

The Carriage held but just Ourselves – And Immortality.



by Phyllis Chesler

I've been reading the Obituaries first thing every day for a long, long time, but lately that task has become more intense and perhaps more personal. It begins to occur to me that I may not live forever—but I don't really believe this. Perhaps reading the Obits is a bit of a reality check.

Who, really, can grasp the fact of one's own mortality?

In the past, starting in the 1980s, I kept a careful list of our feminist dead from cancers, from other diseases, and from suicide, at both young and "old" ages. I stopped when I reached 150 names of feminists whom I knew and/or worked with directly.

I've been asked to speak at more memorial services than I care

to remember. I memorialized some of my words in my book [*A Politically Incorrect Feminist*](#).

I was the Mistress of Ceremonies at one of the first such Memorial services, this one for my darling friend, the feminist author and activist, [Ellen Frankfort](#). It was 1987, and Ellen was only fifty years old; she had killed herself. I remember some very white faces in the crowd—a poet here, a novelist there, both already haunted by how fleeting life seems to be, how fleet-footed Time truly is.

Now when I read the obituaries, I do so carefully. I note the age (older or younger than me?); the reason for Death—Death needs no reason, but we poor souls seem to need a reason, as if knowing what it is will somehow save us from our common fate. I also read to learn what their accomplishments were, and, whether I knew anyone personally or more intimately, through their work.

Sunday, yesterday, I was in for quite a shock. In the small print paid ads in the *New York Times*, I found not one, not two, but three people whom I knew.

Three down. Three who were here a few months ago; even a few days ago.

In my view, each one of them should have had unpaid Obits as well, and maybe they will. I am referring to feminist science fiction writer, [Suzy McKee Charnas](#); feminist philosopher, [Drusilla Cornell](#); and [Rabbi Mark Golub](#). I did not know Charnas personally, but I prized her work, just as I did that of two other deceased feminist science fiction writers: [Sally Gearhart](#) and [Joanna Russ](#). My once robust and vibrant world seems to be shrinking.

Drusilla was a totally interesting dinner companion. She taught both here and in South Africa, and she died too young, at 72. Suzy was 83. Mark was only 77. He was the sweetest and the best prepared interviewers with whom I've been privileged

to work. Reb Mark was also a media visionary who founded JBS—the Jewish Broadcasting Service. He was kind enough to have me on whenever I published a new book.

I began to realize that he was not returning my emails and phone calls only about a half year ago. I thought he might be traveling or simply too busy. It never occurred to me that he was ill and no longer at work.

How bad a friend and admirer am I? Did I really need to learn about his death when a reporter from [*The Jewish Voice*](#) called me for a comment?

On Death: Most often, John Donne is quoted: “Death, be not proud;” and so is Dylan Thomas: “Do not go gentle into that good night....Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

But in truth, I much prefer Emily Dickinson’s delicate, whimsical, lyrical, almost comforting view of death:

“Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.”