

OTHERS SAY ■ TOM PALAIMA, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Facing life's end on the obituary pages

'I been meek
And hard like an oak
I seen pretty people disappear like
smoke

Friends will arrive, friends will disappear.'

BOB DYLAN, 'Buckets of Rain'

'I see dead people. All the time. They're
everywhere.'

COLE SEAR, 'The Sixth Sense'

In what we hope will be for us all a happy new year, more than 2 million Americans will die. The older we get, the more the odds turn against us of making it through another year. If we think about it, that's the way we want the odds to work, even if we are beyond what used to be the standard retirement age of 55. Human beings, since well before Herodotus reported the fateful death of Lydian king in early manhood, view the deaths of those who have not yet lived life fully as a tragic inversion of the natural order. But the deaths of those we know and love affect us deeply, no matter how old they are when they die.

We also feel the loss of public figures in many different arenas of our human experience.

In 2011, we lamented the passing of actor Harry Morgan (96), movie star Elizabeth Taylor (79), literary critic and political commentator Christopher Hitchens (62), boxer "Smokin'" Joe Frazier (67), television journalist Andy Rooney (92), computer visionary Steve Jobs (56), assisted suicide advocate Jack Kevorkian (83), and blues musicians David "Honeyboy" Edwards (96) and Joe Willie "Pinetop" Perkins (97). We may have noted wryly that living the blues can, if one is lucky, lead to a ripe old age. Even the deaths of infamous bogeymen like Osama bin Laden (54), Moammar Gadhafi (69) and Kim Jong Il (69) get us to reflect on the nature of our times here on Earth.

As we get older, we experience at a predictably increasing rate the loss of human beings who have intersected with our own lives enough to make us stop and take notice.

In 2011, my 60th year, I helped write memorial notices in January for my closest male friend in Austin and in December for a good friend from graduate school days whom I visited in October and my graduate school mentor and a kind of second father for 38 years, Emmett L. Bennett Jr. Emmett's life achievements merited a half-page obituary in *The New York Times* on Jan. 1, 2012. These people were inextricably bound to my own life. Now they have disappeared. Yet they are still here as ghosts. They still affect me. They have magical powers to bring to life the person I was when I knew them.

If the deaths of young people are heart-breaking because of our need to have had a longer time with them, the loss of older friends makes us see who we were at different points in our lives and how we have come to be who we are now. Have you ever wondered where your life has gone while you have been living it?

I asked my friend Margalit Fox, an obituary writer since 2004 for *The New York Times*, how she deals with the daily task of making sense of death. She explained that it was something that had worried her when she took the position. But after seven years she sees professional obituary writing as crafting stories about how the recently deceased got from point A to point B in their lives and accomplished things worth the telling. She believes there is no better medium than the obituary for talking about what it means to be alive.

As Marilyn Johnson writes in her best seller about obituaries, "The Dead Beat," "Obituaries are history as it is happening. Was he a success or a failure, lucky or doomed, older than I am or younger? Did she know how to live? I shake out the pages. Tell me the secret of a good life!"

That is what it comes down to: the secret of a good life. Obituaries are like prompts for essay questions about those who have died. Did she or he lead a "good life"? Why? Why not?

And the ghosts of the departed make sure we ask the same questions again and again about our own lives before we, too, become ghosts.

Not a bad New Year's resolution for us all. Palaima is professor of classics at the University of Texas at Austin: tpalaima@sbcglobal.net.