever heard, beginning with "Ave Maria." Soon, like butterflies landing on a park bench, my friends Joy Leister, herself a pianist, and Mary Sand, herself a violinist, sat beside me, and we simply savored the moment and music.

The music ended. Joy, Mary, and I were not yet ready to walk through the tables of people gathered for lunch in the social hall in the basement so we could get to the only restroom in the building. Instead, we walked out into the fresh air and across the lawn to the side door of the nearby funeral home and used the restroom there. Then we headed back to the church for lunch. After the meal, we returned to the sanctuary, which was pretty much empty. At the back of the room, Mary and I visited with Mel Duitscher, a retired public health nurse, who I felt comfortable talking with in some depth about Mother.

I told Mel about my visits with Mother, how she often dismissed me, and just days before had told me it was time for me to say, "Adieu." Mel was clear and compassionate, responding that Mother's style on those occasions most likely reflected much of who she had been throughout her life. It was as though she was both respecting Mother and affirming me by suggesting that I not take Mother's behavior personally. Mel and I agreed that even though Mother had been involved in the community, she was a private person, especially with her feelings, and was even more private during her time at the care center. I added that I felt Mother, who had voluntarily entered the care center a year earlier, had set out to have a self-imposed hermitage, and in many instances did not want to socialize with other people. Soon we heard Joy at the piano at the front of the sanctuary, playing comforting, traditional hymns. I was grateful to have my friends there and have Joy's music as a healing balm.

One of the most important lessons that I took away from a 1980s seminary class on death and dying was that a person dies pretty much in the same manner or style in which he or she lived. I cannot expect others or myself to suddenly change in personality just because we know our days to be limited. Certainly, it would have been unfair to expect Mother to change radically. Fortunately, though, there was that window—like a miracle—when she lay in the care center bed, I sat in a nearby chair, and we expressed our love and forgiveness to each other.

I am reminded of a childhood interaction with Mother that is emblematic of the emotional gulf between us. One morning when age seven and at home, getting ready for school, I felt morose as I sat on the piano bench in the living room and was putting on my shoes. At the time, our family consisted of five children ages 10 and younger. Mother, who had been an only child, would have been only 33 at the time and have had her hands full, but she took time to ask what was wrong. I was most likely brooding about the deaths of a grandmother, great grandmother, and great aunt in recent years. I asked Mother if we would see each other



Helen with her mother Marion Gunderson. Circa 1947.

in Heaven after we died. She replied simply that she would have to ask the pastor, then returned to her work but never got back to me. There are many ways over the decades that I have interpreted her reaction. One is disappointment that she felt the need to go to an external authority rather than relying on her own authority, perhaps sitting next to me for a moment or two, asking about my feelings and what I was thinking, and telling me she was sorry I was blue. Or perhaps she could have hugged me, and said she loved me and always would. Or perhaps she could have talked about how what happens after death is a mystery. It was also disappointing that she never got back to me. I still get choked up when I recall that memory even though I know that it was hard for Mother to express feelings or be truly empathetic and that she probably did better than I ever would have at age 33 with so many children.

Fortunately, I am no longer concerned about whether or not I will see Mother in Heaven. I have not known what to believe—whether there was a transition to some other end of the tunnel where Mother emerged and blended with a great healing light, or the end is the end and she doesn't exist any place at all. Fortunately, I believe that just as there is the principle of the conservation of matter and of energy, there is a conservation of spirit. I also believe in

the power of the imagination and that at any time a person can talk to any deceased person as though they are a saint. I also recognize that Mother's influence carries on in my genes, weaknesses, strengths, dispositions, and values.

