

What The Obituaries Teach Us

I read the Obituaries every day. In part, this is for business reasons, since Life Insurance is at the core of my profession, and we need to know if any of our Clients and friends has died. But also, as one ages, more and more people, who were an important part of one's life, appear there. As poet and preacher, John Donne, wrote:

No man is an island entire to itself;
.... Any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind,
and therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Another poet, T.S. Eliot, encapsulated an age when he wrote, "I have measured my life with coffee spoons." Starbucks attests that this line from 1917 is still true, but 'spoons' would need to be restated as *latte grande*. It can also be said we measure our lives in the Obits.

Obituaries, of course, are typically written in a formula, often by the funeral director. But they can approach a form of poetry known as the *paean*: an honorific, or at least acknowledgment that too few receive in life. The briefest mentions may mean anonymity or poverty. The longest, a

loving family touched in many places by a generous parent or other relative. And often the richest among us is memorialized with brevity and discretion, so many valuable community leadership positions just listed by organization.

Our eyes linger over the snapshots: casually posed, even whimsical, and the “doubles,” Janus-faced youth and age, juxtaposed like life’s bookends. We read in their faces if they’ve achieved a reasonable acceptance of their place in the world.

One realizes that often the high point of a life was reached at 19: a beauty in the ‘40s, a no hitter thrown in High School, surviving combat with commendation; before the tentacles of domesticity and vocation lock one in place.

We are moved by the death of an infant, or we stand on the edge of the abyss of despair, when confronted with the glistening picture of another teenager killed in a senseless car crash.

We talk to God on the pages. We thank Him for a life well led, for one who touched our life perhaps just with acknowledgment. And sometimes I come to Him not as a supplicant, but man-to-man with my fist clenched.

The Obits have their share of octogenarians, but what is startling is how many in their 50s or younger die.

In this land that was once thought to be the source of the “fountain of youth,” where agelessness is marketed relentlessly as microdermabrasion or a surgeon’s slick blade, death is something that happens to other people. But when one reads that a “fund for the children of Mr. XYZ” has been established at a bank or church, one realizes that there is no money: not enough assets, more need than provision. The children (and the spouse), unless very lucky, are thrown back into the world of Charles Dickens’ nineteenth century England, dependent on the alms of friends and charity. The result is despair and thwarted dreams that flame out as the lost cinder of youth.

In the wealthiest and most free nation the world has ever known, it is shocking how many do not plan their life *and* death, and leave their fundamental adult responsibilities “to the kindness of strangers.” The planning tools: Wills, Trusts, Powers of Attorney, and Life Insurance can be simple and inexpensive to put in place. One has it within one’s power to ask and answer the question: “What do I want to happen – now – and when I die?” Combat veteran, famous lover, Dean of St. Paul’s Church, London,

John Donne had the perspective to face this final act of life squarely: “As every man must die, so every man may see that he must die; as it cannot be avoided, so it may be understood.”

Through planning, one can keep one’s loved ones “in their world” and achieve a kind of immortality, extending one’s values and personality for generations to come.

We “live in the moment” at the very great peril to those who depend and count on us the most, or we can “take care of tomorrow *today*.”

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References:

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Ben Feldman – “greatest Life Insurance Agent of all time,” E. Liverpool, OH