

Sharing Memories

By Ryan Helfenbein

During the first week of December, many took time out of their schedules to see these images: President H.W. Bush's casket escorted onto Special Air Mission 41 (aka Air Force One), his casket positioned in the Capitol, and "Sully" the dog lying in front of his flag-draped casket. Many even took time away from work to stand in the long line at the U.S. Capitol in the 30-degree temperatures, to pay their respects to the 41st president lying in state.

Could you imagine, if following his death, a news announcement stated that due to it being "too much on the family" there would be no service, no gathering of remembrance and no scheduled time or place to share memories with family and friends? Quite simply, he is gone, and we should honor him on our own. Or, how about the death of Princess Diana in 1997? In her case, if there was to be nothing after her passing, what would the 33 million viewers have done at 6 a.m. on Sept. 6, 1997? Her funeral service was estimated to be the most-watched funeral service in history. With both situations we must ask ourselves, if so many of us took time out of our schedules to witness a final tribute to individuals we never personally knew, why would we not provide that same opportunity for the people we do?

Today we are finding more people tending to lean toward "doing less and less" when recognizing a death. We are even seeing businesses promote the fact that they can have your loved one returned to you in the form of ashes in a box well within 24 hours. Sad, right? Others wish to simply get through the services as quickly as possible, perhaps even going directly to the cemetery shortly after a passing occurs. Now perhaps we would want this quick turnaround for having our dry cleaning done, or getting rid of bats in the attic or mice in the basement, but not for a family member, friend, and most definitely not a princess or U.S. president.

When no scheduled remembrance is planned, there's no telling where the visitation will take place. You might be thinking "but we're not going to have a visitation." Well, you're not planning a visitation, but it's going to happen. No, not in the traditional fashion, with a casket or a gathering with photos and an urn. This visitation will be held at the local grocery store, mall or other public venue when a friend of the deceased approaches

with the question, "How's your father been, it's been so long since I've seen him?" Unfortunately, right then and there we are now explaining that he passed, ultimately turning a quick trip to pick up bread and milk into a visitation with dad's friend, sharing how much he meant to them - all the while juggling the chaos of frantic shoppers reaching for items on a shelf behind you. This ill-fated visitation also inadvertently leaves that friend wondering why they were not contacted, why they weren't a part of a final farewell, and worst of all, left with an overall feeling of perhaps dad didn't feel as closely connected to them as they did to him.

What we realize when a person of inspiration passes away is that we all were touched in our own unique way by what they may have done and what we witnessed. This person by far was not an immediate relative, neighbor or even a distant acquaintance. Instead, they were someone who impacted our life in a way they will never know, and we feel the need to pay tribute to them for doing so. Hence, we turn our attention to the TV for the funeral ceremony, take a day off work to wait in a long line outside in the cold to witness them lying in state, and DVR the tributes and continued media coverage rather than watching our favorite sitcoms. Providing a time and place for others to share memories and tell their stories is an imperative part of the grief process for everyone who has been impacted by loss.

Some surviving families might think that dad outlived his friends, and it's just us who are left behind. Therefore, we may tend to feel as if no one will give much thought about his passing. Perhaps it wasn't us that need this time of reflection, but the next-door neighbor who brought the newspaper to the door every morning, the teller at the bank he shared a laugh with every Friday or even the kids at the senior center who came to visit him for their church outing one Sunday a month. After all, if we take time out of our lives to pay tribute to a complete stranger, why wouldn't we offer others the chance to pay the same respect to the ones we love?

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