

Chapter Nineteen

A final word . . .

During the four years of my class, six of my students have died. For some it meant a long, painful illness; others went quickly with no warning for them or for me. It's difficult to say which is the more traumatic.

In a short, immediate death there is no time for closings, for goodbyes; there is always, for me, a feeling of incompleteness, of being a little cheated because so much is unfinished. But what is it?

Most of my people have lived long, fulfilling lives, so how and why are we supposed to mourn? However, there is the feeling that they had so much more to tell, to write, to share with me and the class. Some of their families have an even stronger need to understand them more deeply. Many of these students had never expressed their loves, hates, frustrations, desires, joys or opinions until they began writing. Emotions revealed in their writing, bare as a newborn baby, are now smothered by death—forever. It is indeed a sad time, but we examine their powerful legacy and are grateful for their work.

I have an overwhelming desire, a strong urgency to help my people express more and more—before it's too late—to help them share with all of us what their life was all about and what excites them in the present.

Are they prepared to meet death? I feel they have wrestled with it and are ready. For some there is complete

peace and acceptance; for others a strong need for escape from pain and loneliness.

Faith in God plays a significant part in all their lives and in their attitude toward death. "I'm ready when the Lord wants me," "I'm waiting for heaven so I can be with God," "I pray every day so he'll let me join my husband," "I hope I won't reach 100 and be a burden to anyone," "I've lived long enough, but God knows best."

What of those who suffer from a long, painful illness? By helping them approach death, I'm better prepared, I hope, for a possible prolonged illness because I'm convinced I would want to imitate their courage, patience, optimism, and the persistence I've observed as they try to write, almost to the end, under severe pain and debilitating weakness. I have marveled at their incredible absorption with writing. Could it be a desire for one more memory to be expressed, just one more message to leave, just a distraction to ease the pain? Perhaps a little of each. . . .

When one of my students dies after a prolonged illness, I know we have said many unspoken goodbyes while we shared poetry, pain, tears and perhaps even false hopes for a future they pretend to expect. "Next fall I'm going to my grandson's wedding," "When I can get dressed, I'll come to class again," "I want a tree outside my window at Christmas."

So when death comes for them, I smile, thank God, and feel satisfaction that I have been given the great privilege to participate in their last precious weeks of life.

What do I remember? Smiles mixed with tears, kisses and hugs, holding hands and stroking foreheads, pain and anger in dull eyes, flesh stretched taut over bones, their inevitable "Thanks for coming, please come back soon" as their eyes follow me to the door and I feel a tugging at my heart which says, "Go back to their bedside, now."

Yes, I have given them my heart and have submitted myself to pain of loss, but the beautiful legacy of their work, of their love is left to me as an extraordinary "gift of the strangers." I have memorized them: they are etched in my mind and heart in a lasting memorial of our experience of being fellow-writers, to our even greater experience of being true friends to the end.