

Lessons Learned

BY KATE STANLEY

“Learning to Die” was a six-day project that consumed both the editorial and op-ed pages and took a year’s worth of poking around. I think my editors were skeptical—shall we say terrified?—until the last pages were printed. I suppose that had something to do with my long unproductive stints of mulling (I called it research), my glancing regard for deadlines, and my habit of waiting till past midnight to get down to the real business of writing. They seemed unsure whether I was planning for a nervous breakdown or publication, and I can’t blame them.

It all worked out in the end. One editor said we were just lucky, but I maintain there was method to the madness. It’s no easy thing writing about death, after all. You can’t just hop on the web and gather a few quotes. You’ve got to shadow doctors, visit the dying, talk to the heartbroken. You’ve got to read a dozen books. You have to wrestle with a few very personal angels and figure out what you think. And then you have to write, which makes all that came before look like a cinch.

I did all of this, and these are the few things I learned along the way:

- Don’t expect to know what you’re doing until you’re done. The “Learning to Die” series turned out to be an exquisite example of the folly of making up your mind before you gather your facts.

The project started with a trip to Holland and a plan to write about euthanasia. But after chatting with a few Dutch doctors and returning home, it became clear that the assisted-death controversy was a tiny part of what I needed to explore. What really required attention was the messier question of how Americans die, and how they should.

- Don’t wade when you can swim. If you really want to immerse yourself, you can’t just get your feet wet. You’ve got to take a plunge. I wanted to talk to the dying and the people who care for them. At first I thought that might mean scheduling a few interviews. After a while it became clear that it meant letting this issue take over my life.

So I hooked up with a few doctors and a local hospice program and just started hanging around. I spent a lot of silent time in the presence of dying people and their families,

just observing their experience. Only a few of the stories saw print, but all helped shape my thinking.

- Don’t fret about breaking the rules. Convention argues against asking bold questions about delicate matters. Journalistic protocol forbids intimacy between reporter and source. But sometimes to do your job well you must ask and you must get close. I found myself asking an AIDS patient, “Are you afraid? How would you like to die?” I asked the mother of the five-year-old, “How does it feel to be losing your child?” I kissed the five-year-old on the cheek as she lay dying and cried at her funeral. These were the right things to do.

There was another way in which we broke the rules. No self-respecting editorial page devotes its space to the same subject for six days running. But we did. This was a vast project: It included six editorials and three signed columns, as well as more than a dozen columns from outside contributors. We printed scores of “death stories” from readers. We printed all sorts of literary musings on death—from Plato and Thomas More to Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney. I don’t think our readers had ever seen anything quite like it. They seemed startled and stirred by what we gave them.

- Don’t worry; be happy. Last year, I had the same conversation dozens of times. “What are you working on?” someone would ask.

“I’m writing about dying,” I’d say.

“Oh. How depressing,” the someone would respond. “How can you sleep at night?”

No one looks askance at a rabbi for being able to move on cheerfully from a funeral to a bar mitzvah—or at a doctor who signs a death certificate and then pops out for lunch. So why fuss about writers who can tell life’s sad stories with dry eyes? They’re doing what writers from Shakespeare to Solzhenitsyn have always done: staring truth in the face, and telling it. There’s something exhilarating about doing this, and there’s no disgrace in enjoying it.

- Writing is good practice for dying. If writing is the best job in the world, it’s also the hardest. The joy comes only upon completion, and I don’t find that so surprising. After all, pouring your heart onto a page is one of life’s most daunting tasks. It requires putting your finger on the meaning of life. Like the other big transitions in life, it takes a bit of hard labor. Is there anyone out there who finds it easy? Well, then, let’s hear about it.