

On Dying and Bereavement

by Kiki Sykes

"I'm not afraid of death.
I just don't want to be there when it happens."
-Woody Allen

"The fear of death follows from the fear of life.
A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time."
-Mark Twain

What the newspaper said:

Charlotte Jane Edelberg passed away on Nov. 13, 1998 due to heart failure. She was 87 years old. She was preceded in death by her husband, Howard Edelberg. She is survived by her eldest daughter Carolyn, her youngest daughter Jane, her son John, and her grandchildren Elizabeth, Henry, Sophie, John and Matthew. The funeral service will take place on Tuesday, Nov. 17 at 7:30 a.m. at Falling Creek Funeral Home, 3407 Emmaus Blvd. followed by an honorary burial at St. Thomas' Cemetery at 11 a.m.

What the newspaper didn't know:

Charlotte preferred the name Charlie, but to me she'll always be Granny. Just Granny. She died three days after the death of her husband. Her sudden death incited a wide range of reactions from my family: Father choked on his coffee; mother sighed in relief; I'm almost certain I saw Uncle Carl pump his fist, a small smile escaping momentarily from his twisted lips followed by a look of guilt in his eyes as he scanned the crowd to see if anyone had seen (spoiler alert Uncle Carl — I inherited Granny's owl eyes); Aunt Jane collapsed into her chair; her son Henry stayed stoic; Sophie shed a tear; my little brothers John and Matthew sat and twiddled their thumbs like little boys do. I haven't yet decided how to react. I'm still trying to figure *me* out, let alone piece together the great Mystery that is Charlotte Jane Edelberg.

Granny taught me to be neither saddened nor surprised by death. "Death is for the dead, and life is for the living," Granny used to tell me. "Little Lizard all you have is this day, this moment, this breath. As for the rest, well — that's the great big Mystery now isn't it?" And oh how Granny loved her mysteries. She introduced me to Agatha Christie, Nancy Drew and Arthur Conan Doyle. She had me solving crimes with Sherlock Holmes before I was five. When I was in Elementary School, Granny would come over each Saturday to watch "A Murder She Wrote"

with me; if I was lucky Granny would show up dressed as Jessica Fletcher, hair stiffened into a blonde poof atop her head, a simple red sweater blanketing her small shoulders, a magnifying glass in hand. We would strut around the living room scribbling down clues onto our notebooks, taking bets about who the murderer was before Jessica Fletcher could guess. Granny always accepted her winnings without hesitation, much to the dismay of my mother. I lost quite a bit of candy, a handful of hair clips and a modest amount of coins over the years — all prized possessions to a young girl.

Granny didn't just appreciate pop culture mysteries though. No, what really got her fired up was confronting the "capital M Mysteries" of life: goodness, evil, innocent suffering, fate, God, etc. With Granny's help, I befriended St. Augustine, Rudolph Otto, Rumi and Kant. We had tea parties with Geoffrey Chaucer, Albert Einstein, Siddhartha Gautama and David Hume. At these socials, Granny and I would each dress up as a different historical figure, imagining their voice and embodying their mannerisms and ideals during our tea time talks. Mother didn't mind these games quite as much, for who can argue with "Education, education, it's all for the girl's education Carolyn." What my Evangelical Christian mother failed to realize was that Granny's idea of education often took us outside of the makeshift classroom we'd constructed at the kitchen table.

You see, Granny was a firm believer in "experiential learning" (or in the words of Uncle Carl — "unconventional blasphemy"). Take my lesson on Buddhism for instance. Instead of just finding a book on Enlightenment as my pragmatic father would have suggested, Granny and I found a nice looking tree in a nearby park, sat beneath its cool shade with our legs locked in a full lotus, and remained in that position for a full 12 hours without food or drink, waiting for our minds to be "emptied of all essence."

