

The Death of Sarah White
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Sixteen months ago my best friend's love died. Shortly before she died, she mentioned to me that she had flu-like symptoms that made her tired all the time. Less than three months later, she died of cancer that had spread over nearly all of her internal organs.

I noticed something when Sarah died that I have never before noticed in someone's death: her life became frozen in time. Suddenly, when Sarah passed away, we all began talking about the way that Sarah was, instead of the things that Sarah did. That change seems of great consequence to me, and is the subject of my thoughts.

Sarah was scheduled to graduate from college in June of 2003 at the age of 44. She had completed her coursework in Psychology and was looking forward to graduate school. On the night that she told me that she had a nagging flu, she said that her graduation ceremony was in less than two weeks. She told me to make sure that my friend was there at her ceremony, because he often forgot things like that. I assured her that I would mention it to him. It was very important to Sarah that he was there: she had worked hard to get to that point, he was the man she loved, and she wanted him to be there for that event.

I mention this episode because, up until the time that she died, I saw only that Sarah went to school, took classes, did her homework, worked as an assistant, read books, wrote papers, and wanted to graduate. When she died, she became in the minds of those who survived her someone who learned voraciously. That change happened when our perspective changed: when Sarah stopped doing the things that students did, and when we stopped being able to talk about the things that Sarah did.

When her family went through her belongings, sifting out what they thought was incidental from what was precious, her children found books about every imaginable topic from crochet to Dickens to psychology to collecting. Before Sarah died, her books took up a lot of space; when she died, they became small windows to her heart. We could see through them what she liked, what she hoped to be, and who she thought she was. Suddenly, everyone important to her realized that Sarah loved to learn, was occasionally obsessed by learning, and probably would have loved to hear, "This is my friend Sarah: she *loves* to learn." Before Sarah died, we said that Sarah liked books, and that she read a lot. When she died, we said that Sarah was curious about everything.

That curiosity was one of Sarah's most admirable traits. Although she had many fine qualities, one that transcended bonds of family, ties of casual acquaintance, and the elegant knots of friendship was her curiosity. Her children, her professors, and her friends all say that Sarah was a curious person. She wanted to know what was, why it was, how it was. She read and asked and changed her mind. She thought and considered and scrutinized because she wanted to know new things. She was a curious person.

It might have been fun to pin Sarah with the nickname "Curious Sarah", but it never occurred to me. I would have had fun asking my friend how "Curious Sarah" was, or asking "Curious Sarah" what insane new intellectual venture she was involved in. Her children might have laughed playfully with her about having an "Old Curiosity Shoppe" of her own that consisted entirely of books. We might have teased her that she should give seminars in curiosity. Our fun might even have changed the way that Sarah looked at herself.

Sadly, we never did that. To the best of my knowledge, no one ever said to Sarah, "I love how curious you are. You're the most curious person I have ever met. What a great thing." That, I believe, is because we defined Sarah by what she did instead of by what she was. We never saw that she didn't go to school to graduate: she went to school to learn; graduation was an inevitable byproduct of her curiosity.

I have no doubt that Sarah never paid that compliment to herself, either. As the single mother of four children, she had to deal with the realities of bills, schedules, sibling rivalry, a mortgage, school plays, parent conferences, and sick days. A huge portion of her time was taken up in dealing with the daily tasks of life. She worried about rising costs of living, the ability to make ends meet, rebellious teens, and, quite simply, her own ability to cope. In this, too, we missed Sarah's gift. Sarah shuttled kids, cooked meals, bought groceries, chastised, praised, and helped. But we did not see that not everyone does it so well. Sarah did not manage any of these duties to perfection; she probably fed her children frozen pizza more often than she should have, and she probably yelled one time too many. But when Sarah died, those things that she did and didn't do, those tasks and duties that we

saw Sarah perform as well as anyone could, simply disappeared. Suddenly, we saw her huge responsibilities in terms of who she was: Sarah was a great mom.

There is inevitable lament tied to the recognition that we missed something so obvious, so praiseworthy, and so intrinsically worthy of emulation. That lament comes from our own failing as friends and as family to say clearly what we saw only partially, but which was not hidden: that Sarah was a great mom. Just like her books, reading, and study hid her curiosity, her homework sessions, meals, and quiet support of the structure called family hid her gentle expertise of motherhood.

Hidden as well within this large set of duties called motherhood was an ugly secret that defined Sarah White as much as her motherhood, and as much as her curiosity: Sarah was an abused spouse. There are long, dark details here that no one needs to know. In this matter, her past is her own. What matters to me is, again, what we began to see when Sarah's death thrust her life into our ken.

In this delicate matter, I will be brief: Sarah did not merely walk away from an abusive relationship; Sarah was the kind of person who had the strength to walk away. Yes, she left; but she was not driven out. When she left, she faced more negative prospects than I can name; I will leave them all unsaid. Until she died, we all knew that Sarah left. We all knew that her life's difficulties intensified because of her decision to stop the abuse. We all knew that she coped as well as she could. We all knew that she cried, felt weak, and wondered on occasion if all those nasty things were true. We all knew what she did. I wonder if we stopped to think about what she was.

In this matter, I will only speak for myself. I never took Sarah by the hand, looked her in the eye—just once—and said, "You are a brave, noble woman. As long

as you live, no one will ever take away from you the fact that you have the strength, that you are strong, that in your soul you know how strong you are." I am sorry that I did not. It probably would have caused some discomfort. Perhaps I never had the right opportunity. Those are both good excuses. But in the end, they are no more than that. I regret that I never told her.

I am glad that Sarah passed her strength on. I see it in the face and hear it in the voice of her oldest daughter, Heather. Heather is now doing, at age 23, what her mother was: she is raising her siblings and being the kind of person who does so with strength of character and nobility of mind. That sentence is odd, but I intended it as I wrote it: Heather is doing what comes from the depths of her person. She is, like her mother, strong. She has, like her mother, a sense of what is right and what is good. And she is doing what comes from that strength and nobility: she is raising her siblings without question. She is not strong, nor is she noble *because* she is raising her siblings: she is raising her siblings because she is strong and she is noble. I will not fail to tell her that I admire who she is even more than I admire what she is doing.

The gift of life is our ability to shape who we **are** before what we **did** ceases to be important. The opportunity to do so arises when we reflect beyond what we do and think of who we are. That opportunity comes when we cultivate true personhood. It comes when we recognize that, for both good and bad, our actions come from the strength or weakness of our character, from our concern for honesty or indifference toward justice, and from our cultivation of dignity of mind or casual acquiescence in gradual degeneration.

Equally true is that we have the chance to see people for who they are, rather than for what they do. Behind the quotidian tasks of life may be hidden some quality that deserves the praise of sincere recognition. Indeed, that recognition may help someone see who she is when all she knows is what she does. Life may hide cares or greatness equally well.

Sarah was a fine person. I enjoyed her company and appreciated that she loved my best friend with all her heart. I am sorry that I never told her what a fine person she was. But she would be proud that her death engendered the revelation that behind the books lay curiosity, behind the responsibilities lay motherhood, and behind the tragedy lay strength.