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Proximity, Truth, and Funerals
S. Ray Granade
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She thought she was too young to be a grandmother when her first grandchild came, so she proclaimed that she would be called “Momma Ray” instead of “Grandmother.” I was her first, and through the vagaries of war my birth coincided with her only daughter's last extended time “at home.” Proximity and longevity ensured sufficient time and opportunity for her to make a lasting impression. Yet at her death, I discovered a woman I had never known.

Momma Ray always interceded between me and my grandfather, whose diminutive stature was enlarged by his capacity for silence, his gruffness, his unquestionable intellectual ability, and his seeming emotional aloofness. Papa Ray certainly seemed foreboding to a child, as he must have to the people with whom he dealt for the Internal Revenue Service, and he wife always seemed the safer bet for favors.

Like her sisters, Momma Ray asserted herself in her world. Perhaps prejudice caused me to attribute to her a softer demeanor than the other two possessed; looking back, I believe the difference to be real. For all of his taciturn nature, Pop had an ameliorating influence on her life. Yet the strength of her personality had no fears for this grandchild. She was a good wife who, in the best Southern tradition, stayed home and cared for the family while her husband earned their keep.

My childhood memories of Momma Ray were of a domestic, a *mater familias*, who was a whiz at card games, especially bridge. As a baby-sitter she taught me two-handed card games like Canasta and Honeymoon Bridge. She introduced me to a wonderfully-deserted neighborhood place called “The Perry Street Park,” which also hosted a Golden Age Club and was occasionally attended by one of her friends. We would swing or play Sorry and talk.

Then, as I aged and more grandchildren arrived, I found myself relegated to the company of my peers. At Christmas-time family gatherings in the small Montgomery house, we would all get a quarter to take our noise around the block—provided we did not move too quickly. That was never a problem, since one of the grand houses on adjacent Perry Street was guarded by two stone lions. That broad tree-lined avenue with its multi-story dwellings reminded us of palaces, far removed from any world we knew.

As my world and my relationship with Momma Ray changed, two constants remained: coffee and religion. My grandmother was a coffee-drinker in all seasons. A pot remained throughout the day on the small kitchen table, where the coffee strengthened until it disappeared, only to be replaced by a fresh brew. Its aroma heralded its continual presence, and invited visitors to partake.

Religion was a different matter. Momma Ray was socially conscious, perhaps as only Southern matrons can be. I heard her speak of those matters often with family and friends. I had not the sophistication to evaluate the reason for that fact. Most of the conversations I heard were with my mother, whose absence from the scene necessitated “catching up” with who was who and doing what. I came to associate coffee and society as the two mainstays of Momma Ray's existence. Religion seemed a constant, but a peripheral one.

She was a Baptist, and had we grandchildren extended one of our annual Christmas pilgrimages around the block, we could have easily passed her church. The Montgomery First Baptist Church, an imposing white stone Gothic structure, presided over a portion of Perry Street less than a half-dozen blocks north. There my parents had been wed, and there, occasionally, I joined my grandmother in worship.

Perhaps it was the occasionality that bothered me; perhaps it was her custom of speaking of the pastor and church members with the same words and in the same way she “caught up” my mother on the social scene. I never stopped to think that my pastor-father’s occupation kept us from my grandmother’s services, and that visits often revolved around holidays rather than week-ends. I never stopped to think that the church meant more than attendance at this or that service—meant, in short, the kind of social awareness that my grandmother exhibited. I never realized that my grandmother’s concern with the lives of others might have greater implications than idle curiosity.

God gave me ample time and opportunity to learn her lesson. As a child I visited often, for we lived close. Her life spanned most of my own, for she died at 93. We had just made the 550-mile trip home for Christmas, and I had known then that the end could not be far. For the first time, I witnessed what my parents had been saying for several years, and more frequently more recently: both grandparents were failing rapidly. At a distance, that failure was unreal. They managed to “get up” for family gatherings, and events conspired to deprive me of any other contact with them in the last years.

Momma Ray’s death was still a shock, even having seen her frailty and mental inattention a month before. We loaded up and drove for the funeral, where she had requested that her grandsons serve as pall-bearers. That funeral taught me several things.

As my younger son observed, people love to put words, often inaccurate ones, into the mouth of the dead. One person observed that “Momma Ray would have been so proud to see all of you there, such fine-looking young men.” Momma Ray would have been glad to see us, but would certainly have excoriated us for the facial hair four of us sported; she had too vehemently railed against such nastiness and in favor of the clean-shaven look too many times for me to doubt her reaction.

More importantly, the minister’s litany of her church activities and good deeds, and the number of people who attended the funeral of a woman who had outlived all contemporaries save her husband, unveiled her attachment to her religion and the long-lasting results of that attachment. Through another’s eyes, I saw my grandmother’s religious activities for the first time: service on pulpit committees, Sunday School class-work, and years of dedication to the Woman’s Missionary Union—through which she reached out to her community and her world. I saw, in short, the deeds which those in her local church had seen but I had not.

I also saw a lesson which I learned too late to confirm with her. My mother commented on our great legacy from Momma Ray, and from her husband when he died a month later. That legacy came clear to me only through her funeral, a fact which changed my mind somewhat about the efficacy about those events.

The lesson which I learned was that while we do not perform our deeds for men’s approbation, we have a duty to those with whose training we are charged. That duty is to let them see the deeds which accompany our words. Our duty is to bring them actively onto the scene religiously, especially those to whom we are closest. Our duty is to help them past any hint of hypocrisy, to help them see the reality, to help them see the forest through the trees. We must not allow proximity to blind them to the truth.