

On a brilliant June morning, I departed from the cemetery along with a crowd of other mourners, leaving behind the body of my friend Bob. Since then, I have been thinking about Bob, his life and his death. That he died only a few weeks after discovering a fatal disease still shocks me and his many other friends. We had thought ourselves to have more time with him than that.

Understand that Bob and I were friends for 61 years, ever since we entered high school together. We had stayed in touch all during that time, bound as we were by ties of respect and affection. Also we shared spiritual values that became even more important as we aged.

I feel Bob to be still present to me despite his death, but I continually revolve in my mind and heart how that is true. In this contemplation, I have found help from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who was executed by the Nazis in 1945.

In his Letters and Papers from Prison, Bonhoeffer wrote the following words to his wife: "Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through.

Bonhoeffer continues: "That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain."

For me, the words carried a vital message as I thought about Bob.

I find at least two important ideas in this passage from the German theologian's letters. First, that God does not fill the gap that is left in our hearts when a loved one dies. Asserting that God does so is a mistake; it would be bad theology and a misrepresentation of human life.

And, secondly, that God does us a favor in keeping that place empty. It's God's way of helping us preserve the bond with the one we love. At the cost of allowing us to feel pain, God lets us experience a vital absence.

This approach goes against conventional wisdom and the way we think and feel about death. Bonhoeffer's message could make us think differently about people who have lost a friend to death. Of course, their feelings of loss will normally diminish in intensity over time, but these emotions can still serve as signs of spiritual value.

In this way, the absence turns into a kind of presence. We are continually reminded of our loved one, of that person's place in our life. So long as the gap remains, we feel him or her to belong to us.

That is the way I am now feeling about my friend Bob. Though his bodily presence has disappeared, he remains present to me spiritually. Bonhoeffer is right: the gap abides and God is not taking it away.

Does Bob still feel that way about me? This question brings us further into the realm of

mystery. The very act of asking it plunges the questioner deeper into reality than we can handle.

Yes, I believe that my friend can still hold me in affection. Yet, I have no evidence for this nor do I want such proof. Rather, I leave it to the realm of hope rather than science. That is the way Bob would have approached the question, had I been the one to die first.

To me, Bob's life was worth so much, was so precious that I cannot imagine it lost. The gap that I feel serves for me as testimony of my friend's ongoing life. The convergence of faith, hope, and love that we shared suggests a communion of friendship that abides.

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