Rumors of My Demise

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Reflection 1: Putting the fun back in funeral

On my first day of my first job in newspapers, at the Winona Daily News in Winona, Minn., I was given a desk, and an ashtray, and a beat – cops and courts. I was informed of the deadline and how to file my stories. And I was told that, as a cub reporter, it also would be my job to take obits over the phone.

In those days, obituaries were published for free. They were written by newspaper staff. Most of the time, they were called in by someone from a funeral home, who would recite a list of facts, and it was my job to cradle the phone in my ear and type as fast as I could.

Oh, and in addition to that, I was also told to update the “fun box.”

 What’s that?

Well it’s a listing in the newspaper, boxed off by a one-point rule, of all the upcoming funerals for the week. Not full obituaries. Just time, date, and place. For a quick read.

Of course we didn’t call it the “fun box” to anyone outside the newsroom. Just among ourselves.

And so I was introduced to the sacred and the profane of newspapers. Both the sardonic wit, and the social gravity of that occupation.

Newspapers stitched together a community. Your life was noted whoever you were and the whole town was invited to come honor your death if they wished. If you did nothing else in your life, the fact of your birth, and the fact of your death, made the newspaper.

Over a dozen years, I told the stories of maybe hundreds of people.

Most of these obits were formulaic – name, age, cause of death, time of death, place of death. Birth date, birth place, parents. Marriage, if any. Children, if any. Occupation. Military service. Notable awards. Surviving relatives. Time, date, place of services. Where to send memorials.

We had some pretty hard rules about what had to be and what could not be included. No flowery language about the Great Beyond. No names of grandchildren, because that could run to dozens. No aunts or uncles unless they were the only surviving relatives. And no pets.

But once in a while, someone would die whose life called out for more.

Usually this was the decision of my city editor, whom I looked upon as a grizzled veteran with a keen sense of a “hook” even though he was not yet 30. He’d make the call that So-And-So was worthy of what we called a “feature obit.” And I’d go out, talk to the person’s spouse, or relatives, or co workers – learn more of that person’s life, and I would write it up.

There was leeway in feature obits. You still needed all the facts. But you could include more detail -- the twists and turns, interests, impact. And I could exercise the language.

Now that I am a minister – in fact, long before that – I have come to question this singling out of some individuals. In fact, I think everyone’s life is worth a feature obit. Everyone’s life is a story. Even if you think you have lived an unremarkable life, I know that simply the fact that you have lived means you have tasted things, bitter and sweet, and you have made friends, and you have been hurt, and you have survived. So far.

What happens to you when you die? I don’t know. But I do know that you have lived. And that’s the important thing. The interesting thing.

So when we do memorial services here in this church – and we call them that, memorials, because they are about memory – we often say that to live in hearts that love is not to die.

Each of us is made up of bits and pieces of everyone we have known. They become part of us, we become part of them. When one of us dies, the part of them that is in you, lives, because you live. And when we retell their story, when we relive the moments, they are here with us.

Reflection 2: The Compassionate Curmudgeon

I mentioned at the start that we had rules for writing obituaries. Actually we had a lot of rules for writing in journalism. I think learning the rules was nearly 90 percent of what they taught us in journalism school. Strunk and White and the AP Style manual were sacred texts, and you had to memorize nearly all of it. If you didn’t it would not go so well for you. Think crotchety old editors in green eye shades whose ablations could bring tears to the most hardened reporter.

This stuff is soaked into me. Even if I stray wildly these days.

So when I put together the writing workshop I wrote down a list of David’s rules for writing – things to pay attention to whenever you put pen to paper.

This time, as I went over them, I had the idea that maybe these rules could be broadened a bit. Maybe they could be applied to things other than writing. Rules – or at least guidelines – for life.

Rule Number 1: Tell stories. Avoid lists. Your life is more like a novel than a resume. This is nearly all of my theology. Words set us apart. The words we use to tell of each others’ lives give them shape and meaning. The connection we find between each other, the connection in the words we say, is where God is. Tell stories. Tell stories of your life. Tell stories of the lives around you. This is the one true legacy we can leave. This is where hope, and inspiration, are found. Stories of who we have been and stories of who we are becoming. Tell stories.

 Rule 2: Don’t avoid tension. Include the conflict in your life. How did it resolve itself? Or didn’t it? The tension is the interesting part. How do stories begin? “It was a dark and stormy night ..” No one wants to read a story in which all the juicy stuff is left out.

My own approach, as you are coming to know, is to run straight at the tension. To meet it headlong. Within this congregation, I think there are ways we can learn to manage tension and conflict better. But it will be there, always. Even if you are more reserved than I am, I know that there has been at least some conflict in your life. Acknowledge it. Honor it. Find a way to talk about it. Conflict moves a story forward.

 Rule 3: Be straightforward. When writing your obituary, euphemism like “Gone to heaven,” “With your Maker,” “In a better place,” or even “passed on” will not make you less dead. “Dead” is a perfectly good word. I think the straightforward approach is best in a lot of things. Sometimes we have a sense that we should hold our tongues, find the nice way to put things. I’m not saying you should embrace the kind of nastiness that is all too common in social media or even letters to the editor. But be honest. Euphemism is less than honest. Euphemism spins the story. It makes it, fake.

Rule 4: Choose simple, short words. Use instead of utilize. Make instead of construct. Show instead of demonstrate. Have you not met people whose lives are like this? Who have a kind of economy of spirit? An elegance that leaves nothing wasted, nothing left behind. Too many carrots in the row stunts them all. There is no exaggeration in anyone’s life. No exclamation mark behind anything. Your life is what it is. It speaks of your own, plain truth, and nothing more. There are no clichés in your life, your life is completely original. There are no air quotes that trivialize who you are or imply you are something else. You are you.

Rule 5: Related to Rule 4, let the details speak. Compare: “He was quirky and liked food,” and “He was a member of the bacon-of-the-month club.” The divine is in the details. It always is. It is in the color of the sunrise or the hello of a friend. I didn’t wake up this morning filled with spiritual insight. I woke up to the sight of Venus peeking through the branches of a box elder across the river, on its arc down to below the horizon. I woke up to the knowledge that other eyes, other wakeners, will see Venus, too, after I cannot.

And after you have written these lines, read them out loud. Nearly all writing can be improved simply by speaking it and making changes to suit your ear.

 Rule 6: Write in active voice. Jane built a law practice. Not the Flaherty Law Firm was built by Jane. Live in active voice. Let the truth you see be heard. This is what it means to witness. This is what it means to live. Do not hide your light under a bushel. Do not let anyone else build your life for you. We are the mapmakers of our destination. We are the instruments of the eschaton. Whatever will be, will be, because of us. There is no one else.

 Rule 7: Remember the tools of poetry – comparison, metaphor, the part for the whole. We would do well to live our lives like poetry, to find in them meaning deeper than first seen.

 And Rule 8: Break the rules. All of them. Including all of the above (well, almost). Reading aloud helps. Do what sounds best.

Nothing moves forward if we stick to all the rules. Nothing speaks for our lives, for the originality of them, the uniqueness, unless we choose the other, unless we opt for something else. This is the freedom that lives within us. This is the choice. Right now, right here, each of us has the chance to write a new sentence, to make our lives what we want them to be. It happens in this moment. It happens with whatever story you have told so far. It happens with or without bacon. Or daylight savings time. It happens because of you.