

The Power of Showing Up

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Note: Names in this article have been changed or omitted out of respect for the privacy and feelings of all concerned parties.

The card said, "I love you, Harold."

Laying on a dresser top in a room of the old farmhouse, it caught my eye. Such simple, eloquent words. I felt sad to read them--terribly, terribly sad.

A week ago, using a hose attached to his truck exhaust, the card's recipient had converted this same room into a gas chamber. Harold's body and the bodies of his wife and youngest son were found two days later by his younger brother and his best friend. The story has since been splashed all over the statewide media. So far, one side of a complex and painful set of circumstances has been played up by the press. Another side exists, which I trust will emerge by and by. It will be a long time before the legal dust settles. As for the time it will take for the hearts broken by this tragedy to mend, who can possibly say? How does one heal from such a thing? I do not know. I only know that life goes on, and at some point, wildflowers grow on even the most scarred earth.

I did not know this family, but I'm a close friend of their neighbors. So there I was, together with three good friends. Our offer to help Harold's relatives move out the family's belongings was gladly accepted, and we spent the morning loading up a semi trailer and a flatbed with furniture, appliances, clothing, and boxes. There was the usual wisecracking and horseplay of men working together, the casual conversations, the logistics, the teamwork, all the earmarks of a typical house-moving. But it all seemed a bit surreal, framed as it was by the pervasive ambience of stale engine exhaust.

I will never forget that smell.

And as I write, a jumble of other images from yesterday comes to mind. A

large maple tree, half-clad with clown-colored leaves, set against an ironically glorious, blue October sky. Family photos sitting on a bureau. An enormous freezer stocked with food. In one of the boxes, a Sunday school workbook titled *I Am a New Creation*.

A new creation.

In the midst of one family's unspeakable agony, that thought alone offers hope.

In this life, some things happen that just don't make sense. In this life, the most agonizing questions require something that goes beyond any answer you and I can furnish. Not that we don't have answers. God help us, we're full of them. But they don't touch pain's raw, ragged edge. God alone can do that. And he does--but rarely in ways that match our presuppositions of how he does or doesn't work.

In the end, I think the best answer we can furnish is ourselves. We don't know what to say. We have no words. Our power is weak; our understanding, limited. All we can do is show up. Yet therein lies the key.

As a follower of Jesus, I trust that where he goes, I go; and where I go, he goes. My job is simply to go. And to listen--to others, and above all, to him. Be swift to hear and slow to speak. It is a matter of the heart.

Showing up creates the possibility for God to act. When and how he will do so is up to him; I cannot force his hand. But by stepping into another person's circumstances, I may find God accomplishes things that would never occur apart from my being there.

You see, this is what our God-given authority is about, first and foremost: the fact that our simple lives count. You and I have profound and inescapable impact. We can't help it--it comes with being made in God's image. We make a difference when we show up; we make a difference when we don't show up. The kind of difference we make--that of presence or that of absence--is up to us. But whether we will have an influence of one sort or another is already

predetermined by virtue of our having been placed on this green earth.

My friends and I worked our butts off yesterday. We did a good thing. Of course, no amount of care or sweat could reverse the awful consequences of Harold's actions, or alleviate the grief of the people affected by them.

Thankfully, Harold cannot be touched by human judgment; his case rests in the hands of One who sees and understands from a perspective unavailable to both the theologian and the atheist, to merciful and critical hearts alike. God alone knows the full, deep truth of the matter. From my standpoint, I'm just glad my friends and I could make life a little easier for Harold's brothers, family members, and friends. We cared for them. We worked with them. We prayed with them. And that is enough. The rest is up to God. That is a large part of what faith is about: doing what we can, and leaving the loose ends in our Father's hands. He knows what to do with them.

May God's grace rest on Harold's family and friends. May our Lord strike a light in a place of darkness and great pain. He is good at doing exactly that; may he do so here.

And may you and I recognize the power of simply showing up. It is one of the few powers we truly possess: the power of presence. Just being there. It is a great, great power, for in it lies the heart of the name Emmanuel, "God with us." In the midst of an angry, lonely, greedy, self-consumed, blind, demeaning world, Jesus showed up for us. He remains with us today. He will never desert us.

Friends, as our Master is with us, let us be with those around us. For the truth is, while Jesus dwells with us in spirit, he relies on us to incarnate his ways and give flesh to his character. Let us therefore offer others the gift of our presence--of our hearts, hands, and hearing. Let us trust God to guide us in love and action, no matter how awkward or ineffective we may feel. Leaving our questions and concerns at his feet, let us do what we can to show up for others as we have the opportunity.

Our Father will take care of the rest.