In the process of joining the Lakeside Presbyterian Church in Duluth in 1967, I attended the required new member meeting. Considering that I was the only new member in the room and was already a Presbyterian, the senior minister, Reverend Roger Kunkel, said that unless I had questions to ask, I could go home and simply come back and officially join the congregation during the upcoming Sunday morning service. I admitted concerns that I had been afraid to voice when, as part of an eighth-grade confirmation class, I joined the Rolfe Presbyterian Church in the 1950s. At the time, I had complained to Mother that I did not feel I could truthfully answer "yes" to the creedal questions that the church elders would ask each class member. Mother said it would not be a good time to rock the boat and that I should simply answer "yes." I hesitantly told Roger that I was not convinced of either the Virgin Birth of Jesus or the concept of life after death. I was surprised by his candor. He said that no one knows what happens after a person dies and that the meanings of the Greek words used in the New Testament in reference to abundant and eternal life had much more to do with the quality of life here on Earth as opposed to an unending number of years. My seminary studies supported his perspective. There are two words for time in Biblical Greek. One is "chronos" for chronological, quantitative, sequential time, as is commonly referenced in Western culture. The other is "kairos," which is about the qualitative nature of time. Even now, with 25 years of being part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation and the practices of yoga and mindfulness currently being central to my spirituality, I continue to value Roger's insights and the notion of kairos time in contrast to chronos time. I have come to terms with the fact that Mother is gone and I will not see her again.

That said, I am aware of how my feelings toward Mother weave in and out of my life in a bittersweet way that will probably continue until I die no matter how much I grow and come to terms with death. Even now, the melancholic tune for the popular song "Let It Be Me" (1959) by the Everly Brothers resonates deeply and nearly daily with me even though the lyrics are simplistic. When I remember Mother, I often find myself humming the song.

The Everly Brothers harmonized gently and beautifully with a background of ethereal orchestral music. The melody is what lingers most with me. It is one of longing and sadness. The line I recall most is "Don't take this heaven from me." The lyrics, although not exceptionally articulate, address the fear that someone who loves us completely and to whom we cling for meaning and security would take up a new love and forget us. The refrain is a plea that the loved one would never leave but that we would always be that person's first and only love. My association of Mother with that song is related, most likely, to birth order issues and how a mother is more than a mother. In the eyes and heart of an infant, and at a primal level, a mother is akin to a goddess, and two of the key challenges of a person's life journey are to come to terms with her relationship with her mother and honor the power, wisdom and nurture of the goddess energy within herself.



Deane Charles Gunderson (1918 – 2010)

In the spring of 2010, Dad started to experience falls and was admitted to the Pocahontas Community Hospital. Family members then arranged to move him to an assisted living apartment at Arlington Place in Pocahontas. His intent—even if not rational—was to return to live at the farm.

Dad fell again, early in the morning on Father's Day, Sunday, June 20, at his apartment. An ambulance brought him later that same day to Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames where the medical team said he had experienced some cranial damage. Dad stayed in a near-coma condition for 10 days.

I recall Dad as being a man of good works, such as serving on the Presbyterian board of trustees that was responsible for the church building, serving on the Rolfe School Board and as treasurer for the Iowa Association of School Boards, and organizing the annual flea-market-type auction for the Lions Club. However, I never heard Dad talk about religion or faith. Also, there was a time in the 1990s when I asked him if he would be willing to let me record an oral history interview with him, to which he gruffly responded, "Not if you are going to ask me to philosophize." Perhaps he was confused and meant "theologize" instead of "philosophize" and suspected that because I had a seminary degree and three of his other children were born again Christians, I would ask him questions about his faith. However, that topic was far from my mind in wanting to interview him about his rural heritage. I knew Dad was fully capable of reflecting on life as well as telling stories, especially if he were in control of a conversation and there was no tape recorder in the room. Fortunately, he did allow me to record an interview with him.

Dad was quite a reader, and in his last years, was on a quest to read the Bible. He also asked my older sister, Clara, who has been a high school librarian and became his key reference librarian, for books that explained Christianity. Although I have a seminary degree, he did not ask me for a reading list, even though he was probably agnostic in his beliefs, much like I am.

During my chaplaincy internship at the University of San Francisco Medical Center, religious creed was not emphasized in visiting with a patient. Rather, personal presence and being attuned to the person was.

