

## "When Human Voices Cannot Sing": A Hymn for a Funeral Liturgy

Bernadette Gasslein and  
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Death speaks with a silence that no sound can break or fill. And yet, what church musician has not had to break death's silence with music for funerals? From a pastoral perspective, a too-quick movement towards proclaiming resurrection joy can leave mourners without words for their grief and no consolation for their pain, since God's solidarity with suffering humanity can be lost in too easy a joy.

Texts for funeral hymns are critically important. As a musician who has had to lead music at some tragic funerals, I (Bernadette) remember refusing to think of the words as sentences with meaning. I ventured only as far as the end of the syllable, just to be able, physically and emotionally, to get to the end of a verse. And yet, I clung to those words, reassembling them when I dared, because as a believer, I, as well as those to whom I ministered, needed to make sense of what was senseless.

Thus the genius of a text, "When human voices cannot sing," that captures this paradox by giving us words for those times when death has snatched away our words and left our vocal cords numb.

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When human voices cannot sing  
and human hearts are breaking,  
we bring our grief to you, O God  
who knows our inner aching.

Set free our spirits from all fear—  
the cloud of dark unknowing,  
and let your light pierce through and show  
the pathway of our going.

Make real for us your holding love,  
the love which is your meaning,  
the power to move the stone of death,  
to heal us in our grieving.

And let the one we love now go  
where we, in faith shall follow,  
to travel in the Spirit's peace,  
to make an end to sorrow.

Shirley Erena Murray. © 1992 Hope Publishing Co., Carol  
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Murray accompanies the mourners on their journey, where they find, immediately, the God of compassion who "knows our inner aching." Knowing that death is not just silence, but also darkness, Murray lets mourners invite God's light into that cloud of unknowing, the time when, in the mystical tradition, God is experienced as absence. It is a fearful time: fear arises, not just from the loss of the beloved, but also from the sense of loss of the divine that can accompany it.

Those who mourn know the promise of comfort offered in the beatitudes. But when our hearts are broken, we need to know that love: now, really, concretely, lest we too be sealed in the grave with those who have died. This is the prayer she puts on our lips in verse three: that love will heal us as the future unfolds.

There is a moment when we must let the deceased person go, and as the funeral unfolds, that moment comes closer and closer. The coffin will be removed to the grave; the ashes will be deposited in the mausoleum; the final goodbye is now. Murray tenderly lets us voice our love once more, even as we state our faith. We know where our beloved friend or child goes; we know we will one day follow; in our anguish we might want to go right now, and yet we cannot: our journey is not complete. We still have something to

live for in this life. And so, the final lines pray for the peace that only the Spirit of the God who knows our sorrow can give: that as we continue to journey without our beloved, sorrow will gradually be healed.

### Performance Suggestions

Hymns for funerals are always a sensitive issue. They require supportive accompaniment, both from instruments and singers. The singing will often be subdued, for two reasons; people dealing with grief will be less likely to sing, and those people who see the inside of a church only at weddings and funerals are less likely to join in hymn singing. In planning a funeral, consider exactly who is going to sing the hymns. The congregation would usually benefit from the additional support of a choir or at the least a cantor or soloist.

Shirley Erena Murray's wonderful text would fit to many tunes, but a funeral is not the time to be teaching a new hymn tune to the congregation. I (Gordon) like ST. COLUMBA because it is familiar to most churchgoers, and the text will speak more clearly if the congregation is able to sing it with confidence. I'm always puzzled when I see new or unknown tunes suggested for congregational use at funerals. At a time of grief, comfort can be

Hymn Performance

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found in familiar liturgy and familiar music.

The organ accompaniment for a funeral hymn should be strong and supportive. Because this particular text is contemplative, it sounds best with a warm registration of foundation stops (8' and 4' principals, with a 16-8-4 pedal to match). The tempo ought to be in the area of a quarter note=92. The addition of a descant would not be appropriate for this hymn, since it would likely detract from the text; it would be a different story if this were a text the congregation knew well, but in all likelihood it will be new to most worshippers. If the choir and congregation can sing the hymn with confidence, and if the acoustic is sufficiently warm to blend all the voices, the last verse could be sung unaccompanied. The focus must be to encourage the congregation to sing comfortably, to allow them to absorb the meaning of the new words.

A final piece of advice: if you are emotionally involved in the funeral, consider asking someone else to play the organ or conduct the choir. Some musicians feel they owe it to their friends and family members to provide the music at their funerals. Remember though, that you are not Superman or Superwoman, and if you are grieving the loss of someone very close to you, it might be the time for you to be on the receiving end of pastoral music, and let a colleague minister to you by doing the work.