



And so then I say

BY MARY ELLEN MCGINTY COLLINS

I GREW UP IN THE HOUSE AND THE TOWN in which my dad grew up, which meant that my family hosted dozens of visits from his six siblings through the years. Whether aunts and uncles came for an afternoon, a weekend or a week, they always made a trip to the cemetery to visit the family graves.

I often tagged along and watched them kneel down, bless themselves and pray quietly. Although I faked my way through the ritual, I never understood why we were praying to people we had known. Prayers were meant for God, Jesus, Mary, the Holy Ghost and the saints. My prayer arsenal consisted of the rote recitations we used for specific occasions — the Our Father, Hail Mary, Apostles' Creed, Act of Contrition, pre-meal blessing and the Guardian Angel prayer. It made no sense to direct any of these to a real person, especially a dead one.

I understood the concept of praying for someone who was sick, but if heaven were the perfect place we believed it to be, why did our relatives need prayers? I never asked the question, and no one thought to explain it to me.

By the time I was an adult, cemeteries no longer figured into my life. When friends and colleagues passed away, we remembered them in services that took place in churches, auditoriums and function rooms. These celebrations consisted more of warm recollections and funny stories than ritualistic prayers. And on the handful of occasions that a service included a trip to the gravesite, I skipped it.

Decades later when my father died, we did what most Catholic families do — held two days of visiting hours at a funeral home and a funeral Mass at the church, followed by a short service at the

cemetery chapel. When I learned that Mom had decided we wouldn't participate in the actual burial, relief temporarily replaced the sadness. I wanted no part of trying to pray while wrestling with the conflicting visions of a happy heavenly afterlife and the reality of a casket going into the ground.

I knew that prayers and cemetery visits wouldn't figure into my grieving process, but I didn't fully grasp how I had reconciled the loss until my husband and I were on our first trip to Africa. We stood in an open Land Rover, excited by the fact that we were speeding across a savanna that stretched to infinity in all directions, and I said silently, "Can you believe this, Dad? It looks exactly like *Wild Kingdom*." I wasn't thinking or saying, "Dad would love this." I was talking directly to him, as if he were a few yards above me and slightly behind my right shoulder. After all those years we spent watching Marlin Perkins' adventures on Sunday afternoons, I knew that, at that moment, Dad was seeing the real deal unfold in front of him, just as I was.

I don't talk to my father constantly, nor do I think he's glued to the minutiae of my life. I think he's watching over the shoulder of whichever one of us is experiencing something he would appreciate. He sees graduations and job successes, holiday dinners and family vacations. He watches with interest as my brother tries to train a spirited new dog, and he is certainly present whenever the Pittsburgh Steelers cause the family fans to yelp in anguish or delight.

The last time he was with me, my husband and I were attending a cabaret performance of a show about Mahalia Jackson. My father had always liked gospel music, and as the singer who played Mahalia blew the roof off the small venue, I said quietly, "Isn't she something, Dad?"

I saw and heard his response — that little laugh, the shake of the head and a "Boy, what a voice." I was nowhere near a cemetery, and I didn't utter a prayer. But it was a perfect holy moment for my dad and me. □

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