When I visited Dad at the hospital, it was hard to know what he comprehended and nearly impossible to understand what he struggled to say. I sat close by his side and held his hands. They were large like a person would expect a 91-year-old farmer to have, but I was surprised by how soft they felt. I leaned close to his ear, knowing his hearing was not good, and said, "Your

hands are soft.” Soon he began chirping, “Soft hands,” and chuckling, almost like a mantra throughout the evening.

In the few other words I said, my emphasis was, “Dad, you are in safe space. You don’t need to hang on for me. I will be okay. You can let go. I love you.”

I was grateful that my friend Joy could accompany me to visit Dad. Although she is an evangelical Christian whose father was an evangelical pastor, I have not known her to push religion. Instead, she has been gracious and an example of the fruit of the Spirit growing from a person’s religious disciplines. She brought her Bible, and after a while, quietly asked permission to share some passages. It was beautiful to hear her voice as she read the 23rd Psalm and from John 14, “My father’s house has many rooms...”

Late in the afternoon after 10 days at Mary Greeley, Dad was transferred to the Israel Family Hospice House in Ames and died 18 hours later in mid-morning on July 1 after Clara had visited him briefly and stepped out of the room.

Clara called me with the news. I rode to the hospice house on my bike. When I entered the building, my first time ever there, I was struck by the names of donors on the wall of the entrance. Both Mother and Dad were listed for their contributions. So was Dr. Barbara Forker, the head of the Iowa State University women’s physical education department when I was an undergraduate. She was both a national and international leader, a force to reckon with whom I looked up to and kept in touch with over the years. I recalled, probably in the 1990s, when we had lunch and she had said she was on the committee to raise funds for the hospice house and was assigned to recruit my parents to be part of the campaign. She died in Arizona on June 11, 2010.

When I went to Dad’s room, he seemed relaxed and at peace in his bed as though he had just nodded off after reading a book. The hospice chaplain led a ritual for family members in his room, then I rode my bicycle toward home on a trail through a park in Ames that I had never seen before. The park and the weather were idyllic. On one hand, I wanted to linger, soak in the experience, and meditate. On the other hand, I wanted to keep moving. Then I did the mundane. I stopped at Hy-Vee and had two pieces of pizza—food I seldom indulge in, but I wanted nurturing food.

Next, I stopped at the nearby Goodwill and looked through the men’s long-sleeved cotton shirts. Ever since I began shopping at Goodwill for those kinds of shirts to wear for gardening, they have been a staple of my wardrobe. I found one I loved with a blue and white checkered print and wore it home. Later, I realized it was not much different in style than one Dad wore, along with a string tie and Ivy League hat, when I last photographed him at the farm.

The graveside rites would be on Friday, July 30, and the memorial service on Saturday, July 31. The one-month delay would work okay with me, but the hang time was not something I cherished. Over the decades, I had anticipated that Mother’s and Dad’s deaths would not be as hard for me emotionally as it would be to get along with family in dealing with their funerals. As it was, for better or worse, the responsibilities had been outlined and delegated by a core group of sisters. Again, as I did for Mother’s memorial service, I designed the bulletin. I also discerned how much to follow tradition and family expectations, and how much to step outside cultural molds in order to create healthy circumstances for the two days of family gatherings.

For sure, I was glad to work on the program for the funeral service. I could easily use the Adobe PageMaker template that I had used to create Mother’s bulletin to expand Dad’s bulletin to six pages. Throughout the process, I kept in touch with Clara about my plans. I selected several black and white photos of Dad ranging from when he was a young boy with chickens on the homeplace farm to a photo of him in his checkered print shirt. I also chose a variety of written pieces such as a poem by Iowa author James Hearst titled “When a Neighbor Dies,” a letter from environmentalist Rachel Carson to a friend about the migration

of Monarch butterflies, and paragraphs from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* about life both before and after death. I also included pieces that Clara and Joy had recommended. This project seemed the best way for me to have a voice, even though silent, in the service.

