Wakefulness

By M. Regina Cram

The children and I drove to a nondescript building in a nearby town. Once inside, we were directed to a room where voices overflowed into the hallway. But when we entered, the voices abruptly silenced. Every face gawked at us.

What had I done to shock these people?

I'd brought children to a wake.

The deceased's family was delighted that children were visiting their loved one. My friends, however, were appalled. They issued dire warnings that an open casket would cause the kids' nightmares. It might scar them for life.

I reminded them that, until recent generations, wakes were held at home. People grew up understanding that death is part of life, that dying is part of living. Surely this is healthier than sequestering death in the shadows as if we can keep it at bay.

I attended my first wake when I was seven. The deceased was an elderly woman I'd never met, so I was able to process the sights and sounds without being assaulted by grief.

When a high school classmate died a few years later, I was glad his was not my first wake. The same was not true for my friends. One by one teens arrived at the funeral home, then panicked when they saw the open casket. Their parents had done nothing to prepare them. My mother quickly stepped in, stationing herself at the entrance of the funeral home in order to intercept arriving teens. Walking alongside each one, my mother explained what they'd be seeing, then accompanied them inside. She was a godsend.

My husband, Peter did not grow up attending wakes or funerals. He went to his first memorial service when the death of a colleague made it impossible to avoid. This gradually eased him into funerals, but he couldn't bring himself to attend a wake. He thought they were ghoulish.

We'd been married for nine years when Peter's grandfather died. His parents feared that the children would be traumatized by seeing grieving adults at the memorial service, so they asked us to leave the children at home. Unable to find a babysitter, I had to stay behind. This left Peter alone in his grief, and the family missed the sweet consolation of children.

When my grandmother died a few years later, my entire extended

family attended the wake, funeral, and burial, including ten great-grandchildren who ranged in age from 9 months to 9 years. There were plenty of adults to help when a child became noisy, and the children's presence was a wonderful balm in our grief. The baby was handed around between grieving relatives, giving incredible solace during a time of loss.

Our children asked a lot of questions, which we answered as best we could. They listened to our words, but more so, they listened to our attitude: death is a natural part of life and should not be feared. In fact, it should be celebrated.

Death is, after all, a personal invitation to spend eternity with God.