

Dead Charlies

Okay, so you Google Charlie's name and page after page of Charlie W obituaries appear. New York, Illinois, Utah. A corporate CEO, a president of a major university, a farm seed salesman. So many Charlies. They were known to business associates and friends simply as "Charlie." Good Old Charlie. Charles is much too formal – for an American anyway. Charles is for De Gaulle or some European ruler with a roman numeral after his name.

Poor Charlie. He wasn't going to set the world on fire. A middle manager. Not corner office material. But then again, there are only so many corner offices to be had. And what's so wrong with that? Leaders need their followers, armies need foot soldiers. Blah dee blah. Shouldn't be so glib about it. Charlie's dead.

So why "poor Charlie?" Because he was so young. Because his children are at that age when they still desperately need a dad, although teenagers don't always admit it, not out loud at least. Because those other Charlies – the CEO, the college president, the seed salesman – they were old, they had lived full lives, had testimonial dinners, retirement ceremonies, 75th birthdays. Not that they deserved to die, but their passing doesn't haunt you, their obituaries don't jump off the page – in the prime of his life, his kids so young, and on and on.

We didn't always speak so well of him. We told jokes at his expense. Hey, don't get so high and mighty - they tell jokes about you too, and about me and everyone else. But when someone dies unexpectedly you feel remorse for speaking ill of them, for being so chippy. You resolve to be a better person– to hug your kids more, to take more time off from work, to forget about setting the world on fire, to stop and smell the roses.

Clichés get bandied around like Buddhist prayer notes flapping on some Himalayan mountaintops.

“Je n’oublie pas...” Baudelaire wrote, but we do forget, until something makes us remember – the sunset on the water, the distracted smile on a lover’s face, the phone call: “Charlie’s dead.”

I will not forget. We will not forget. Until we forget. Again.