

Some ^{few years ago} ~~months~~ I heard a talk given by a ^{person} friend ^{and sociologist} and ^{and sociologist}
Two weeks ago, Dr. Leroy Rowman, educator, author, (and related by marriage to

-- Write Your Own Obituary --

FUS 1965

Ruth Wise who was one time organist of our Society, spoke at our Adult Forum)
on the subject of the American funeral. Toward the end of his remarks, he
very calmly and matter-of-factly, made it known that he was living on borrow-
ed time, that a recent medical examination had disclosed an inoperable can-
cer, and he went on to say that he had written and recorded his own obituary
and that this would be used ^{at} in his memorial service. In so doing, he was only
following out a suggestion ~~that~~ he had made earlier in his comprehensive and
well-blended study entitled "The American Funeral" that every individual, even
long before he anticipates death, might do well to write out his own evalua-
tion of his life's efforts in the light of his ideals, ^{which} done with as
much honesty as possible, would at least provide the basis for a fair evaluation
of the individual at a memorial service, or even without a memorial service.

To many the suggestion that one write one's own obituary will seem rather
shocking, and it is not likely to become a prevalent custom. Only a relative-
ly few have made a point of doing so, and usually their actions has been view-
ed as rather eccentric or bizarre, if not morbidly grim. Such was the reason
situation with the ^(aunt) self-obituary of the English scientist, professor J.B.S.
Haldane. His death on December 1, 1964 would have occasioned some comment, since
he was a man of numerous interests and in no small measure a controversial
figure. But his having written his own obituary added to the comment, and much
of it was along the line that this was what might be expected from so eccen-

trick a figure as Haldane, but it was not the kind of thing that any sensible person would particularly care to do. Personally, I found Haldane's self-obituary a moving statement, without morbidity as also without vainglory, and all the more convincing because it was his own. He taped it for television at University College, London, on February 20, 1964, and it was televised over BBC following upon his death on December 1st., and the text was ~~published~~ ^{printed} in various journals and periodicals. It is too long to quote in full, but he began:

"It is now February, 1964, and this is supposed to be my own obituary, so I hope it won't be shown, say, until 1975, when I shall be eighty-two years old, which is perhaps old enough. However, I have just been operated on for cancer, and if the operation has not been successful, you will be seeing and hearing me a lot sooner."

He then went on to speak of some of the work he had done in the fields of mathematics, genetics, and physiology; of having been the first person to estimate the rate of mutation of a human gene; of having been one of the first two people to study the effects of being ~~xxxxx~~ locked in a miniature submarine for 48 hours, with no auxiliary source of oxygen available; of other work done on oxygen poisoning, which results when oxygen is breathed at high pressures. He spoke of himself as having been a dabbler, as was his father before him, but fortunately his dabbling had not been without some results in the advancement of scientific knowledge. And he made mention of having been

a member of the Communist Party for a time, but how he split with the Party largely over Lysenko biological theory and Stalinist suppression of genetical research, altho still remaining fundamentally a Marxist in his outlook. And he told of leaving his teaching position at University College, London in 1957 and settling in India, where up until the time of his death, he was head of a State genetics laboratory. If some of his scientific colleagues thought he was committing scientific suicide, he could only say that he had found his work in India to be fruitful and greatly needed. And he brought his obituary to a close with the following words:

"...I don't really very much care what people think about me, especially a hundred years hence. I should not like them to be too critical of me as long as my widow and a few friends survive me. But the greatest compliment made to me today, I believe, is when people refer to something which I discovered-- for example, that eating ammonium chloride causes acid poisoning in men--- without mentioning me at all. To have got into the tradition of science in that way is to me more pleasing than to be specially mentioned. ...what matters, in my opinion, is what I have done, good or evil, and not what people think of me."

Out of long experience in the ministry and involvement in almost countless funeral and memorial services, I am quite convinced that there are some values in writing one's own obituary, and I would strongly second the suggestion made by Dr. Bowman and exemplified by Professor Haldane. First of all, in

most instances, no one knows more about an individual than the individual him-
self, and he, better than anyone else can fill in ^{not only} details of his life story
but also something of his feelings, his struggles, his disappointments, his
successes, and his general philosophy of life. It is not essential that the
individual turn his obituary into a multi-volume autobiography, altho if one
had the time and the ability, there would be nothing against that and one
might end up with a posthumous literary fame that was never expected. But, on
a more modest level and even with very little circulation, such a survey of
one's own life might be of very great interest to relatives and friends and
could indeed be a highly valued family possession. Years ago it was not too
uncommon for individuals to keep journals, in which they sometimes entered
a good deal of rather inconsequential material, such as the temperature in
the morning and the color of the sky in the evening, but along with this they
entered a considerable amount of interesting information and some indication
of their own ~~xxxxx~~ growth and development. These journals became family rec-
ords, referred to on many occasions, sources of renewed memory and often-
times of inspiration, a binding tie within the family and a link between
the generations. Today, in most families there is very little of this kind of
written record. We are all too busy, or ~~are~~ ^{are} too lazy, to give time periodi-
cally to a journal. Members of a family grow up and separate, knowing not too
much about one another, and knowing virtually nothing about relatives of
past generations. This, it seems to me, is a real loss in terms of family