I did not want to go to Rolfe by myself or be dependent on family for housing, meals, or socializing. As the preordained days came closer, my friend Joy said she would be able to go with me. We tried to figure out how we could take our bicycles, but we could not get a bicycle carrier. I called Mel Duistcher to see if she knew any place in Rolfe where we could get bikes. She checked and called back to say that her son Dan and his wife, Nancy, would loan us bikes. Betsy Dahl, who farms for me, said that Joy and I could stay at her sister Anna's house in Rolfe. In some ways, the old home is like a bed-and-breakfast place.

It dawned on Joy and me that we could ride the bikes to the cemetery. Mine is a family of walkers, runners, and bicyclists. I thought perhaps some might like to join us and told Clara, who was the hub of family communications that month, to let the others know our plan. I also let her know of another idea.

There were friends from Ames who had expressed an interest in going to Rolfe for Dad's memorial service. I wanted them to carpool if possible. I also wanted them to feel welcome. Indeed, people can be uncomfortable driving to an event in a strange town, looking for a place to get a decent cup of coffee or bite to eat, finding the right church, and being among strangers. Certainly, I did not want my Ames friends needing to wind their way to the basement of the Rolfe Shared Ministries building, then to the far end of the social hall to find the small rest rooms. Also, I wanted to have time with them and for them to meet some of my Rolfe friends.

I realized the Rolfe Community Center would be a great hospitality center. It shares a new building with city hall and the public library that had been funded partially with Mother's donation of stock. Beth Pearson, well known as a volunteer community organizer in Rolfe and local food advocate, was willing to provide food and serve as hostess for my guests. I let other family members know their out of town guests would be welcome to join us. Little did I know there was to be greeting time at the church just prior to the memorial service. Maybe the family organized that time because no wake or visitation time had been scheduled the day before.

Being single, my perception is that married couples, when traveling to family turf for funerals or other gatherings, have an advantage of being able to take their best friend with them—if indeed their spouse is their best friend. I also place a high value on friendship and have definitions of family that go beyond biology and certificates. Even with Dad's 90th birthday dinner only a year earlier, I took the initiative go counter to the norms of some family who cling to a narrow definition of what family means. I told the sisters who were planning his dinner that I would be bringing Joy. We all knew Dad liked her. Arrangements worked out well enough but not without hesitancy on the part of those sisters and tension between us.

In the week ahead of the trip to Rolfe, I also confided in Clara that I would like Joy to join me at the private services but also expressed a concern that there might be family members who would resent Joy's presence. Clara was fine with Joy being with us but said she would check with the others. When she reported back to me, she said there was resistance. Admittedly, the rituals at the funeral home chapel and the cemetery were meant to be private times, and typically, that might mean family only. But for me, Joy was family. I was bummed, but I did not want to put her in a situation where she might feel uncomfortable vibes from other family members.

Also, knowing how much photo snapping happened at Mother's graveside services, I requested through Clara that no one take photographs at Dad's private services, especially the graveside rites, until at least 10 minutes after the service was over. Clara was willing to accommodate my wish, but got back to me, saying that other family members would not honor it.

Joy and I drove to Rolfe on Thursday night, checked into Anna's house, then walked the few blocks to Dan and Nancy's house to get the bicycles. The bikes were not a perfect fit for either of



Tombstones in the older Clinton-Garfield Cemetery near Rolfe. 2008.

us but good enough to serve our needs on this milestone weekend. We settled in for the night. The next day we rose, had breakfast, and rode the five blocks to the main street. I left Joy at the library, then rode down the street two blocks to the funeral home for a brief service.

As soon as it was over, I promptly left the funeral home and got my bicycle, not wanting to get caught up in socializing and certainly wanting to get to the cemetery on time. I found Joy at the library. We rode a mile on paved streets, then traveled a gravel road, crossing where train tracks had been removed and replaced with the Three Rivers Trail, then arrived at the old Clinton-Garfield Cemetery. It was the home for the annual Memorial Day services and used to have tall, beautiful cedar trees, but they were destroyed in a 2004 tornado. The gently hilly landscape sloped downward toward the meandering Pilot Creek in the valley east of the cemetery with cattle grazing in the pastures across the creek.