(All this came after the weeklong preparation Granny and I went through to commemorate the Buddha's long journey to Enlightenment, which among other things involved mindful gardening and sunrise yoga. Mind you I was six years old at the time. Mother and Father were at a church retreat with their Baptist friends, and John and Matthew sat safe and squished in Mother's belly. To this day, if Mother ever comments on their "inability to sit still for one, just one minute," they rattle back that perhaps if Mother had taken them to the Bodhi tree with Granny that day instead of smothering them with more Baptist ideology in the womb, then maybe they'd know how to sit peacefully in silence).

A few years later Granny decided it was time I learn the tragic story of the Titanic. For this lesson, she had me immerse myself in a bathtub full of ice water for a full two minutes. Mother walked in with about 7 seconds left on the timer. We haven't mentioned the word "Titanic" in the house since, and I haven't gone one day without lifting up a little prayer for those whose last memory consists of floating in a great big bathtub full of ice water.

My first real exposure to Granny's thoughts on Jesus came when I was seven years old. On Christmas Eve that year, Granny finally got fed up with all the "Jesus is the one and only true son of God who came to earth to save me and you and everybody else from all our shameful shameful sins by shedding his precious precious blood and tonight we get to celebrate his virgin birth" talk I'd been dishing out after visiting Mother's church one too many times. Granny decided I needed a "more nuanced" version of the Christmas story, so she decided to take me to

the local prison. "If you want to celebrate Jesus' birth then you need to know who Jesus was. Do you know who Jesus was? I didn't think so. Jesus was a radical, a revolutionary. This man ate dinner with tax collectors, kissed lepers, and invited the outcasts over for dinner. Was he the 'Son of God' or 'fully human and fully divine' or any of that human constructed religion baloney your Mother loves oh so much? Hmmpf how should I know? All I'm saying is that whoever this man was, he saw at least an ounce of goodness in everyone, even the people society tossed aside, so if you want to celebrate and honor and praise this Jesus fella then you can start by celebrating and honoring and praising the down-trodden."

And so we did. That very afternoon, Granny piled my siblings and I into her 1961 baby blue Volkswagen Beetle, and we chugged our way across town to visit the Cook County Department of Corrections, fresh baked pumpkin pie in hand. Matthew, John and I still spend each December 23 chatting with the inmates there, bringing them fresh pie.

Above all though, Granny taught me about death, and in a round about way, I think she taught me about life as well. "Little Lizard — don't waste your time asking pointless questions like, 'will I die? Or how will I die? Or will I be remembered after I die?' Those are for Others to decide. They're up to Life to decide. Life will plunge you forward, onward and over, and the weeds of death will sneak their way onto your path whether you like it or not. But what you *do* get to decide and what you *have* to decide Little Lizard, is how you'll dress for death. You see, that's why I wear a crash helmet whenever your Uncle Carl is around. I never have trusted that boy, and when I go out, I want to look prepared."

What the newspaper could have said:

Charlotte Jane Edelberg's spirit left her old, wrinkly body on Nov. 15, 1998 after a self-induced heart attack. She was 87 years old. Charlotte was preceded in death by her husband and partner in crime, Howard Edelberg. She is survived by a family full of people who love her enough to organize a funeral but not enough to figure out why she died of a *self-induced* heart attack. The funeral service will take place on Tuesday, Nov. 17 at 7:30 a.m. at Falling Creek Funeral Home, 3407 Emmaus Blvd. followed by an honorary burial at St. Thomas' Cemetery at 11 a.m. The burial is honorary because her body has not yet been found.

What history told me:

Granny was born and raised in the early 1900s. She was a World War I baby who grew up with bombs, bedlam and booze. She and Howard starved their way through the thirties, feeding themselves on war protests, the radio, and more protests. Granny worked as a full-time teacher through the forties, meanwhile raising two daughters, one son and six wild cats. That's not counting the fourteen foster children of displaced or lost war veterans who lived on and off in Granny's home for the next ten or twenty years. In the sixties, her front door remained

perpetually open as she had more lost pets, civil rights activists and hippies crashing on her couch than vegetables in her 2-acre wide garden. Granny liked to say she caught the adrenaline rush of anti-war and anti-oppression activism as a baby and eighty years later still hadn't fallen off her surfboard.

