

MEMORIALS: IN MEMORY OF MABEL

Thursday, March 31, 2005. Mabel died yesterday at the age of 89. She had been my tablemate at Drum Hill for over a year. The other two at our table of four in the communal dining room are Paul, age 92, and my husband Leo. After we had lived here for half a year or so, Leo stopped having lunch in the dining room and later on, he began skipping some dinners as well, preferring to eat out or in our apartment. When he was at the table, Leo was kind to Mabel, going into the kitchen to get tea or water for her, for example. But basically during these last few months our table consisted of Paul, Mabel and me.

Right from the start we knew Mabel had a memory problem. (She is the one I wrote about in the essay "Shoes.") She simply could not remember, and so we heard the same stories and comments over and over again. We knew she could not help the state of her brain and privately we agree that her condition was sad, but I must admit that I found her repetitive chatter and habits to be tiresome and irritating at times. When that happened, I knew the problem was mine, not hers, and I tried to be more compassionate, more understanding. I needed to draw on God's grace, God's ever-sufficient supply of grace.

Mabel was an only child who never married; her closest relatives were cousins who lived at a distance. She was absolutely fearless in the face of death. When her father died, Mabel and her mother went from their home in New York City to a cemetery in our county of Westchester and purchased three lots, one for each of them. Mabel appreciated her mother's thoughtfulness in including her in the transaction; now she knew where her body would be laid to rest. Her mother's family had a history of suddenly dying in their middle age. She was totally prepared, she said, when a policeman told her that her mother had dropped dead on a bus. "Just tell me what I need to do," Mabel said. "I've been expecting this." She also thought the same would happen to her, but it didn't. "I'm 89!" she marveled. "I'll be 90 in August – if I live that long. And if I don't, it's okay."

Mabel was person of faith, devoted to God and her church. When she left the table in the evening, she would say, "See you tomorrow, God willing." She told me that she would be with God when she died. There was nothing to worry about.

In the last few months, Mabel's condition grew worse. She became deluded at times and so confused. She thought she was part of a bus tour and this was a lunch stop. How her face would light up when someone would lead her to table 3, where Paul and I were seated! We were the only two she recognized; we were her friends, part of her tour group. "When do we have to get back on the bus? How do I pay for my meal? Are you going to stay here over night?" By this time my voice had deteriorated to the point where Paul had to do most of the talking. When he said once that she had lived here for over a year, she was dumbfounded. "I can't believe that!" she exclaimed. I nodded that it was true. "Then I am losing my mind – and that's frightening! Had you noticed that something is wrong with my mind?" We said we had.

On Monday when I got off the elevator to go to lunch, there was Mabel, sitting on a chair waiting for her relatives to take her out to eat. She said she had seen them, but could not see them now. That could have been true, I thought, so I left her there and went on to table 3. About twenty minutes later, a waitress guided her to her usual seat. "I may as well eat here," Mabel said. "I lost my parents." Her parents! Paul and I looked at each other, knowingly. Now I wonder if she had indeed seen her parents, sent by God to take her Home.

Tuesday evening all four of us were at the table. Mabel noticed that Mary was sitting alone at the next table. She asked me, "Shall I go sit with her? I know what it's like to sit alone." (And she did, for

there were a few times when the other three of us were absent from a meal.) “That would be nice of you,” I answered. And that was the last thing I would say to Mabel on earth. (Maria, our waitress, thought Mabel’s deed was nice, too, and moved her water and utensils to the next table.) I could see Mabel from my chair. She seemed to be having a good time with Mary. I’m glad. She was not at lunch on Wednesday. We thought she was probably asleep. (That was happening more often now.) But sometime that afternoon she was found dead in her apartment. In reality, Mabel was with her Lord and her parents. She is no longer confused. The bus tour is over. Mabel is Home.