We passed by old tombstones of varying shapes and designs; stopped not far from where my great grandparents, C.L. and Dena, were buried; and parked near large tombstones that could allow Joy to be out of sight from the family that would be gathering in the new cemetery across the road. Of course, it was her choice to do as she wanted with her time. Fortunately, she was resourceful and able to enjoy being by herself. She was also gracious, not taking offense at the decision I had made, with her blessing, after hearing from Clara that there might be resistance to her presence at Dad's gravesite.

The skies were blue and full of sunshine, and the temperature was comfortable, even though that time of year in Iowa is typically hot and humid. Our ride had seemed so basic—simple, exposed to nature, active, a true pleasure, no engine sounds, no exhaust fumes. I found myself humming, "This is my father's world."

Joy and I visited briefly, then I mounted my bicycle and followed the gravel cemetery road down the hill in the direction of Pilot Creek. In that lower section of the old cemetery, I passed by a section of tombstones I had explored years ago. I recall there was one with a bronze sundial. Another that said, "I told you I was sick." And another, "It's later than you think."

As I crossed the gravel road to enter the new cemetery, I saw the farmstead where LeRoy and Mary Nelson had lived just east of the cemetery. LeRoy had sold Dad two horses for \$50 apiece for gifts to us children on Christmas Day in 1954.

The new cemetery was relatively flat. Most of its grave markers were rectangles set close to the ground, their surfaces flush with the turf for easy mowing. I parked the bicycle a distance

from where the family members were gathering and walked over to join them. I recall little except that Dad's ashes were inside a round, green, metal John Deere seed box that had been used on an old corn planter. The motif for the weekend seemed to be that of Dad being a corn grower, especially when one considers the seed box for a corn planter was used as an urn and how my sisters had placed tall, vibrantly dark green corn stalks at the front of the church sanctuary for the memorial service.

I lingered long enough to shovel my share of soil over the area where the planter box with ashes was buried and for some pleasantries, but soon returned to the bicycle, rode across the road to the old cemetery, and met Joy. Our trip back to town was as wonderful as our trip had been from the funeral home to the cemetery, yet I was humbled when I noticed that the black banana seat of the borrowed bicycle had left a serious, large black stain at the back of my new khaki slacks.

That night, Joy and I went to my parents' home for dinner with the whole clan of siblings, spouses, nieces, and nephews who were gathered there. I had never seen the place so full of backpacks, suitcases, bedding, and people. One group gathered at the round oak table in the kitchen for dinner. Another group of us sat at a round oak table in the breezeway. I genuinely enjoyed the conversation, particularly with a nephew and his fiancée.



Rolfe's new community center with white pillars and green roof stands on the east side of Garfield Street, aka Main Street. 2006.

The next morning, Joy and I met my Ames friends and others as they arrived at the community center. Our host, Beth Pearson, had placed linen towels in the bathrooms, provided tablecloths with 1940s and 1950s floral-patterned fabric, and arranged bouquets of flowers from her garden and the local market. The menu included local apples, sweet corn and black beans for salsa, tortilla chips made just north of the Iowa border in Welcome, Minnesota, strawberry scones, coffee, and more. She also graciously greeted people and helped them feel at home.

The group of us walked the three blocks to the church. We seemed like a contented gaggle of geese and were in no hurry but savored the experience and the beauty of the bonds between people, even those who had never met before.

