

Noteworthy Deaths: What About Everyone Else?

By Michael B. Friedman, LMSW

Posted: 01/19/2016 9:00 am EST

I recently came across an article about the "noteworthy" people who died last year. It was just one of many such articles that appear in memory of the past year and in hopes of a better New Year. But it suddenly struck me that all these lists imply that everyone who died last year who did not make a list is not noteworthy. That's a pretty harsh dismissal of the vast majority of people who die, ultimately all of us.

Some of the people who did not make this particular list probably were noteworthy in the usual sense and may even have made other lists. A Nobel Prize winner, a Senator, a film maker, a novelist, a painter, a jazz musician, a CEO, a General, an inventor, a social activist, a scholar, a hero, a religious leader, a philanthropist, a Mayor, a tennis pro, a top chef, a medical innovator, and more.

But what about all the people who are not the stuff of year-end lists of important people? Housewives, craftsmen, bank tellers, 1st responders, waiters, extras on movie sets, military personnel, failed candidates for public office, bureaucrats, parents and grandparents, school teachers, churchgoers and non-believers, people with disabilities, their caregivers, children killed by cancer or in accidents or drive-by shootings, refugees washed up on the shore after a failed attempt to make a better life for themselves and their families, and many more. Are these lives not worth remembering except occasionally as symbols--like the Syrian child carried lifeless from the Mediterranean by his distraught father?

I understand, of course, that there are just a few people who move the world. Are those of us who live in the world they shape, who move or shake the world only a little or perhaps not at all just the fodder of history?

Yes, I'm more than a bit annoyed because I will never make a list of noteworthy deaths. There won't be an article about my life and death in the *New York Times*, just a paid death announcement--a small box that will mostly go unnoticed. I would like to matter more than that.

But what troubles me more than this narcissistic injury is the political implication of our society's fascination with important people and celebrities (many of no real account). There are political philosophies according to which history and the goods of life belong to the powerful people who make the world what it is. But democratic theory is based on the idea

that the people--not a few of the people but all of the people--come first. Society exists for their benefit and not vice versa. I am finding it very sad that this is not the case.

Here I am not talking about the economic disparity of haves and have-nots. The degree of that disparity in America today is disturbing, but it is not the same as the existential disparity that relegates most of us to the large, deep, dark historical pool of people who don't matter, who are of no note, and who are forgotten.

Personally, I find some petty comfort in the fact that the vast, vast majority of people who are included on a list of noteworthy people will be remembered only slightly longer than I will be. Very few make it beyond a decade or two. But I still think there's something deeply disturbing about how quickly we write off the lives of good, ordinary people.