Grave Tending: With Mom at the Cemetery

Carolyn Ellis

Abstract

This autoethnographic story shows the process of tending the graves of family members. In the past, the author reluctantly accompanied her mother on her visits to the family cemetery. Once there, she took on the role of distant observer as her mother took care of the family cemetery plots. When her mother becomes disabled, the author begins to arrange the flowers on the graves. Doing so leads her to examine the meaning of visiting the cemetery, feel and connect with her losses, and consider the customs she wants to be part of her own death. When her mother dies, the next generation of women in the family—the author, her sister, and sister-in-law—take on the role of tending the graves, connected in their love and respect for their mother and their feelings of family and family responsibility. This story examines the meanings of family rituals around death and how they are passed from generation to generation.

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Claudia Schmitt held a funeral for her mother just three weeks ago, but now has to go through it again: the cemetery forgot to bury her mom’s skull. Schmitt, 48, of Cologne, Germany, noticed the grave error a few days ago when she went to tend her mother’s resting place. When she bent down to check the flowers, she noticed a hard round object that she initially thought was a coconut. It wasn’t. “There were also many worms and maggots,” she told the German-language news site Express.de. “And then when I saw a jawbone complete with teeth, I flipped out. Of course one had the terrible feeling that she often visits his gravesite at New Gray Cemetery, bringing with her flowers, mementos, little figurines and other trinkets to place at his stone. In one of her more recent visits, she took her grandson, who never got a chance to meet his uncle. When they arrived, she was shocked to find that her son's gravesite had been stripped completely bare. All of the little gifts and angel figurines that she had been leaving for him for years had disappeared. She also lamented over the fact that she couldn't decorate her late son's grave as she saw fit, especially since this is her only way to still physically honor his memory. It's all we can do [to visit his grave]. […] This is where we come to remember and to grieve and to heal, and it helps to be able to put things there.