

Email Death

During the past year, four friends and colleagues listed in my email address book have died – two not yet 50 years old, one just beyond 60, and the other approaching 90. Three men and one woman.

I use email several times a day, probably more than is good for me, but even if I were disciplined enough to use it only once each day, when my address book pops up, these four are still present. Until I delete their names and addresses, they will continue to live in this cyberspace program for as long as I allow them to do so. Yes, of course, I accept – very reluctantly – the harsh reality of their deaths, but now many months have passed and here they are. I remain hesitant to delete them. In some odd way, their names on this list keep their lives fresh in my memory. Why would I want to cut them loose from this fragile, flickering life?

Many years ago, I read *The Death of a Nobody*. Deep within urban Paris, an elderly man, originally from a small rural village, lived by himself in a small studio apartment. He died unknown, not even his name came to the lips of the residents in the same building. He was a nobody. After much difficulty, the authorities identified him and sent notice to his village of origin, seeking next of kin. A distant relative was located, a middle-aged man, but he had only met the deceased briefly, and that was many years ago. The deceased was virtually unknown to the next of kin, but because he was the only known relative, he traveled to Paris to arrange the funeral.

A funeral service was held, followed by the procession of the coffin to a nearby cemetery. Aside from the cleric, his altar attendant, and the undertaker, the distant relative of the unknown was the only mourner. (As a young boy, I once served as an altar boy at a church funeral attended by only three mourners: the parish priest, the undertaker, and me. None of us had ever met the deceased, but we were resolved to conduct the service as if the church were full, and I believe we did so.) During the funeral service, the distant relative strained to establish his family connection to the deceased, and the functionaries carried out their respective roles as if the deceased was well known in the community.

The small procession made its way out of the church and slowly down the crowded street. Some pedestrians stopped, looked at the coffin, bowed their heads, and crossed themselves in respect; others stepped aside, made way for the casket, and waited for it to pass. A young man looking onto the street from an upstairs window watched the funeral procession pass by and was motivated to return to bed and make love with his wife, and he did so. All the while, the distant relative strove to reconnect with the deceased. How long ago had it been when they met? What did he look like? What did they talk about? Or did they even have a conversation? He assured himself that they had.

Through his death and funeral procession, and in the mind of the distant relative, the life of the nobody flickered alive. He began to have an impact on people's lives. Little things, to be sure, even insignificant, but some directional ones, too. This nobody would flicker alive as long as the distant relative carried him in his consciousness. True, there would be some point in time when the deceased, known or unknown, ceased to exist. There would be no consciousness left in which the flickering memory could live on.

My apologies, it has been more than 40 years since I read *The Death of a Nobody*, and if you have read it more recently, I hope I have not mangled it beyond your recognition. But I'm clear about the concept: if a person completely unknown can continue to live on, however faintly, in the lives and consciousness of others, how must it be with the deaths of those we knew well and loved so much? The memories of loved ones are not easily snuffed out, nor should they be. In some sense, it is our own continuing life that keeps the flicker of those departed alive.

I have no doubt that writers seek to extend their lives through the consciousness of others. Their published work is no guarantee of immortality, but that possibility exists. If even one reader, 50 years hence – or 100, 200, it makes no difference – lifts the book from the shelf, dusts it off, opens the cover, and begins to read the title page, isn't this flicker of life just enough to keep the author from being forever snuffed out?

My email address book is on the computer screen before me. I think of each person, recently deceased, whose name and address are still listed here, even though I cannot email them. Most of them I have known for years, but

strangely, there is one person I never met, and yet in some way, seems more known to me than the others. It seems odd, that with each of these four, I had had very recent communications shortly before their deaths, only a day or two in a couple of instances.

They are not unknown, but well known. I take responsibility for keeping them alive in my consciousness, and I will read again their last communications to me.