

VIEWPOINT

Reports of my demise

What would my obituary say if I could see it today? And what can I do to change it?

When Bob Hope's obituary appeared recently, it was for the second time on one prominent news site. Back in April, that site inadvertently made available on line the obituaries, prepared in advance, for Hope and six other famous people: Pope John Paul II, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Nelson Mandela, Dick Cheney and Fidel Castro.

Before the error was detected, another website captured these seven obituaries and publicized them widely.

Although reading these premature death notices was an odd experience for me, it must have been significantly more unnerving for the seven people featured. It was a stark reminder that their deaths are inevitable — others are already planning for them.

What about the rest of us?

Few of us are famous enough to be featured on CNN, but our deaths are no less inevitable. As I looked through the seven obituaries, I wondered how my own "premature obituary" would read if I could see it today. How would a stranger, preparing an objective assessment of the

way I've spent my life thus far, describe me? Could I be called the "loyal point man" (Dick Cheney), the "definition of entertainment" (Bob Hope) or "great and controversial" (Pope John Paul II)?

I'd like to think that if the objective stranger interviewed my wife, she would describe me as her "loyal point man." Perhaps she would.

But in what other terms might she describe me? "Spent too much time working?" "Cared more about his own projects than the kids' projects?"

How would my children describe their relationships with their father?

If I don't like what my premature obituary says, what can I do over the next 10 years

to change it? What if I had only five years?

When Alfred Nobel's brother died in 1888, the newspaper made a mistake and ran an obituary for Alfred Nobel himself. The obituary explained that he was known as the "dynamite king" for having amassed a fortune from his invention of TNT. Nobel got to see his life as

the rest of the world did — and he was deeply dissatisfied.

He did not want to be remembered as the man who had unleashed history's most powerful weaponry. So, he used his considerable wealth to establish the Nobel prizes, by which he is best-known today.

It's been said that "in death, we are all the same." I think of that maxim often at this time of year, as the tom turkeys on our farm are reaching their maturity. They strut, gobble and lunge against each other, each seeking to prove his dominance. But in just weeks they will all be the same: equally plucked, equally frozen, equally roasted.

Many of us live like turkeys — strutting, gobbling and oblivious to the impending demise which will erase all distinctions. But what is true of turkeys is not exactly true of us: Turkeys go to the freezer. We go to be judged.

Regardless of whether we die with great fame or whether we die in such obscurity that no newspaper even notes our

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passing, the substance of our obituary will still be presented in the one court that matters.

The lists of material accomplishments, which usually comprise the "front end" of an obituary, may be ignored altogether. By contrast, the descriptions of our relationships with others, usually relegated to the "back end" of an obituary, will likely be the most important evidence read in that court.

Indeed, the last may be first, and the first may be last. All will learn what kind of husband, or wife, or parent, or Catholic we have spent our lives becoming. Will that evidence make the case for our coronation — or for our condemnation?

I don't know if Bob Hope saw his own obituary when it appeared in April. I do know that few of us will have the opportunity to review our own obituaries. Few of us will read what might be written about the way we have led our lives thus far. But each of us has a tremendous opportunity to influence, through his own choices, what could be written about him next. □

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