ties and cultural roitage. ⁵ In my own case, I would greatly like to know something about my ancestors, however ordinary and loaded with faults they may have been, but about most of them I know nothing whatsoever. I have been able to live without that knowledge, and by ~~the~~ ^{my} lack have been spared the temptation of indulging in excessive family pride, but such has not been a particularly satisfying ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ substitute for a still persistent, although now quite ^T ineffective, curiosity about the matter. Certainly we ourselves could make more of an effort than we commonly do to see that the same kind of gap does not exist between ourselves and our children and their children. What we may write in the way of some kind of self-obituary may not be great literature, and it may not be highly exciting or even of long-lasting interest, but at least it ^S ~~xxxxx~~ could be some kind of a personal record, answering some questions, satisfying some curiosity, and perchance even inspiring some one in a yet unborn generation. It might even have more meaning and value to some over a period of time than what we may leave to them in the way of some sticks of furniture and some cash.

Second, if anyone is planning on having a memorial service, or expects that relatives and friends are going to insist on such a service after the individual is dead, then the individual would do well to write out his own obituary, or at least jot down the main points that someone else might use in doing the service. This is important, again, because in many instances

others know very little about the individual, even about such things as where and when ~~he~~ was born, and what was his schooling. This is the situation sometimes even with the closest of relatives. Time and again, I have had people come to me to do a memorial or funeral service, and when I have sought to find out something about the person for whom the service is to be done, and particularly when that person is a complete stranger to me, I have come up against a paucity of information that is almost unbelievable and has left me completely un-nerved about what I might do with the service. I am far from being attracted to the formalized and set ~~services~~ "Services for the Dead" that characterize some religious bodies, but when I am confronted with a situation in which I am asked to do a service and am given no more information than that the individual died in his or her ~~xxx~~ nineties and was a good person, I sometimes have a twinge of envy of those who do an impersonal, set service for the dead. I believe that a personalized memorial service can have important values for the living, but to create such values in a service for one who has been ~~rather~~ well known, is difficult enough, and the difficulty is intensified many times over in a service for one who has been a ~~complete~~ stranger, and the situation becomes almost completely impossible when there is nothing available to say about the individual. So, if one desires a memorial service or expects the others will insist on there being one, then the individual would do well to write out his own obituary. Maybe he doesn't have to

go so far as to have it put on tape for televising or recording--although such is not without growing potentiality-- but at least he can make sure that whoever is asked to speak at the service will have some adequate material from which to speak and from which to quote. Thereby the individual will not only be of great help to the situation, but he will have some measure of control over what will be said at the service. It was Dr. Bowman's point, (speaking at our Forum) that the reason he was doing his own obituary was because he didn't want some clergymen or someone else giving a flowery eulogy about him at a memorial service. What he wanted was a simple and ~~and~~ as far as possible an honest portrayal of himself, and to be somewhat certain ~~that~~ this would be the case, he would have at least his own obituary remarks played at the service. It is a precaution well worth taking, not that what is said at a service will make any difference to the person who is dead, but it may to the living. And a flowery eulogy can be just as distasteful and incongruous as unsympathetic condemnation and criticism. I recall the old story of the kind-hearted and well-meaning minister who called in to do a funeral service for a (relative) stranger went on and on in fulsome praise of the deceased. Finally, the widow, sitting in the front row, turned to her son, and said: "Willie, when he gets through you had better go over and see if that is really your father in that box." On the other hand, it was scarcely necessary, according to another story, to close the service for the town drunkard of a New

Hampshire village with the lengthy singing of a hymn which repeated in each verse ~~the line~~-- "I've reached the land of corn and wine." Write your own obituary and you will be relatively safe from such boners on the part of the clergy. Whether you will be relatively safe from making your own boners in writing a self-obituary becomes another matter. That will depend upon your honesty about yourself, your feeling of propriety, and your sensitivity to the feelings of others.

Again, the writing of one's own obituary, ^{could} force a more realistic facing up ~~that~~ to the fact of one's own death and might make for a clear expression of one's own desires for the disposal of one's body. Such, I know is distasteful to many and they never bring themselves to doing it. But for any adult, and certainly for any mature adult, this is an evading of responsibility and a loading onto others of a burden of decision that should be one's own or at least shared within the immediate family circle. When the decision is left to others, it usually has to be made at the time of death, when the survivors may be in a state of temporary shock, torn with conflicting emotions, and least capable of making ~~decisions~~. Time and again, out of my years in the ministry, I have witnessed survivors completely confused when confronted with death in the family-- whether the body should be buried or cremated, whether there ^{should} be a service or no service,-- and many times I have seen families split and rent in a bitter ~~division~~ of opinion, and

future... Though I have discarded much of past tradition and custom, and am anxious that India should rid herself of all shackles that bind and constrain and divide her people, and suppress vast numbers of them, and prevent free development of body and spirit; though I seek all this, yet I do not wish to cut myself off from the past completely. I am proud of the great inheritance that has been, and is, ours, and I am conscious that I too, like all of us, am a link in that unbroken chain which goes back to the dawn of history in the immemorial past of India. That chain I would not break, for I treasure it and seek inspiration from it. And as witness of this desire of mine and as my last homage to India's cultural inheritance.... I am making this request that a handful of my ashes be thrown into the Ganga at Allahabad... The major portion of my ashes should, however, be disposed of otherwise. I want these to be carried high up in the air ... and scattered from that height over the fields where the peasants~~es~~ India toil, so that they might mingle with the dust and soil of India and become an indistinguishable part of India."