All the while, Grandpapa never left Granny's side. He pushed away protestors who thought Granny shouldn't be teaching about evolution to their young Christian boys at the public school where she worked. And when Grandpapa wasn't pushing away protestors to let Granny get to work on time, he was at home raising their kids and the other houseguests Granny so kindly welcomed inside. Granny likes to refer to Grandpapa as "America's first stay at home dad." He even has an official homemade ribbon to prove it, courtesy of Granny of course. Every Father's Day growing up, I would spend the day at Granny's where we would have pumpkin pie (Grandpapa's favorite) for lunch and then clear out all the chairs in the living room to host our very own Father of the Year competition and medal ceremony. Since my father was home nursing the bottle, as usual, the competition wasn't exactly a nail biter. Grandpapa always won by a landslide.

What Granny thought about history:

"A few things you need to know about history. Are you listening? This is an important one Lizard. First of all, history is about power. Look at the word itself — 'his-story.' History is written by someone who decides to write about it, and traditionally that someone has had white skin and too much testosterone. Don't believe everything you're told Lizard and don't you dare let someone tell your story for you. Secondly, history is about heritage. It's about knowing your roots. Where you came from, why you are the way you are, where you're going. History is like a little magnifying glass illuminating the past. You can't change the items under the glass, but you can decide which ones to look at and illuminate. Be Jessica Fletcher and take the time to piece together the clues. Figure out who you have been and who you want to be. Remember that you've got your Granny's thick, raging, relentless blood flowing through your veins. You've also got your Mother's spirit and your father's practicality. You don't need to numb your problems with the Bible and booze like your parents, but you do need to decide how you want to live in light of the story they've handed you. And according to my great-granny Gertrude, you've got the one and only Pocahontas' blood running through you too, so trust your ability to be a fierce female fighter Lizard."

What the newspaper could have said:

Charlotte Jane Edelberg said farewell to Life on Nov. 15, 1998. It was a Sunday, her favorite day of the week. Her other half, Howard Edelberg, died three days prior to her passing. She is survived and remembered by a medium sized family of children, in-laws and grandchildren, most of whom resent her for her clashing political and theological

beliefs, her need to always have the final word and her inability to filter. Her funeral will take place on Tuesday, Nov. 17 at 7:30 a.m. at Falling Creek Funeral Home, 3407 Emmaus Blvd. followed by an honorary burial at St. Thomas' Cemetery at 11 a.m. As per request by Charlotte via her 3-sentences-long will, there will be dancing at the service. Her granddaughter Elizabeth will give the eulogy.

What I thought the day Granny died:

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry Elizabeth. Don't cry. Granny said you shouldn't, said you shouldn't be sad. She warned you about this. She told you.

Don't cry. Toughen up. Remember who you are. You're an Edelberg. You're an ancestor of Pocahontas. You are fierce. You are strong. You know Life rolls on, ever onward and over, Life rolls on!

But Granny is gone. So does Life really roll on? And if so, how?

Father is in the kitchen, rummaging through the drawers. Again. The cabinets are flying open and I can hear the bottles clanking. Here we go. Again. And Mother has probably locked herself in her room. Again. Last time Father started drinking, he decided he wasn't okay with Mother locking herself in their bedroom, so he took it upon himself to "set her free." He went into John's bedroom, snatched up his baseball bat, and exerted his will. Destroyed the lock. Again.

I called Granny and she drove right on over, scooped me up, and took me out to Culver's for some frozen custard. John and Matthew stayed behind, as usual. Mother can't tell me what to do anymore, but the boys are still young. Too young. Besides, mother feels especially protective of them. Or maybe she just loves them more. Either way, Granny and I usually go to Culver's when the cabinets start flying and then Granny gives me her two cents. "Little Lizard you cannot blame yourself. Do you hear me? You are not the source of your father's problem. And your mother knows that too, she just hasn't forgiven herself yet. Your birth was not a mistake but a miracle. Do you hear me? A miracle. You were made to be my little Lizard. You were made to be a sleuth Elizabeth. You were made to shine."

