

**2015 High School Essay Contest Winner:
Unpacking Death's Baggage with Prayer and Laughter by Corinne McEachern**

Welcome to this celebration of the winners of the 2015 Garaventa Center High School essay contest. The top three essays will be read by UP student actor, Amy Billroth-McClurg.

Unpacking Death's Baggage with Prayer and Laughter, by Corinne McEachern, from Bishop Gorman High School, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Yesterday, literally, my family attended a funeral mass.

My uncle slipped on the ice and received a simple hip replacement. Ten days later he was performing sit-ups for rehab when his bowels burst and he died. We cried, we prayed, and we, dare I confess, laughed at the multitude of ironies. Even today, we continue to pray for Uncle Craig, a former NHL player, though our lips quiver with mirth when his wife jests: "Always knew he was full of..." As the chuckles subside at lunch, we raise slices of Lenten cheese pizza to toast his memory.

We cope with death via laughter, prayer, and a hastily written essay, this one.

Last year an English unit on grief and stoicism coincided with a multitude of family traumas, culminating in the passing of my great great Aunt Barb, an apt pseudonym. Usually, works like Dickens and Petrunkevitch failed to generate the contemplation of the hereafter, but I am a Midwestern German-Italian, a mutt, with an appreciation for the macabre whimsy of life, because it evokes interesting dinner conversation.

Following the hand chain for Grace, we topped one another with one liners, hoping the same will be done to commemorate our passing. If we aren't to judge His will, then why not laugh at the whimsy of it?

In defense of my family, Lazarus probably endured a few wisecracks at his next reunion. Sadly for Aunt Barb, up until the end she remains too busy hanging out our family's dirty laundry from Depression Era luggage to hear death's carriage rumbling down the driveway to kindly stop for her. She fails to appreciate that her fissured bowels, yes it runs in the family, and her reservation with Eternity are responsible for these familial pilgrimages to her bedside.

Instead, she orders her nightstand decorated with candles to form a true martyr's shrine. She relishes that relatives she has shunned now extend to her olive branches. To her this is like a resort vacation only the hotel and guests have come to her. My mother is sad that Barbara is dying but thrilled to be allowed back into her former babysitter's life.

These paradoxes naturally give rise to quite a few jokes. We wait for a revised prognosis, then an admission of a misdiagnosis. Neither happens. Barb declares that a miracle, and demands that the Vatican be called. My grandmother assures us that we should not call the Pope unless we want to get Barb excommunicated. She smirks just a little though, like she's rethinking the upside of that possibility.

When Barb grows stable enough to be bored, she requests a cell phone from my grandmother. I fear that she plans to call the Pope herself, but when I expressed this reservation, grandma says, "He's at death's door too. Say a prayer that if he passes that neither of them have a layover in purgatory, because if Aunt Barb catches him there he'll rethink his final destination... or God hers."

Months of nasty letters demanding apology for arguments that predate the Holocaust follow. Barb, having worked as a secretary for 30 years texts like a teenager. When her passing comes, finally she is too absorbed in her quest for vengeance to realize that she is dying. Fortunately, her funeral is prearranged, Mass, songs, and readings included.

The feeling of playing Russian roulette follows. Each relative waiting to see if he must bite the bullet, named in Barb's secret will to make the holy quest to deliver her box decorated like a macabre happy meal cross country to her service. The entire town will attend, weather and a keg permitting.

Even once Barb checks her ticket to the beyond, she retains our family's amused attention by managing to be late for her own funeral. A cliché few think possible. However, the US Post Service motto, next day or your money back, proves lucrative and humorous, in a break even sort of way.

Of course, it fails to be as funny, when the grim reaper t-bones my car that same week. That accident occurs two days before we are supposed to be grateful for outliving a turkey, and Barb. Because of prayer and God's plans, I survive my internal injuries, and Barb, well, does not.

Our puritanical fowl is touted with cheers from all present. It is stuffed lovingly with breadcrumbs and innards, not the wasp larvae referenced in Petrunkevitch's *The Spider and the Wasp*. And for that gustatory pardon, I give God my prayers of thanksgiving. However, I still eat pasta. At that meal, this generation smiles, noticing that Barb's absence has left Grandma with a voracious appetite, too, with or without her teeth.

At Christmas, as others gather around the family table, we join hands to mourn the loss of a tough old bird of an aunt. A totaled vehicle, a turkey, and a tarantula but with enough comic material needed to poke fun at life's happenstance through the summer. For me this prolific dance with death allows me to propose that how one copes with loss largely resonates with one's faith in God's sense of humor. Prayers help.

Meanwhile back in Kansas the relatives who have received Barb's tongue lashings wait graveside as patiently as Petrunkevitch's wasp for her ashes to arrive with the mailman. Their maudlin stories turned mischievous gaining us the material for the comic family dinner stories we so treasure today.

The morning of Barb's funeral, grandma texts the tracking number to the graveside mourners when they called to say that Barb is late to her own funeral. Several text savvy mourners traced the guest of honor to a post office in Wichita. They'd lingered by the grave until midday when the wind starts to bite or their flasks run dry. It depends on whom one asks. They eventually begin swapping enough stories of happier times that a full dozen resolved to remain graveside hoping she'll be delivered by a rogue postal officer, a postman gone postal.

Finally, the mortician apologetically informs the tipsy mourners that he will be forced to close the grave. This is awkward, since he's related. They each take a clump of earth, and with a prayer for the dead and

the mortician, toss it into the empty tomb. Next evening, several distant relatives sneak into the graveyard, dig up what they hope is the right mound, and place the box reverently inside.

Once again, they verbalize memories of happier times since they have had time to unpack their emotional baggage. One piece of luggage remains, superstitions tied to the unknown aspects of death. Following the second burial of Barb, Grandma calls to say that the deed is done, but with one problem. None of the mourners noticed a cell phone tucked into the wooden box's decorative side.

Ever frugal, my grandmother had placed it there in case they needed to reach the family. Of course my grandmother kept her own phone, but there were still minutes left on Barb's phone, so I turned my phone off. The next morning I find mom's phone on her charger, off. Memories of Barb's nasty tirades give us chills, no flashbacks. They're our baggage.

But in this case they actually distance us from the sadness that usually get tends such occasions. Our actions are comical but no one is mocking the others precautions. By the end of the week it becomes clear that all of the graveside mourners have turned off their phones just in case she can reach us from the other side. We all want to ensure that she targets someone else first.

We smile to this day, praying that her verbal victim is not our retired but still living Pope. He is in God's hands and our prayers.