I do not believe we all got assigned to table 3 by accident. My friend Vallie, who helps me during the week, would sometimes eat lunch with Mabel, Paul and me. One day after Mabel had left, the three of us were talking about the situation when I said, “Vallie, I think Paul and I are both better people because we have had to relate with Mabel.” Our experience is now over and we feel mixed emotions, including sadness. We will have much to ponder in the time to come. Mabel, this memorial is for you. Thank you.

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To me, one of the saddest sentences in the Bible is 2 Chronicles 21:20: *“He passed away, to no one’s regret.”* I can’t imagine a sadder commentary on a person’s life than that, can you?

This was written of Jehorim, son of Jehoshaphat, one of the kings of Judah. Jehoshaphat, a godly king, had seven sons. He chose Jehorim to succeed him as king because he was the oldest son. (This was not the law of the land for David, in choosing Solomon, did not select his oldest son as his successor.) As soon as his rule was established, Jehorim had all six of his brothers killed. He was an idolator who also led Judah into idolatry. The evil he did was so bad that *“the Lord afflicted Jehorim with an incurable disease of the bowels.”* The disease lasted two years and he died in great pain.

Here’s how the Bible concludes the record of his rule: *“His people made no fire in his honor, as they had for his fathers. Jehorim was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eight years. He passed away, to no one’s regret, and was buried in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings.”* No bonfire, no special tomb, no memorials of any sort – just “good riddance.” I think the moral of this story comes through loud and clear:

LIVE IN SUCH A WAY THAT YOU WILL BE MISSED!!

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I’m sure Mabel will be missed by relatives and the friends she had during her lifetime, including here. She was active in the business world and lived in Florida for twenty years before coming to Drum Hill. We can only speculate on what she was like before dementia robbed her of her memory, and speculation can be wrong! Mabel smiled readily when anyone greeted her, and she was genuinely concerned when someone was missing from a meal, even at neighboring tables, though she knew very few names. She took part in some activities at first, but increasingly was content to be alone in her apartment. Basically, she seemed happy. With few exceptions, she enjoyed her meals, especially the desserts. At lunch on Tuesday, she could not make up her mind whether she wanted chicken salad or salmon salad, because she liked both. “Why not order some of each?” Carlene suggested, and she did. “That was delicious!” Mabel said when her plate was clean.

Several months ago we had a memorial service at Drum Hill for those who had died in the previous six months. We were encouraged to look at the names on the list and give our memories of any of them we knew. One person after another spoke, and the reminiscences were interesting. I imagine there will be another service in the future. Mabel’s name will be on the list and two others that I know of, for Mabel’s death was the third among us in five days! God only knows who else’s name will be listed; perhaps mine will! I do like memorial services, especially where the planned program leaves

room for people to talk about the deceased. I find them to be therapeutic, a balm for the soul.

Tom, the resident coordinator and moderator of the memorial, asked me to write a prayer that could be used in the service. I did, and then he made copies to hand out so we could read the prayer together at the conclusion of the program. Some found it comforting. I will conclude this essay with that same prayer. Perhaps it will bring you comfort, too. I hope so.

PRAYER FOR A MEMORIAL SERVICE AT DRUM HILL

Almighty God,
Creator of the Universe,
Designer of Human Life,

In your wisdom, from the time of our first parents, you decreed that our lives would consist of good times and bad;

happy times and sad;

hard work and play until we return to the ground, since from it we were taken;

for dust we are and to dust we will return.

Even knowing this, death tends to take us by surprise, an unwelcome enemy.

Help us to focus more and more on your wisdom and goodness,
for you are good and what you do (even allowing us to leave this earth in due time)
is good.

Help us to appropriate and appreciate the wonderful promise of an even better life
beyond the grave in exchange for believing in you.

Open our spiritual eyes that we may see the value of receiving the gift of eternal life that
you offer to all.

God of All Comfort,
We are gathered here to remember friends, acquaintances and relatives whose lives
on earth have ended.

Comfort the grieving, as only you can, with your everlasting arms;
and may we pass on the comfort we receive to others who need it.

God of Hope,
fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in you, so that we may overflow with hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.

To God be the glory forever and ever.

Amen.