And elsewhere, prior to these statements and ~~xxxxxx~~ in the very opening part of his last will and testament, Nehru said:

"I wish to declare with all earnestness that I do not want any religious ceremonies performed for me~~me~~ after my death. I do not

believe in any such ceremonies and to submit to them, even as a matter of form, would be hypocrisy and an attempt to delude ourselves and others."

At Nehru's funeral there was some slight violation of this basic request, but otherwise his wishes were followed, and, as he hoped, the known statement of his wishes limited what ~~otherwise~~ might have been ~~occurred~~ a considerable amount of dissension.

We are not Nehrus, center figures in a vast political turmoil, but nevertheless within the limits of what might be a difficult, awkward, and even bitter family situation, we have a like moral obligation to make known what we want done when we die. Certainly those who know us best, and love us most, can only be grateful to us for any foresight and consideration we have shown in relieving them of the strain and harassment of making ^{Such} decisions in a time of grief.

With a Nehru, and a Bowman, and a Aldane there is an openly expressed skepticism about immortality in the sense of the conscious continuance of personality beyond the death of the body. ^{that belief} ~~Such~~ rests wholly upon faith and hope, with no conclusive or verifiable evidence of any kind. ^{This objection} ~~is~~ however ~~has~~ in no way kept them from leading full and productive lives and being able to write an obituary that has ^a a considerable amount of content. "Suppose" writes the philosopher B.D. Lewis that there is no reality other than the

events which make up the life of man in the present world...Would it not still be true that we ought to treat our neighbor in one way rather ^{than} another? Should we not still succor the needy, alleviate pain and avoid the infliction of it, seek a fair distribution of material goods, cultivate our talents, and generally so conduct ourselves that the fleeting spell of man's life on earth should be as full of richness and wonder and the glow of affection as it is possible for it to be." ^(only) And likewise with Spinoza, who commenting on the view that men would give themselves over to lust unless they believed in another life, said:

This seems no less absurd to me than if a man, when he discovered that he could not keep his body alive with wholesome food, should straightway seek to glut himself with poison and deadly foods; or that a man, when he discovered that his mind was not eternal or immortal, should prefer to live without any mind at all." ^{omit}

Whatever be the case about immortality, and no one really knows although the evidence is heavily against it, still there is for both skeptic and believer the living of the life we know and have, and for both there remains the same kind of ethical requirement that we should strive to deal with this life in the highest possible manner. For even though our lives are limited to a certain time span, kindness is none the less real, courage none the less necessary, and friendship and love none the less desirable. Even though all men now living will some day die, the fight against pain and disease is a very pre-

resurrection and immortality, but because, acknowledging a time-limitation on individual life they feel the more impelled to make of life itself the most worthwhile experience. According to an English philosopher "the best way to overcome the fear of death... is to make your interests wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede and your life becomes increasingly merged in a larger life." And he draws the analogy that

"an individual ~~life~~ human existence should be like a river--- small at first, narrowly confined within its banks, and rushing passionately past boulders and over waterfalls. Gradually the river grows wider, the banks recede, the waters flow more quietly, and in the end, without any visible break, they become merged in the sea, and painlessly lose their individual being. The man...who can see his life in this way, will not suffer from the fear of death."

Just shortly before his death, Professor Aldane, wrote an article that very much was in the way of a supplement to his televised obituary. In it he said:

"I think...that we must... accept the notion that we are finite in time as we are in space, and act on this acceptance..... I should find the prospect of death annoying if I had not had a very full experience mainly stemming from my work.... no thing which I am really sorry to have missed is walking to France on the sea bottom,....I only got the money needed for this purpose at the

at the age of 70. (But, I have had any number of experiences and)
I doubt whether, given my psychological make-up, I could have found
many greater experiences in a hundred lives. So (when the final
darker drink is presented to me, I shall not shrink.)"

Why not write your own obituary, starting now. You can undoubtedly say
more about yourself than someone else may eventually say about you in some
~~such~~ one line ^{such} as "She was a cousin of the Duke of Bedford" or "he spent some
[^] time in Alcatraz". And if the writing of your own obituary makes you a bit
uncomfortable, not so much because it makes you face up to the fact of your
own death, but because of the paucity of what you have ^e worthwhile to say about
yourself, then possibly that might be spur to doing whatever ~~xxxxxx~~ ^v righting
you can of your obituary---"writing" in this ^{evolution} ~~instance~~ being spelled r-i-g-h-
t-i-n-g.

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