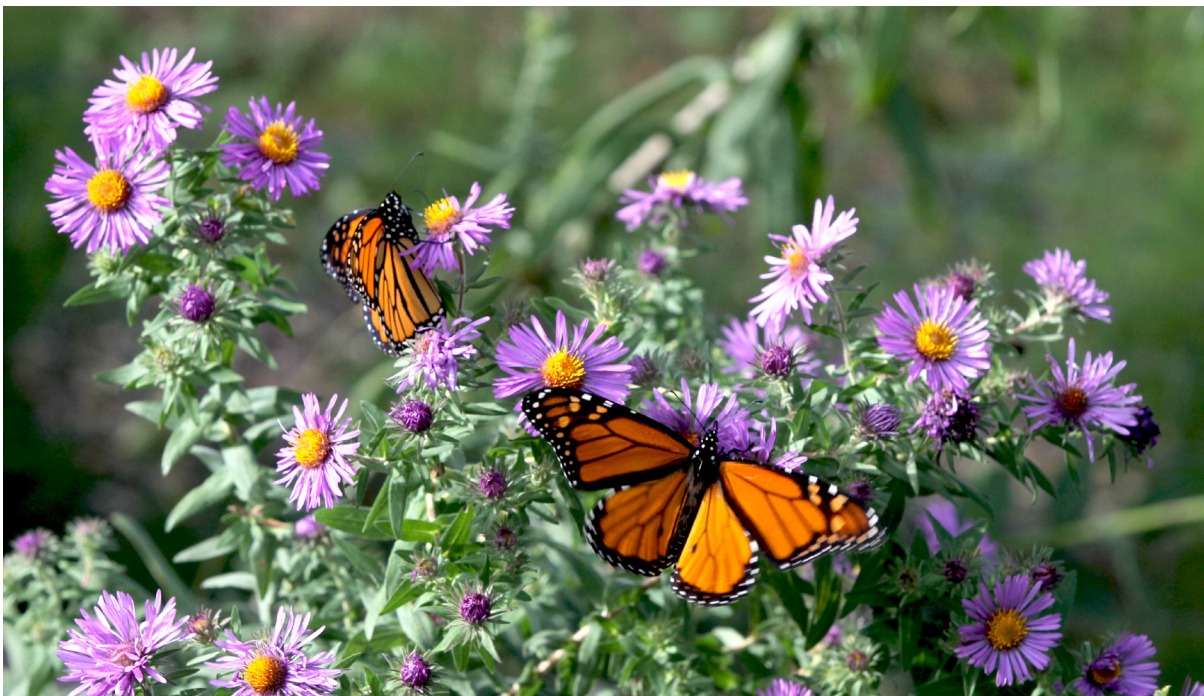
In anticipation of the day, I had called the funeral director to say I was going to sit with friends and asked him to reserve space for us. The staff did save space, but it wasn't a large

area of open pews toward the front and on the left like where I had sat for Mother's funeral in 2004. Also, our pews were not well marked. Even so, we were able to squeeze into the space allocated to us, and I was grateful for the feeling of solace sitting among friends.

I recall little about the service except how the minister spoke so glowingly and at length about how Dad had supported him. Also, brother-in-law Jeff Moore, who is a pastor, read a piece that one of Dad's tenants, Gary Beekmann, had written at the time of Dad's 90th birthday a year earlier. Like I had done at the end of Mother's service, I stayed seated in the pew while others left. Betsy's nieces, Maria and Sophia Roland, slipped in beside me, gave me hugs, and listened to the music with me.

My friends and I attended the lunch in the church basement but reconvened at the Rolfe Community Center where they expressed great interest in seeing the territory. Several of us went in a caravan of cars, starting with my land in Des Moines Township northeast of Rolfe, then coming back through town to see the school, then off to my parents' farm for a short visit, then to the homeplace where my grandparents had lived. My friends were intrigued by the homeplace and felt comfortable there, seemingly sharing some of my vibes toward the place that had meant so much to me.

To have my friend Erv Klaas, who is a retired wildlife biologist, drive one of the cars in the caravan and stop frequently to explain some feature of the environment was not much different than the days when Dad would be driving the family home from church but point out some feature he thought was intriguing. For instance, there was the time when I was a teenager and Dad drove into a field, stopped, had the family get out in their go-to-church clothes, and examine a drainage tile project—even having us look deep into the trench. Dad's was the perspective of an agricultural engineer. Erv's was the perspective of an environmentalist and ardent fan of Aldo Leopold, who had written *A Sand County Almanac* with its ground-breaking piece, "The Land Ethic." To have Erv along was about as good as it gets for having a guide for a field day, perhaps second only to what it might have been like to have Leopold himself as part of our caravan.



Monarchs and asters at Helen's urban farm. 2016.

