

James Julius Catalyn, a Wonderful Uncle

Wonderful uncles cannot die. At least we thought that way as children. Our dearest uncle, James Julius Catalyn, we, with much affection, call “Uncle James,” has been the sweetest, kindest, most loving, and no nonsense uncle one could ask for. On the Saturday afternoon, August 18, 2018, after being rushed to the hospital because of poor breathing from lung problems, we did not realize it would have been our last few minutes with him alive.

With our uncle we laughed, cried, talked, and had lots of fun. What stands out a lot in the minds of the immediate family is our annual Christmas dinners at his home. For about sixty years he was the one who cooked, fried, and baked the sumptuous meals. He was an exquisite cook. Only the vegetarians, like myself, cooked the vegetarian entrée. But you could not imagine what creative dishes would be at the next Christmas dinner. About five years ago, Uncle James told us that he is passing on the mantle and that everyone should start cooking for Christmas dinner. From then on, it was a potluck-style Christmas dinner. This next Christmas in 2018 will be different. He will not be there. Isn't it amazing that he told us to start cooking for the Christmas dinner while he was alive! Now he is gone, and we will still provide the meals for the other Christmas times, just as he taught us.

These kinds of family gatherings are special. They keep you close to each other. They help to keep continuity in family life. We all have watched our family Christmas dinner-time lose one loved one after another. Between 2015 to 2016, five family members died. Now, our dearest Uncle will not be with us. The circle is smaller, but the love is still strong.

One special tradition was Uncle James giving gifts to all the minor children, no matter how many of them. He would purchase these gifts months in advance. Closer to Christmas time, he would put them under his well-decorated Christmas tree he took his time to populate with his cherished ornaments. As we visited the home weeks before Christmas day, we wondered: “Which one is mine?” It was so special on Christmas day when everyone gathered around the Christmas tree waiting for Uncle James to call his or her name—Derek, Judith, Barry, Kirk, Gina, David, Claudia, Ann, and on and on. “Thank you, Uncle James.”

Another Christmas treat of Uncle James was his cake baking. He had a method in his madness. Months before Christmas, sometimes from August, he would start preparing to bake his cakes. His special fruit cakes, that some of us could not eat, were richly saturated with wine over a long period of time. Uncle James loved baking. He called his baking, “Sinfully Divine, for Sinners and Saints Alike.”

Uncle James had a gift of purchasing the right clothing for everyone, male and female, when he traveled around the world. I could never forget a winter coat he bought for me when he worked for the Ministry of Tourism in Chicago in the late 1960s. That coat was so warm, I was able to use it in Michigan where I lived for four years in the 1990s. I kept the coat for over 53 years. I recently had to admit, with coaching from my wife, Annick, that the coat had seen better times. I really loved that coat.

Uncle James was very close to my mother, his only sister, and the eldest in the family. During his many years while working in Tourism Ministry, he would travel around the world on business for the country. One thing he did each time was to leave his detailed itinerary with my mother. It included countries he would be traveling to, time of flights, and hotels he would be staying in. So, we would ask my mother, “Where is Uncle James now? She would say, “He just left Sweden for Germany this morning.” Or “He is coming back to Nassau tonight and will be heading in two days to South America.” They had a close relationship.

Two of Uncle James' strengths were organizing and planning. His funeral plans would be a good example. About thirty years ago he gave my mother the first draft of his funeral arrangements. It was a twenty-page document of the detailed instructions for the service. He revised it at least three times before her death in 2015.

After her death, he gave a copy of the plans to two of his nieces. The instructions were precise and detailed. There were even instructions where each family member will sit. He knew exactly how many could sit in each pew. He said: “Positively, absolutely, and definitely no reserved seating for any official . . . Anyone attending must attend as a friend and need no special treatment. . . No acknowledgments of any kind are to be made in recognition of anyone attending the service. The most important persons there are my family.” He prepared for his death. In 1960 he wrote a poem entitled, “The Epitaph.” In August of 1985, he wrote a poem describing his wishes during his funeral service entitled, “This is My Day.”

My Uncle was special. The detailed instructions for his funeral were clear and facilitated their execution. He even prepared his own funeral booklet with the entire service—songs, scriptures, intercessions, etc. No sermon, choir, or general remarks! And he said in the document to not allow any to persuade us to change anything. We did follow exactly what he wanted. He concluded his instructions with a warning not to change anything and to never think “Oh, he dead, he ain’ ger know.”

There are many lessons we can learn from James Julius Catalyn. Some of them are forward thinking, planning, detailed organizing, being proud of yourself, being self-confident, the importance of laughter, and being kind to everyone. He was truly an outstanding Bahamian. Wonderful uncles cannot die. They live forever in our hearts. James Julius Catalyn, 1940 to 2018—My Uncle.

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