

Pandemic 2020: Those We Cannot See

My cousin, Archie, died in late March. I don't suppose we'll ever know for sure whether his death at home in Manhattan was due to Covid-19 or not. Having been born on the day of the 1929 stock market crash, he had a sense of history and a quirky sense of humor, too, so I think he wouldn't have minded being part of another historic event – a worldwide pandemic.

Archie was an Ivy Leaguer, an Army vet of the Cold War era and had been the superintendent of a large, urban school district when only his in 20s. He went on to become a college administrator and a Dean of Students for four decades. After retirement, he became an actor and found roles in several feature films, a Madonna video and an episode of Law & Order: SVU. He loved every minute of acting and was proud to be listed in the IMDb.

He was also a closeted gay man for most of his life, longing for a partner “who looks like Ronald Colman – is that too much to ask?” He loved Broadway shows, New York, history, fashion, family stories, gardening and dogs. He could strike up a conversation with anyone, making a big fuss about a dog being walked or a fine display of homegrown flowers. He never forgot a name and always remembered to inquire for news of friends and neighbors he had met while visiting family. He followed my children's college careers with interest and would often exclaim “You're so lucky! None of your children are drug addicts or homeless!” To my objections that this was rather a low bar, he would shudder and say “Oh, you have no idea of what I've seen.”

Archie cared about his community and served as a Democratic committee member in his Chelsea neighborhood. He showered gifts on us younger cousins and throughout his long life, paid K-12 parochial school tuition for a succession of minority students. He was buried next to his beloved older sister and best friend, Floss, in their New Jersey hometown. She had secretly converted to Judaism for one of her marriages and so, in solidarity, Archie, a Scotch Presbyterian, arranged for a Reform Rabbi to preside over his funeral. His wasn't the first Jewish funeral I had attended, but it was the first via live streaming from a Protestant cemetery on Passover eve. As always, my cousin showed how to bring people together in surprising style and with love.

This has surely been a season of death and we are very conscious of “those we cannot see,” a Haitian Creole phrase for the invisible departed who yet are so much in our memories and on our

minds. In my county, an hour north of New York City, 500 people have died, among them my former boss' husband and son, a married couple who were Warwick high school classmates of my husband, three family members of my Latina coworker and numerous elders. I've learned to keep a selection of condolence cards on hand and to dread emails headed Sad News.

I've always been a devout reader of obituaries since my early career as an EKG technician. I saw many patients die over my eleven years in that job and eagerly turned to their obituaries to complete my sense of each person by learning about their lives, families, education, jobs, religion, hobbies, pets, favorite clubs and charities - all the details offered to understand their place in the community and not just to remember them for the deaths I had witnessed. Well-written obituaries can be minor masterpieces to sum up a life. Recently, I've been collecting memorable obit quotes that appeal to me:

- Among Fred's chief mourners will be Anheuser-Busch.
- It breaks our hearts that she'll no longer be in the world with us.
- He was a rare find and so much harder to lose than we ever could have imagined.
- She was a friend of Bill's for over thirty years.
- He loved golf and his family – in that order.
- He had become an incredible person! (about a 13-year old)
- She was born February 25, 1909 in Plattsburgh, NY.

What intriguing snapshots obituaries are, illuminating glances into lives lived and lost and promising material for storytelling, too. Over a year ago, I had challenged my storytelling guild members to tell the story of someone they didn't know by choosing a current obituary. It was an interesting exercise and it reminds me now, again, of all that we have lost with the passing of "those we cannot see."

As storytellers, like everyone else, we may be casting around, trying to figure out how to negotiate this coronavirus world of new rules and social isolation, but there's fertile ground for our art in reclaiming the stories of those who have perished. It's important work, whether we do it for family, friends or strangers. We have the skills to organize anecdotes and facts into meaningful narratives that can be treasured stories for humanity and history. No one's really gone until their story is no longer told, right?

Every time I write a letter of condolence, I include memories of the lost one and my hope that families and friends will tell stories of remembrance about them. What history, accomplishments and revealing nuggets of personality are preserved when we make the effort to save these stories! I'm quite sure my obituary someday will say something like "It absolutely killed her not to proofread this." So, NEST sisters and brothers, I challenge you to use your art to make stories of beauty out of the terrible times of 2020. Let's get together and swap them when next we meet.

Madelyn Folino is a storyteller and library director from Orange County, NY and a founding mother of the Black Dirt Storytelling Guild. She was the Northeast Storytelling (NEST) co-chair for the annual Sharing the Fire Conference and Festival in 2019, as well as the 2020 conference which exists in suspended animation waiting to be awakened. She tells many stories of "those we cannot see."

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