

## Obituaries as a moral reflection

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July 15, 2018

On June 29, Margalit Fox retired as a *New York Times* obituary writer. That day, she wrote a farewell to her readers and offered a peek into her craft. Her role as a writer sets apart her work from self-authored announcements or clever family-written encomiums.

Death announcements tell us that a person lived and died. They contain data about relatives, schools attended, jobs held, awards received. By contrast, obits animate images of what a person lived and died *for*, what and who attracted or repelled them, and why.

Most obits appear in print. Modern media produce a type of documentary-as-obit. One of the best recent examples is “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” about Fred Rogers. A July 5 *New York Times* David Brooks essay about this film will move you to tears if the film doesn’t.

Who would have thought that, one day, we would include Mister Rogers among reflective sendoffs for writers and movie makers who portrayed history as a journey into fleeting joys and profound sufferings, both of individuals and peoples? We benefit by learning from those who gaze on the shifting frontiers between good and evil, love and loss, success and failure. They get us to care, or to be upset that we don’t. Viewing a whole life in retrospect can provoke a certain repentance in us, a dissatisfaction about elements of our history or character.

For those of us who have a flash-frozen idea of repentance attached to particular sins, artists (Jesus and John the Baptist included) bring something more expansive. Artists, prophets and obit writers intuit that self-satisfaction is the enemy of a full life — and of community, of love and every other virtue.

I may be exaggerating if I say that today’s media provide a tutorial in the art of dissecting *other* people’s behavior. In contrast, in the quiet we afford ourselves to read proper obits, we can be encouraged by the virtues and experiences we share in common with the deceased. We can also gain insight into relationship opportunities that we have undervalued, and repent of our hesitation to encounter others in meaningful ways. The news media present a stream of moral challenges and they are difficult to sort out. We will make little headway with any of them apart from a faith-informed response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Put another way, the quality of solutions to moral conflicts will only be as adequate as our lived answer to that biblical question.

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Afterthoughts: My annual book list is still weeks away, but I will tell you one title that I am currently reading. Last fall, I purchased “Scalia Speaks: Reflections on Law, Faith, and Life Well Lived,” authored by Justice Antonin Scalia with a foreword by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

This posthumously edited collection helps to elevate our knowledge about the nature of the U.S. Supreme Court and the role of the justices. And it will offer some timely conversation starters (not enders) on the relation of religion, morality and law in the United States. I submitted this column before the naming of the next candidate for justice