Tonight it's just me though. Me and the soundtrack of the Becker family's dysfunction. Granny is gone and life doesn't feel like it's rolling on.

What Granny left behind:

- 1) For my father — a small brown box filled with faded letters adorned with my Granpapa's scribbles, all signed "forever yours, Watson." Taped to the top of the box was another letter, this one with Granny's chicken-scratch signature. It read: "Some light reading for you Steve, to learn how to be a better partner in crime."

- 2) For no one in particular — a collection of items strewn about atop her bedside table including a golden cross, an emerald statue of the Buddha, a wine goblet, an elephant figurine and a seashell.
- 3) For my mother — a framed photograph. The picture is of two women sitting with their backs to the camera, gazing out at the serene waves rolling to and fro in the distance. One of the women has wild brown hair flowing down to the middle of her back, a handful of braids waving in the wind atop the wild mass. The other woman, smaller, rests her head gently on the other woman's shoulder. Granpapa took this photograph of his wife and daughter only days before his daughter, my mother, conceived me. She was 15.
- 4) For my Aunt Jane — a record player from the 50s and a collection of Granny's favorite records, featuring The Flamingo's "I Only Have Eyes for You," Little Richard's "Good Golly Miss Molly," and Ritchie Valens "La Bamba." Included was a note: Some musical inspiration, to remind your sister how to dance.
- 5) For Uncle Carl — a crash helmet.
- 6) For Matthew and John — a "how to" book about Buddhist mindfulness practices.
- 7) For me — a handkerchief and a bottle of laundry detergent.

What I remember:

By the time I was ten, Mother no longer dragged me to church against my volition. "She's a double digit now Carolyn. She can make her own choices about how she wants to praise the Infinite." Instead, Mother would drive me across town to Granny's house, kiss me on the cheek farewell and remind me "to keep Jesus in my heart." I don't think Mother knows the same Jesus Granny does. Granny's Jesus wouldn't want to be trapped inside my body and he most certainly wouldn't want to live in our house. Granny's Jesus is like a sunflower. He needs to be rooted in the soft, subtle mud of the earth, to be rinsed by the cool blue drops from above, to grow and stretch and reach up up up towards the Sun so that he can shine and shimmer and stand tall for all the world to see.

Granny's house is magical. It is my safe haven, my home away from home. Her driveway is about a mile long, a mile of rocks and dust and ditches that send you bump bump bumping along and leave you coated with a thin layer of brown dirt when you arrive. Mother would always greet Granny by asking for a handkerchief, wanting to wipe away the earth that had accumulated on her pale skin. And Granny would always respond, "Why are you so afraid of a little dust Carolyn? From dust you were made, and to dust you shall return. Right? My driveway is just helping you speed up the process." Then Granny would shake her head, hand Mother a handkerchief and the conversation would scamper on, ever onward and over. Oh the odd rituals of my family.

Mother never stayed long. She just dumped me on the porch. Sometimes, when she was feeling especially talkative, she'd ask me one last time if I'd like to join her for church, but I always said, "No thanks. I've got all the church I need right here," to which she would offer me a

half smile and head out back to the dusty driveway to pick up the little ones and drag them to church with her (poor Matthew and John couldn't turn 10 soon enough).

Once it was just Granny and I in the house again, we'd start my Sunday school lesson. The lesson always took place in Granny's garden out back. If you ask me, Granny was half human, half plant. She spent more time in that garden than anywhere else. She ate all three meals amongst the rows of lettuce, kale and chard. She journaled each afternoon beside the tomatoes. In the warm, summer months, she slept beneath the sunflowers and in autumn she used their decapitated heads as a pillow for her mid-afternoon naps, her wild gray hair fanning out with the bright yellow petals. If someone were to gaze out into her garden at these times, they'd see a field full of sunflower heads, one of which could blink.

