

How We Remember – Remembering Sally White

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How do we remember our loved ones? By how their lives have influenced others, by what they have said and by memorial services and markers. I would like to share with you some thoughts about Sally White, my beloved first wife, her life, her approach to death and how we can remember her.

Sally and I were Goshen College classmates and were married in 1960, a year after graduating. In 1971, we moved to Maryland, started coming to Hyattsville Mennonite Church and became very active in the life of the congregation. We both took a turn as chairperson and Sally was the first woman to hold that position. She loved music — directed musicals, children's choirs and bell choirs at the church. She gave piano lessons for 45 years in our home and at one time had 52 students [1992-93]. The legacy of her love of music lives on in her students, in her children and in her grandchildren.

Sally died in 2006, after a year-and-a-half battle with advanced breast cancer. During that time, when she could, she read voraciously — I would guess some 50 books, many of which were on spirituality and the writings of early saints and mystics. I think she was establishing a connection with those who had gone before. At some point, after extensive surgery and limited success of treatments with hormones and chemotherapy, she knew she was going to die and began preparing herself for that event. She read books about death and dying and even kept a journal for awhile.

One way to remember her is by her own words. I would like to read three excerpts from her journal — to share with you her thoughts and, in a few places, thoughts from her readings — which may help us to reflect on our own mortality. In the second passage she interjects her immediate feelings of freedom, shakiness and fear.

Monday, August 29, 2005:

The last day of my 67th year. What a challenge this year has been. It began with a trip to the Southwest and, specifically, to Zion National Park. In the midst of fabulous beauty and a very comfortable lodge I struggled with incontinence and celebrated the success of hand surgeries. Little did I know that I was going to discover a life-threatening malignancy.

How do I approach a 'new year' tomorrow? Will it be a continuation of healing and beginning of new possibilities or will it be an ending? Can I prepare for both and do I have the courage to try?

Utne Reader, p. 48, Oct. '05 –

... “reconciling ourselves to death can open a window into our deepest nature and only by accepting death will we lead a truly fulfilling life.”

“mortal salience” modern science-speak for moments of realization that death awaits us; makes us want to defend our views, bolster our self-esteem — anything to lull us into forgetting our fate.

Mystics have long considered how living with our mortality can liberate us.

Dan Liechty, theology & peace studies scholar & prof. at Ill. State U.,

Science & Spirit, 3-4/05

From death, anxiety & its contradictions “the most sublime, creative and spiritually uplifting aspects [of] our nature emerge. But, that’s also where the most primitively reactive, paranoid and violent aspects of our nature emerge.”

... fear of death, amplified by the media, creates panic — hardened absolutism, rigid politically, theologically.

Death [is] like an unmapped land — but on the perimeter we might find new spiritual depth as well as sheer terror — even learn to live with this tension.

If, as Paul Peachey often says, “Intelligence is [the] ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind”, maybe we can do the same with considering life and death, and live more honestly.”

Thursday, October 6, 2005, 4 AM

Dark Night of the Soul, Gerald May, pp 149-151

“Maybe some — perhaps many — of the troubles we experience collectively are really manifestations of a communal dark night of the soul. If so, then some of the turmoil we experience (in the church at Hyattsville) might not be due to something gone terribly wrong. It may be a sign of something going exquisitely right, of divine action carrying us through spaces where we would not and could not go on our own, toward a place of greater freedom and love.”

Can never know for sure — but signs are

1. powerless to anything about it
2. lack of deep down motivation to return to old ways
3. deep heart-felt desire within group to remain alone in loving awareness of God — in interior peace and stillness without the acts and exercises.

“When people long for sheer love and bare compassion, when they yearn for simplicity of being and naturalness of peace, when they die inside from the simple desire for liberty and justice that they may become manifest in their relationship, in the groups they form — third and surest sign

... glimpse of incredible hope ... all we can do is hope for the dawn.

Psalms translates Lord to Beloved. My experiences with fighting for my life [this] past year transformed my understanding of love — love for God and for one another.

- (1) Just can't do it anymore — as before illness.
- (2) Don't really want to return to what I was or had. “Just want to be with God — be in love with God ... faculties are emptied, sensitized and reliance on God is deepened.”

- (3) “Desire — simple desire to love God — to remain alone in loving attentiveness to God ... in inward peace, quietness and rest without any (some) of the normal “acts and exercises” associated with meditation and “without any particular understanding or comprehension.

[Gerald May], pp 161

“dark night of recovery from life-threatening illness”

“dependence on God is the only way [of] life”

“need to stay alive” source of grace “only hope for survival”

At some point, perhaps in May and again in October, [I felt] the desperate need for God and moved toward a loving desire for God ... as if God was (is) saying ‘I want to be your deepest love.’ (For me [this] translated into love for family and church.) ... freedom. Before, needed God for recovery; now need developing into a love for God as God’s self. Shakiness — recovery no longer is the most important thing in life — fear. God was a means to an end — recovery. Now recovery is no longer the end, but only a means in the service of love. [My] deepest desire is no longer for recovery, but for God alone. Freedom to love God and neighbors (family) more completely.

Saturday night, November 26, 2005:

“Advent is only one hour away. A new year and new hope — come Lord Jesus. Watch and pray. Is the night past? The day of salvation, the great season of Advent! Observe with faith and love, with praise and thanksgiving, with healing.”

Finally, she quotes from T. S. Elliot:

“Love is most nearly itself

When here and now cease to matter.”

And then, “In my end is my beginning.” (End of journal entries.)

How do we as a congregation remember our loved ones who have died? We do have a special service once a year for that purpose. But, we have no cemetery like our country congregations have. So, what are the alternatives? Sally expressed a desire to have her ashes buried at Rolling Ridge Study Retreat, where our congregation is a partner member. My family is working with a group of friends to develop a memorial space there and we hope to be able to do that soon. I think it would also be valuable if we could provide a permanent place in our church building for remembering members of our congregation who have died — perhaps designate a wall where commemorative plaques could be mounted.

So, we remember our loved ones by how their lives have influenced others, by what they have said and by memorial services and markers.

I would like to close with a passage from Psalm 116,

“A Hymn of Thanksgiving”.

“What shall I render to the Lord

for all his bounty to me?

I will lift up the cup of salvation

and call upon the name of the Lord,

I will pay my vows to the Lord

in the presence of all his people.

Precious in the sight of the Lord

is the death of his saints.

...

Praise the Lord!” Amen.