

Elizabeth Coblentz - The Amish Cook

If there's such a thing as a good day for a funeral, Sept. 23 in eastern Indiana qualified. The sky was postcard blue; late-season soybean fields soaked in a plentiful September sun. Elizabeth's garden continued to produce an ample bounty for the winter ahead. In the soil, in the sky, life went on. Life goes on, it's a phrase that punctuated many of The Amish Cook's columns.

A sea of black buggies filled a field next to Elizabeth's home as Amish from all over came to pay their respects. "This is a big funeral, but I've seen much larger," an Amish man told me, as I tried futilely to blend in with the crowd. "Once a person gets over 70 years old, there are so many branches of the family that a funeral can get real large." Still, I counted hundreds of people milling around. Elizabeth was only 66 when she passed away.

A traditional, well-spoken sermon, all in Swiss German, lasted about an hour. My girlfriend and I were among a handful of non-Amish people attending the ceremony. I know little of the Swiss dialect that the Amish speak among themselves at home. Through the years I've picked up a few words and phrases the Coblentzes taught me. Still, it wasn't enough to understand the funeral service. So I mostly just quietly reflected upon life and my years of visits with Elizabeth. As is Amish custom, Elizabeth's home had been transformed into a makeshift chapel, with benches cramming the living room and dining area. A second simultaneous service was held in the cavernous tool-shed outside to handle the overflow crowd. How different this once familiar living room seemed, filled with faces, some I knew, some I didn't. I found myself wishing I could understand what the minister was saying, as his voice settled into an almost rhythmic cadence. I remember the first time I met the Coblentzes and my sloppy stabs at speaking Swiss. I greeted them with "vee gates," which is Swiss German for "How are you?" and always said goodbye with "Auf Wiedersehen." But for the occasional Swiss word I understood, most of the sermon was lost on me. My eyes occasionally drifted to the casket. So many memories. Mostly, I just stared out the window.

Funerals showcase the attributes that make the Amish such an admirable people. While I always caution readers not to over-romanticize the Amish (they live a very difficult life), or put them on a pedestal (there are good and bad Amish, just like in any other faith), as a whole the Amish do exhibit some traits I often find myself wishing more of society would emulate. Within 48 hours of Elizabeth's death, 15 casseroles had

arrived at the Coblenz home. People seemed to materialize out of nowhere just to lend a comforting condolence to Elizabeth's family. Our world is filled with lonely people who's only wish is for a meaningful human connection or two.

Among the Amish, there is a collective caring that ensures no one will ever be alone during times of illness, death, or accident. Also on display during times of trial is the legendary Amish stoicism, a stoicism it took me years to understand.

The strength of Elizabeth's family and of the Amish in general awe me. At times over the past few weeks I would find myself in tears over the death of Elizabeth, only to be comforted by one of her daughters. "This is what God wanted," they would affirm. This isn't to say there weren't many tears and deep grief among Elizabeth's family. But their grief was salved by an unshakable faith. This bedrock belief in their faith underlies all Amish attributes. Most Amish don't preach or pontificate, they just live and let their religion speak for itself. I admire that.

A procession of black buggies carried Elizabeth's casket to a simple cemetery not far away. The Amish shy away from vanity in death as much as they do in life. Someone driving by an Amish cemetery would never know they were passing it. So in respecting the privacy of ceremony, all I'll say is that poignantly, Elizabeth was laid to rest next to her husband Ben. They loved one another so much, and now they are together forever. Each Amish grave is marked by a simple, small wooden headstone carved with the person's initials and years of life.

After Elizabeth's funeral, we enjoyed a big feast at Elizabeth's. By the day of the funeral, the casserole tally had probably passed a score, so there were casseroles, rolls, pies, soups, vegetables, all comfort foods brought by this community of caring. After the funeral, the meal is a cheery time to celebrate the departed's life, not mourn their death.

I had been visiting Elizabeth about eight years when an Amish man told me I was slightly misinterpreting my attempts at Swiss German. "Vee gates" means "how are you?" and "Auf Wiedersehen" is translated literally as "until we meet again." In most Amish communities I've visited, there isn't a formal expression for "good-bye," only the circumspect "auf wiedersehen." I came to realize that's one of the reasons why the Amish are so strong in the face of funerals. They always know there's not a permanent parting, just an absence until we meet again.

Auf Wiedersehen, Elizabeth.

Contributed by bunnygirl