Our lessons would begin with a sun salutation, "to honor the Son and the Sun in you and me." Next Granny and I would begin the question and response (never question and answer) portion of the lesson. At this time, I got to ask Granny any question I'd like about the world or my family or whatever else came to mind at that time. Granny used to gripe about how little time and opportunity schools or churches (especially Mother's church) allowed for kids to ask questions. "Life is one big question Lizard: how? If you don't learn how to handle questions, you won't ever learn how to handle Life." I asked Granny what she thought of my mother as a child — "Always a shy one, that Carolyn, but oh you should have seen her when she started to dance..." how she met my Grandpapa Howard — "Have I not told you about the night I sang 'I've Got a Pocket Full of Dreams' on a karaoke stage in Peru?" and when she stopped going to organized church — "...and then that tall, balding white man told me I should shut up and be silent if I wanted to stay in God's sacred house and I told him God gave me too damn much to say."

I asked her why she loved gardening so much — "well when we garden Lizard, we get to practice creating, practice becoming Divine. And life is all about practice, is it not?" where she thought people went after death — "Well now about the geographic location I can't be quite sure but I sure hope there will be cheese and wine Lizard, oh yes endless supplies of cheese and wine" — and why my parents don't want me — "Lizard. Remember what I've told you. Sleuthing can only take you so far and then you have to build a theory and go with it. Trust yourself. We could spend years analyzing the childhood I gave your mother or your father's parents gave him, but the point is, you were born. God gave you life. And I love you. You are always safe and welcome in God's house and you are always safe and welcome in this house. Don't you doubt that for one moment little Lizard." I asked her about God, about Moses, about the Prophet Muhammad, and about the night sky. I asked her about birds and the body — "ah the sacred dwelling place of Life's Light, Lizard." I never once asked Granny if she'd like to ask me a question.

The question and response portion was always followed with a craft or activity because "talking without doing is a waste of air." My favorite activity was laundry. Granny would have me collect all the towels and clothes and sheets from the house and bring the big bundle out into the backyard. We would dunk it all into the basin of icy water and plop a few dollops of soap on top. Then Granny would let me scrub, scrub, scrub the clothes and then scrub, scrub, scrub them some more. "Who needs confession at church when we can do laundry out here in the shining

sun?" Then we'd rinse and repeat, rinse and repeat. All the while, Granny would tap her toes and hum a little tune to herself, something unfamiliar and almost inaudible to me but soothing nonetheless. She lived the rhythm of music. Finally, we'd hang the laundry up on the wire racks weaving through Granny's garden. I'd sit on the porch for hours and watch our handiwork wave in the wind, our confessions flicker and fade as the sun warmed the damp cloth.

What the newspaper could have said:

Charlotte Jane Edelberg was last seen on the morning of Nov. 15, 1998. She was spotted visiting the tomb of her beloved husband, Howard Edelberg, who died of pancreatic cancer two days prior. He was 88 years old. Neighbors report seeing Charlotte and a young girl placing pebbles on his gravestone at sunrise. At sunset, Charlotte's granddaughter Elizabeth called the police to report her Granny's death. Though she had no body to offer the officer who arrived at her Granny's front door, she did have a note. The funeral service will take place on Tuesday, Nov. 17 at 7:30 a.m. at Falling Creek Funeral Home, 3407 Emmaus Blvd. followed by an honorary burial at St. Thomas' Cemetery at 11 a.m. Any and all are welcome to attend the service, so long as they wear something "colorful, bright and bold," as per request by Charlotte's granddaughter Elizabeth.

What I thought one week after Granny's death:

Today I am Jessica Fletcher, and I am off to solve the Capital M Mystery of Granny's Life! Who was she? How did she live? How did she die? Why did she die? Did she die? Pull out your magnifying glass and you too can help me crack the case!

Step one: read the newspaper.

Step two: talk to the family.

Step three: consult the history books.

Step four: talk to the family.

Step five: reflect.