Erv's wife, Janet, also rode with us. In a sympathy card she sent when Dad died, she handwrote the words of a letter by environmentalist Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, that I incorporated in Dad's funeral bulletin. Carson wrote the letter, entitled "Departure," shortly before her death to a friend:

Rachel Carson Letter

For me it was one of the loveliest of the summer's hours, and all the details will remain in my memory: that blue September sky, the sounds of the wind in the spruces and surf on the rocks, the gulls busy with their foraging, alighting with deliberate grace, the distant views of Griffiths Head and Todd Point, today so clearly etched, though once half seen in swirling fog. But most of all I shall remember the Monarchs, that unhurried westward drift of one small winged form after another, each drawn by some invisible force. We talked a little about their migration, their life history. Did they return? We thought not; for most, at least, this was the closing journey of their lives.

But it occurred to me this afternoon, remembering, that it had been a happy spectacle, that we had felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return. And rightly—for when any living thing has come to the end of its life cycle we accept that end as natural.

For the Monarch, that cycle is measured in a known span of months. For ourselves, the measure is something else, the span of which we cannot know. But the thought is the same: when that intangible cycle has run its course it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to an end.

That is what those brightly fluttering bits of life taught me this morning. I found a deep happiness in it—so I hope, may you. Thank you for this morning.

It is interesting, within a family, how the attitudes toward and memories of a patriarch (or matriarch) can vary. In ours, there is at least one sibling with unfettered adulation for my father. That is not my perspective. Instead, I have mixed feelings—both positive and negative—regarding him. I also have mixed feelings about the power dynamics among us siblings.

Just as no two people ever step into the same river, no two people ever enter the same family. A river is always changing. A family is always changing. It is natural that people within the same family would have different perceptions, not only of the family, but of the patriarch and matriarch. It is also natural that people have different ways of dealing with grief.

I recall Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and her book *On Death and Dying*, written in 1969. It outlined five stages of grief. I suspect that it was the first research and book on the topic, and her work, which became quite popular, was misinterpreted to mean there is a definite, linear process that all people go through when someone important to them dies.

Rachel Carson letter, published in the book *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson* by Linda Lear, Beacon Press, Boston, 1998.

Although many older people in my life (grandparents and great aunts and uncles) died when I was young, I did not encounter much in terms of death of friends or family members until the last few decades. Mother's and Dad's deaths certainly put me more face-to-face with death than ever before.

During my seminary course on death and dying, I came to understand there is power in embracing death and not denying it—and wisdom that can be found in honoring grief and negative feelings rather than splitting off from them.

On the one-year anniversary (July 1, 2011) of Dad's death, I wrote a piece titled "Endings" for a website I had published since 1999 for alumni of my hometown high school. In it I wrote about my experience of grief related to Dad.

I sometimes think that I have completed my grieving related to my father's death a year ago, then I find myself choked up and lamenting the complexity of feelings I have for him and the unresolved issues between us that went to the grave with him. Some of my perspective is adulation that I had for him and my grandfather when I was a child and looked up to them and their way of farming. Some of the feelings, though, have to do with frustrations about his style of discipline when I was growing up and frustrations I had relating to him as he aged. Perhaps, just as many schools now require students to take parenting classes, there should be a movement to teach people how to be compassionate toward aging parents, especially when they regress in some of their reasoning abilities. Example number one was Dad's insistence on being able to continue driving a car and the family's inability to reason with him. Example number two had to do with his hearing and how he could easily hear what one sibling said and how he could barely understand what I would say even though I tried to talk slowly and articulately.

As I write, I have a sense of equanimity. I am pensive as I choose my words. I am not choked up. But as I said earlier, grief is mysterious in the ways it works on a person and its timing. I cannot predict what future course my feelings will take.

Perhaps someday, enough healing will have transpired that I can be more understanding and compassionate regarding Dad and the power dynamics within our family. Forgiveness is an important part of healing, but it is not something that can be forced.



Fallow fields and power poles in the last mile of Helen's road project. Circa 1992.