

Funerals in Egypt

BY ANNE ZAKI

I have had many cultural shocks since I moved to the West, but funerals are by far the biggest one of them all. I've been in the U.S. eight years now, and I still can't get over how people do funerals here. To me it seems Americans rob the family of their rightful space to grieve, to look death in the eye and feel the depth of the loss. They are too quick to shortcut the pain and sadness and get on to "celebrating life." I have already instructed my husband that if I die here, I want my body to be flown back to Egypt (no matter the cost, even if it means selling some of our things), so that my family can properly grieve in the presence of my dead body and see it lowered to the ground with a proper time of parting and praying. I don't care to look beautiful in the coffin (for whom anyway?), and I don't want people to eat party food in my funeral. If I am dead, I want to look dead. And if I am dead, people should not be partying at my funeral. Not for my sake, but for theirs, and for the sake of my grieving family.

Here's how we do funerals at home.

People are usually buried on the day of death, or possibly the next day if family from out of town couldn't make it on the same day. The dead body stays at home (or the hospital, though fewer people die at the hospital, and even fewer at nursing homes). Given the weather in Egypt, many fans are brought into the bedroom where the dead body lays, but that still does not get rid entirely of the presence and smell of death in the house. As family members, neighbors and friends arrive, they are greeted by the loud wailing of both men and women present. Then they are permitted to go into the room and see the body and say goodbye if they so desire. Some time later after the coffin has been purchased, family members wash and dress the dead person then lay the body in the coffin. The coffin is then closed, never to be opened again. An hour before the funeral, family members, neighbors and close friends show up to the house dressed in black, carry the wooden coffin on their shoulders, and start a walking procession from the house to the church accompanied by the loud sounds of wailing and crying (sometimes they travel by car if the church is far). Out of reverence for the dead and the grieving family, traffic stops, people stop walking, vendors stop selling, people stop shopping, and street coffee shops and juice stands turn off their music. On the way to church, more and more people join the procession so that by the time the coffin arrives at church it is drowned in a creeping black blanket of people that stretches a few hundred meters outside the door of the church, still wailing and crying.

The minute the coffin enters the sanctuary, the silence of the dead comes alive, without a single musical note played. The service is usually very somber, the church walls are stripped off any banners or ornaments, except for the few flower bouquets sent by friends and family. The service proceeds with a minimum of three or four pastors participating (basically any pastor in attendance is invited to participate and can do so if they so desire), somber songs about faith and hope are sung accompanied by only the piano, a prayer is offered for the deceased and the grieving family and the church community, and then everyone is dismissed. The pastor's "Amen" after the benediction is the verbal cue for all the women to start wailing, and all the men to rush towards the coffin to help carry it out to the Harris. All of the family members, young and old, stand in a long receiving line at the only open exit to the church (older family members are seated in line), and they take their time receiving condolences and prayers from people.

An hour or so later, everyone gets on a charter bus and heads out to the graveyard. As the coffin gets lowered into the family burial place, the minister conducts a brief committal service, once again his benediction ushering the family into a time of wailing and touching the coffin one last time before it goes down. A few minutes later, people start heading back to the bus, family returning to the home of the deceased and friends going home for some rest before visitation later that evening. Visitation happens for the next three nights, all evening long, at the church hall. It's a time mostly spent in silence, while people drink their coffee. (We don't have funeral homes; when you die you go out from a church or a mosque. A funeral home is not a place of worship of God to whom we return after death. Both Christians and Muslims believe that we return to God after death.) The pastor is sure to be present for at least an hour every night during the three-day visitation, and is expected to lead everyone in a brief devotional and prayer every night. Friends and church members join the family in a time of mourning and fasting during those three days; sometimes the fasting is on behalf of family members who are too frail to fast themselves as they need their nourishment. After the three-day period, people can now move from a time of mourning into a time of remembering. It's no longer shameful to laugh at good memories and rejoice in a life well lived. People cook simple foods and start eating again as a family replenishing their grieving bodies after three days of living the loss. Family members then can return to their jobs (they are not expected to go to work for at least three days), and the pastor is expected to be there to make sure that people are finding their way out of grief into remembrance into comfort. Even now, "celebration" is not the word used, but rather "gratitude," shifting the focus from the deceased being the object of celebration, to God being the object of gratitude.

It's not that I want Americans to do funerals the way we do in Egypt, and I do think Egyptians can learn some things from how funerals are done here. But this tradition recognizes that our humanity is at the core of our being. At that moment of loss, it's deep within us: we hate death. Death is separation—separation from the person, separation from memories of that person happy, healthy, and living well.

No matter what our culture is, I believe Christians should grieve deeply, loudly, slowly, and communally. But we should not "grieve like those who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We live with a sense of hope of the resurrection. We need to have that hope, verbalize it, live it. We need to carry that hope and carry that witness. We need to grieve like those who have solid hope in Christ.

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