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Vivits

Obits, or obituaries, are rarely depressing. You seldom come upon an obit of yourself. If you ever do, “Bingo!” You can exult and repeat Mark Twain’s vaunt: “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” A painful obit—and lamentably there are a few each of us finds painful—is of an old friend or agreeable classmate with whom you have been out of touch. It brings a pang of loss, with a sense of your own vulnerability, and a furtive thanks for your respite.

A special kind of obit is one I glimpsed in a magazine written for physicians to advise them on their financial affairs. Obits for the general public spare us details on the departed’s final malady. “Short illness” or “long illness” are code words, and “heart attack” and “heart failure” are as specific as the writer thinks it advisable to go. But not so with this magazine for physicians. Its obits presented details on the departed’s last illness, though discretely none on the state of the physician’s final stock portfolio.

A thoughtful person I know tells me that when she opens the *New York Times* she usually turns to the obituaries first. A ghoulish obsession? Not at all, for she knows that a typical obituary there is about a life primarily, and only secondarily about a death.

Again and again I have asked myself, “Why didn’t I know anything at all about this remarkable individual of whom I am reading?” In a recent issue of the same paper (May 13, 2006) I read: “Zelda Foster, 71, Pioneer in Hospice Care.” The day before, I had read: “Harold Olmo, 96. Created Many Grape varieties.” According to his obit, he “helped to create the modern

California wind industry.” Two months earlier I had learned of Seymour Furman (b. 1931), who did more than anyone else to develop the implantable cardiac pacemaker. Thanks to Furman, millions of us are still alive. These three are not the most impressive biographees previously unknown to me—only three whose obits I find immediately at hand or who stand out in my memory.

What sensitive person is not depressed by the torrent of accounts of massacres, rapes, embezzlements, etc., in newspapers every week? What I am asking for is that newspapers print *vivits* of such exceptional, but not widely known people as Foster, Olmo, and Furman on, say, their fiftieth birthdays. These vivits on their “quinquagesini” (to elevate such birthdays with a tongue-twisting Latin title) would be less to applaud the subjects than to give readers more timely news of such remarkable people than what later they might learn through obits.

As Walt Whitman, a knowledgeable newspaperman before he became a great American poet, wrote of this country: “Behind this fantastic farce, enacted on the visible stage of society, solid things and stupendous labors are to be discover’d.”

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