

Empathy is the most radical of human emotions.

—GLORIA STEINEM

Jack's Funeral



When I arrived at Jack's funeral, I found the large church completely full. I recognized a lot of people and felt like I was among community. The only space left was standing room at the back. I sensed the solemnity among us as the coffin came in, followed by Jack's wife, Marie, and their two young sons.

I find all funeral services intensely moving because of the loss—the utter, irreversible loss—for those close to the person. And because of the power of death, the way it is beyond our grip, beyond our understanding. It makes visible the huge thing that is every person's life. All this, and the tragic experience of Jack's family, affected me in the first moments of the service.

I was very moved and felt a force rising up within me. I did my best to open myself and let the feelings flow. Sometimes this works for me—I can hold myself like the banks of a river while the feeling rushes through—but this time my river banks were dissolving, and the huge surge of feeling was fast becoming all that I was. Any moment now it would burst out as a wild, noisy outpouring. We were in England, where the culture for funerals involves weeping, certainly, but not loud shrieking and sobbing! *What to do?*

I looked toward the door and saw a route I could take that

would barely disturb anyone. I'd go outside. That would help. Just before leaving, I realized how much I wanted to be present, to be part of the service. Something within me resolved to find a way through this, and I remembered something I had recently learned. *With such a strong feeling, there must be an equally strong need underneath it. What could it be?*

From nowhere I could identify, an answer came immediately: I needed to worship. I was surprised. This was not something I had considered, and yet I was immediately calmed by this answer. This was it. It felt true. As I focused on my desire to worship, the forceful push of my feeling subsided, like a wave flowing into the ocean after breaking on the shore. I could feel my feet again. I could stand steady. I could stay in the church. I could worship. I fell into a deep state, totally centered and in sacredness for the rest of the service.

At the end there was an announcement that family and close friends would proceed to the burial in the cemetery a couple of miles away. I wondered whether I counted as a close friend. *Perhaps not*, I thought. I got on my bicycle and pedaled very slowly toward home—but something stopped me. I didn't feel ready to go home. Instead I headed to the house of a friend who had been at the funeral, but she was not home.

I paused, wondering what to do next. At least ten minutes had passed since the service ended, but I began cycling slowly toward the cemetery. I was in a deep state and could hear my inner promptings more clearly than usual, so I decided to trust my impulses for action in each moment. I cycled gently, at the exact speed that felt right to me, enjoying the spring flowers along the roadside in the dappled sunlight.

I arrived at the large cemetery, like a beautiful park in the May morning sunshine. In the distance I could see the funeral cars and the mourners beside the grave. I parked my bike and walked over to join them. Just as I arrived, the burial rituals were done, and people began embracing each other and talking quietly. I was glad

to embrace friends and participate in the moment, but sad to have missed the shared graveside prayers.

Marie and her sons were the first to depart from the group. They got into the leading funeral car and the group dispersed. No longer among the mourners, I wanted a moment to be with Jack, to connect with his spirit. I went close to the grave and looked down at the coffin, deep in the earth, where his body lay. I picked a few of the daisies growing abundantly in the grass and, with a prayer, threw them in. I stood in silence for several minutes.

Part of me felt continually alarmed. My mind was telling me I shouldn't do this—it wasn't right, not my place, not respectful. I was not nearly as close to him as the others. What would they think? But my inner connection was still very strong from my experience in the service, so I managed to stay with my inner promptings.

The last of the family and friends got into their cars and drove off slowly together. I stood alone next to Jack's grave. Then I felt like the moment was complete, but I was not ready to return to daily life. I saw a bench under a tree some distance away, so I walked over to it and sat down.

As the last car left the cemetery, I heard a motor start up. A small truck bounced over the grass to the grave. Two men got out and began spading earth onto Jack's coffin. They talked loudly as they worked, joking and chatting. They were full of the vigor of life. They reminded me of the gravediggers in Shakespeare's plays, contrasting life with death, humor with tragedy, lightness with sorrow. In a few efficient and energetic minutes, they had filled the grave and jumped on it to press the earth down, chatting cheerfully all the while. They threw their spades back into the trailer and drove off.

I sat for a while longer in the silence and stillness. It was done.

I did not see Marie during the next days. I had an urge to write to tell her what happened after she left, but I felt unsure. To send something so personal at such a sensitive time—would that be

okay? Several days later I felt the urge again and, reconnecting to my decision to follow my inner impulses, I penned her a letter.

Some days later Marie rang me. With her voice full of joy, she told me how deeply grateful she was for my letter. She said she had left the graveside to care for her younger son when he could not take any more. Through the window of the car, she had watched me go to the grave, pick the flowers, throw them in, and stand in silent prayer. She told me she had been longing to do exactly this herself, and it was as if I had done it for her. It also meant a lot to her that I had seen the grave filled. It brought her solace and completion.

I was amazed. I had never considered that I might be doing it for her. From that moment in the church when I became deeply connected with myself, everything had flowed at the right time, right place, and right way. It was like grace, and I felt privileged to have been part of it.

—BRIDGET BELGRAVE, www.liferesources.org.uk