Step six: synthesize data.

Step seven: crack the case!

Step seven and a half: crack the case?

What I think now, five years later:

Eternity scares the living daylights out of me. It's not that I'm scared of death, because I haven't yet decided if death is eternal. In fact, sometimes I think the eternity of life scares me

just as much, if not more. The thought of living here, in this house, forever, that's a terrifying terrifying thought that give me goose bumps and sends a swift little shiver down my spine. How many times have you lay awake in bed, enclosed by the bleak darkness of night, and thought to yourself, "will this never end?" It felt eternal, didn't it — that suffocating blackness. And yet, as you laid there overwhelmed by the endlessness of the night, the clock kept ticking and time kept plugging along and the earth kept rolling its way ever onward and over. Onward and over. And then eventually, after seeming hours of infinity the sun rose again, didn't it. Just like Granny said, the eternity of the night flowed right into the miracle of the morning.

We fear eternity, but we also fear endings. Classic humans. We fear everything. But do we have any reason to say that life is explicitly one way or the other? Eternal or finite? Endless or full of tragic endings? What if all our supposed periods were actually just commas, half time breaks, little ellipses to let us pause before Life resumes and surges ever onward and over. Onward and over.

Granny died five years ago today, and yet I still see her sleeping face when I gaze out at a field of sunflowers, and I still feel her coarse hands brushing up against mine as I wash the laundry every Sunday morning. I still hear her deep, strong voice telling me to "Live Life Lizard, live your one wild, beautiful, archaic Life!" in lieu of a traditional bedtime story. So is death final? Does Life end? I don't have Granny here to pose these questions to at Sunday school this week, but does that mean she hasn't, or isn't, responding?

I no longer have Granny's house, or arms, to run to when the cabinets start clanking, the doors start clicking shut, the profanities start crashing down around me, but I have Granny's stories. I have my stories. And I have the stories I get to create moment by moment, day by day. Life is a Mystery. And we are the sleuths. But Life is also a question. And questions cannot be answered, only responded to. So here I am, trying to live in light of the lessons Granny taught me about Life and Death and the capital M Mysteries of Existence.

I have my magnifying glass in hand. I am ready to respond.

What the note said:

Today's the day Lizard, yes today is the day. I'm off to go skydiving. You know what I mean. I miss Howard dear; I miss him so very much. I know what I've told you about Death and Life and the miracle of each moment, but some day you'll meet someone who drives you insane and pushes your buttons and knows just what to say to make you flush and fume and giggle and burst and who you never wish to let go of and when this person comes along, and spends over 50 years holding you hand and then one day disappears into the dark, well then perhaps Lizard you'll understand. Then maybe you'll know. You'll know why I had to go sky diving today, had to put on my crash helmet and my favorite sparkly jumpsuit and burst forth into the Great Unknown, the Endless Abyss, the Capital M Mystery of Life and Love and Death and Darkness. You

need not look for me. I'll see you soon enough. Just remember my little one: ever onwards and over, rinse and repeat. You are fierce. You are wanted. You are a warrior. I love you long time Lizard.

What the newspaper should have said:

Charlotte "Granny" Edelberg rolled onwards and over on Nov. 15, 1998, three days after her best friend and husband, Howard "Granpapa" Edelberg. She was 87 years old. She bid her adieu in the form of a handwritten note addressed to "my little Lizard." She is remembered for her contagious energy, overwhelming passion, controversial politics, and unconventional educational methods. She swore often, prayed daily, fought with her family at least once a week and had her heart broken only once, the day her husband died. Her Life and Death will always be a capital M Mystery, but maybe that's the point. The funeral service will take place on Tuesday, Nov. 17 at 7:30 a.m. at Falling Creek Funeral Home, 3407 Emmaus Blvd. followed by an honorary burial at St. Thomas' Cemetery at 11 a.m. Any and all are welcome and encouraged to come, so long as they promise to wear something colorful, bright and bold. Wine and cheese will be served. Crash helmets and tap shoes are recommended.