

Am I still a daughter, now that Millie is gone?



BARB GUY

My mom died over a year ago. Her parents, siblings and husband preceded her, so as her only child, the duty of handling all her final arrangements fell to me.

When she died we held her memorial service in Salt Lake City, in the Methodist church where I was raised. But my responsibilities as her daughter were not complete until her remains were laid to rest in Arizona, where she and my dad had lived for 10 fun years as retirees.

The service in Salt Lake was a nice event where Reverend Dolloff-Holt, a woman my mom was fond of, gave a warm, humorous, tender eulogy. It was important to me to have someone speak for my mom who knew the real her, the creative, funny her, not the frail, confused lady she was at the end.

We handed out programs with pictures of my mom, who was called Millie, as a toddler in a child's wagon on her family's Missouri farm in 1924, riding a gorgeous horse as a young woman, astride a merry-go-round horse in her 70s, and my favorite: Millie upon an inflatable alligator, pantlegs rolled high, floating in a swimming pool.

Millie's colored glass collection was on display after the service, along with pictures of her posing with the collection at various times in her life. I remember the colorful pieces from my earliest days, always in a sunny window, their numbers growing as her life went along. She'd get glass as gifts or find it in her travels - a red vase from Montana, a green candy dish from Spain.

She was interested in clear glass pieces, too, especially antique glass that would change color after being exposed to sunshine. When I was little, we'd visit relatives in Denver and go antique hunting. Later, she'd place the clear pieces on my grandma's garage roof.

The next time we came to Denver, I'd have to wait on the lawn as Millie climbed onto her mother-in-law's roof. I can still hear her oohing and aahing happily before emerging into view, gingerly carrying sparkly

purple glass pieces down the wobbly ladder.

As a surprise, everyone who came to Millie's service was invited to choose a piece of her collection to take home with them. The night before the service, I washed the dust from each piece, saying goodbye as I carefully dried every goblet and vase.

While they lived in Tucson, my folks decided to forsake their Utah burial plots and instead be cremated and have their ashes interred in a columbarium, where containers of ashes are placed in separate niches within a huge marble container.

The columbarium they chose is in a fragrant garden patio outside their Tucson church. My dad's ashes have been there since 1995; it was finally time for Millie's ashes to join his.

Arriving in Tucson two weeks ago after the rainiest winter people can remember, I found the landscape teeming with life: ocotillo, prickly pear, saguaro, yucca, palo verde, oleander. Millie loved the desert in bloom and this spring's display is the best in many years, painting our somber trip with a joyous palette.

We gathered on the church's garden patio for this last memorial. It was a lovely, sunny, warm day. The orange blossoms'

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fragrance was bliss-inducing; a church bell chimed faintly, birds chirped, and a garden fountain trickled gently as people took turns saying how much they loved my mom and why.

Chris and I stayed in Tucson for a few days, honoring Millie by doing some of her favorite things. We spent special time with her Arizona friends. We toasted her with margaritas - repeatedly, just to be sure. We visited her beloved Tohono Chul Park, where we went a decade ago, immediately after my dad's memorial service. That day, we had seen a rainbow and Millie took it as a message straight from heaven.

So in Millie's honor, we marveled at the beauty of the desert and the unending array of colorful, mysterious things in bloom. We went to a twice-yearly street fair that she always loved and, when I admired a rabbit pin and said it was the kind of thing Millie would have given me, Chris bought it for me. Oddly, we saw three real rabbits that day, one running along a busy city street, the other two hopping happily in the wild. I took them as a message straight from heaven.

Back home, I admire the way the sun hits the glass pieces that I kept from Millie's collection and I think about life. We all make lists to describe ourselves in short-hand: doctor, skier, son. Our lists change as we make our way along life's path. Reflecting on my own list, I wonder: With

my last daughter job completed,
am I still a daughter?

Barb Guy is a frequent contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.