

The Blessing of Comic Relief

It is the small moments of humor—a joke, laughter or a playful child—that remind us of life even in the face of death.

By **Nancy Davidoff Kelton**

My niece through marriage died two years ago at age 40. We sat shiva at her brother's house in Needham, Massachusetts. His 6-year-old daughter helped serve drinks; she made \$50. 🧡 Kaitlin's tip collecting began six hours after the funeral, when her grandpa, father of the deceased, asked her to get him a glass of wine. In a playful way, he gave her a dollar. 🧡 I then asked her for a club soda. "That'll be a dollar," she said. Grandpa pulled out another one. Other relatives followed.

I met the clan five years earlier on the evening of my then-boyfriend's father's funeral. Our kindergarten bartender, 13-months-old and clinging to her mother, would not get near me. Now she hugs me when I come and go, sits on my lap at the piano as I guide her pointer for "Happy Birthday" and "Heart and Soul" and, with her 9-year-old brother, takes my hand when we go on walks and jump waves at the beach.

I have developed what my grandmother jokingly called "great rappa-port" with the "littles"—my sister-in-law's name for her grandchildren—and with the three older generations: the "bigs."

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE FUNERAL we ate pizza. The leftover pies became snack food and a part of our conversations for the rest of the week. So did the insensitive relative who even 20 minutes before the funeral made a stupid remark and the acquaintance who called herself "spiritual" but we called "garrulous," among other things.

"Death, a necessary end, will come when it will come," wrote Shakespeare.



To our niece, it came way too soon. My 96-year-old mother-in-law keeps saying that life is unfair and she should have been the one to go.

As Kaitlin continued adding dollars to her red plastic cash register on the beverage table, I steered customers her way.

The day after the funeral, when my husband and I took his grown children to the train station for their return trip home, my daughter called from New York. I told her about Kaitlin so she would laugh and so my stepchildren in the backseat would,

too. They could board the trains holding on to that one funny occurrence. In my telling, I felt particularly close to "our" children.

And to Kaitlin. At age 7, I was the "family cheerer-upper"—my father's name for me—when my mother had a nervous breakdown. I wrote and recited poems to amuse her as she retreated into herself.

When she was institutionalized, I played Ping-Pong every night with my gloomy father, learning to return his toughest shots both on and off the table. I sang to my grandmother, who

KATHERINE STREETER

stayed with us and cried. When her sobbing took over and she would ask me—me—where she went wrong with Mom, I reassured her she was not to blame.

AS AN ADULT, I STILL LIKE SPREADING cheer. Last summer, when I told my cousin, a rabbi, about my niece's death and Kaitlin's

Davidoff died from complications after surgery, my Grandma Cohen was hit by a car, about to pay a shiva call. She was carrying food in a casserole dish. She died immediately.

During our second week of mourning for my second grandmother, my mother told my father to make tea for our rabbi, sitting in our living room exactly where he sat the week before.

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bartending, he said that children, like the mounds of food, discussions of peculiar people and funny moments, are important—even necessary—in a house of mourning. He reminded me of a family moment 50 years earlier.

In 1964, a week after my Grandma

Flustered, Dad asked my older sister, Susan, and me to help. We boiled water. Dad carried in the kettle. Susan followed with a teabag. I followed with an empty cup. We stood in front of the rabbi. Susan and I cracked up and could not stop laughing. Years

later, she and I still laugh about how we served the rabbi tea.

On the second night of shiva for our niece, Kaitlin was told to put her cash register away. The tipping stopped. For that first day, though, her bartending provided the "bigs" with a few smiles in the middle of a huge cry. The family still talks about Kaitlin's accumulation of cash.

The late writer Mavis Gallant said, "...everything, no matter how grave, holds the possibility of laughter. Look at the fits of laughter you get at a funeral, at a wake. It's emotion and in a way it's a relief that you're alive."

I plan to tell my grandson all about Kaitlin's bartending when he is older... If I am still here. **H**

Nancy Davidoff Kelton, a widely published book author and essayist, is currently finishing her memoir.