

In Time of Sorrow: The Gift of Your Presence
Condensed from Guideposts
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One morning several years ago my mother phoned me at my office to ask if I was going to her cousin's funeral that afternoon. "I can't," I told her. "I won't be able to break away."

"Please," she urged. "It won't take more than an hour. You don't have to go to the cemetery, just to the service. You don't know how much the family will appreciate you being there."

"No one's going to miss me," I said. "It's been at least four years since I've seen those cousins."

I felt guilty as I hung up, though. While I did have a heavy schedule that day, I could have rearranged it to fit in the funeral. And I had once been very close to the children of my Mother's cousin. But I reassured myself: Surely, wrapped in their grief, my cousins wouldn't know whether I was there or not. Why should I disrupt a busy day in order to involve myself in the gloom of a funeral?

Over the years I had shunned funerals of people not quite at the core of my life: the business acquaintance whose family I have never met, the gentle neighborhood pharmacist with whom I had solved countless problems of the world and whose funeral service would have delayed (by two or three hours) the start of a vacation trip. What good would canceling my appointments do the dead? They were gone; I could not bring them back. Staying away from the funeral did not mean that I mourned them any less.

Like many other people, I was convinced that the bereaved were temporarily beyond any comfort that my presence at the funeral service could bring. I thought of them as walled within their grief, blind and deaf to everything around them. On the rare occasions when I did attend a funeral, I could never bring myself to offer condolences to those who sat in that dreaded "first row." Of what value, after all, were words, a handshake, a kiss?

Then my turn came to sit in that first row. My father, still active though in his 70's, collapsed and died without warning. It was one of those deaths announced to a family in an emergency-ward corridor. Suddenly all you can do is walk back out to your car.

Now, on a chill but sun-bright morning, we were being driven by limousine to the funeral, a ride that until that time only other families had taken. Already a fragment of the mystery was being lifted for me; I was aware of awareness. For once thing, I found myself grateful that it was a sunny day. But I also felt the aloneness of grief, apartness from everyone we passed—men going into their work, women shopping. My mother said softly, "They say I should be thankful that I had him this long, but it's only been like a walk around the block." Yes, so it was for her and for my sisters and brother and for myself. No one else could possibly know how brief that walk had been.

Before the service began we entered a room just off the chapel, and soon people began coming in. One of the first was an elderly man I didn't know. He held my hand for a moment as he said, "You wouldn't remember me, but I worked for your Dad when he first started in business. He was a real gentleman." Just that, and he was gone.

But inside, where there had been emptiness, I felt a strange flow. And it grew, this glow, as the line inched by. Here was a cousin, only three days out of a hospital; here, business competitors of my father. And between the familiar faces and the strangers were people I was amazed to see: a maid who had worked for my parents long ago, the corner candy store owner and his wife, and the television repairmen. It was as though, kaleidoscopically many parts of my Father's life were coming together on this day.

Then suddenly my wife was saying, "Look who came!" And walking towards us were friends of ours, a couple who hadn't even known my father—yet he had taken time off work and she had gotten a baby-sitter. I embraced them warmly. "I can't tell you how I appreciate this," I said.

"We wanted to be with you," they replied.

With *me*, with *us*. Now, others were approaching, friends who though their words might be awkward or mumbled, brought the priceless gift of themselves. How grateful I was for their presence; how infrequently I had given mine.

Afterward there was another revelation. I had long questioned the practice of stopping at the bereaved's home immediately following a funeral—it did not seem right for food and drink to be served as though it were a party. But that day, we got back to my mother's house, it was good to see the quiet friendliness of neighbors who had spread a table; good to have people coming and going, to talk, to reminisce about my father, and now and then to smile. This was not a turning away from mourning, nor was there a moment's forgetting; it was, instead, a communion of the living.

Recently, the father of a dear friend of mine died, and although I had not known the father well, I made it my business to attend the funeral. Later my friend said to me, "It may sound strange to use the word happy, but there really was a kind of happiness in seeing you. It had nothing to do with being comforted; it was just that I was so glad you were there. I've been to many funerals," he went on, "but I never knew until now how important it was to go."

I nodded, remembering the solace of a deep and personal grief shared when I, too, had been in that first row.