

Slowing down for death

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [June 7, 2000](#) issue

Although I live nine miles away from town, there is nothing much to slow me down on my way in. After the first two miles of tooth-rattling dirt road, it is a straight shot down state highway 17, with only one stop sign between me and the city limits. Every now and then I get stuck behind a school bus or a chicken truck, but on the average it is a 15-minute ride past cow pastures, a couple of churches and Sonny's Famous BBQ stand.

The road is curved and hilly, which makes it fun to drive. It is also a two-lane, which means that Sunday drivers can really slow things down. If you do not want my Ford 4x4 nipping at your rear bumper, then it is best to push the speed limit—either that or drive with one wheel on the shoulder so that everyone can pass you. People are in as big a hurry here as they are everywhere else. The absence of stoplights and traffic only greases our rush.

Yesterday I had just turned onto the hardtop when I saw a logging truck up ahead of me signal right and pull off to the side of the road. Since the driver could see over the hill and I could not, I pulled over too and waited for a fire engine to appear. Instead, I saw the flapping white flag on the black hood of a hearse top the hill, followed by a long line of cars with their headlights on.

While I sat there waiting for the funeral procession to pass, I considered what an odd ritual it was. None of the cars in the procession was on my side of the road. There was plenty of room for me to continue on my way while they continued on theirs. I did not even know the deceased, but none of that mattered. The logger's logs would be five minutes late that day, and so would I, because we stopped to show our respect for someone who had died.

It is a custom that has all but disappeared in the big city. When I lived in Atlanta, funeral processions were accompanied by at least two policemen on motorcycles with flashing blue lights. One of them led the procession while the other one sped ahead to block the next intersection. Otherwise none of the regular traffic would have stopped. The only concession I remember seeing in the city was on a long

stretch of four-lane highway. Motorists traveling in the opposite direction drove in the far right-hand lane, leaving the lane between them and the hearse empty.

Some of Atlanta's grand old cemeteries are in parts of town that are not so grand anymore. My own grandparents are buried at Westview Cemetery, on the south side of town, where the headstones now cost more than some of the houses. It is still a good address for the dead, and it was often where I headed after a funeral at a downtown church.

As the officiating minister, my position was right behind the hearse. I tried to remember to wash my car, which the funeral director pulled into place while I was still in church. Once the service was over, I escorted the family to their limousine and then walked up front to my car. Trying to get into it in full vestments was always something of a challenge.

Once I had stuffed myself behind the wheel with my surplice billowing around me like a collapsed parachute, I switched into passive mode. My only job now was to follow the hearse, which made all my decisions for me. There were no lane changes to navigate, no yellow lights to outrun. I stayed in third gear the whole way, ignoring the "change gears" light that sometimes flashed on my dash.

I did it in silence, too, although the radio tempted me. It was the distraction I wanted, and the distraction that seemed somehow wrong. Surely, when one is following a hearse, that alone is enough to think about.

The fastest route to Westview was down the expressway, but one thing about a funeral is that almost no one is in a hurry. Death stops time flat, and few people look forward to standing around an open grave. So we took the slow route, through parts of town that most of us had not seen in years. In perfect, dignified formation, we crept past the backside of the city, past abandoned warehouses and vacant lots littered with blown trash. We drove past liquor stores with bars on the windows, grocery stores with no cars in the parking lot, and pawnshops with electric guitars lined up behind the glass. I saw things I never would have seen if I had been free to choose my own speed limit.

When we passed the public housing project, people stopped what they were doing to look at us. A child caught his ball on the bounce and turned with his friends to admire our cars. A woman pushing a grocery cart stopped and leaned on the handle so she could search our faces. I resisted the impulse to wave. A funeral procession is

not an interactive event, after all. It is more like an icon, through which people look upon the face of their own death.

Finally we turned into Westview, through two-ton stone pillars and a wrought-iron gate 15 feet high. The noisy city street yielded to a rolling urban pasture full of graves. We pulled up to the open one under the green awning and in 15 minutes we had filled it. Afterwards people stood around in helpless clumps—wanting to leave, not wanting to leave. When I saw my chance, I took it. I sidled over to my car, threw my vestments in the front seat and headed for the expressway. Then I drove home as fast as I could, with loud music on the radio and all my windows open wide.