

Remembering Richard

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I'm not sure if Richard knew he had cancer when he and his colleague, Maura Speigel, began work on a compilation of writings on death. As far as I understand, the project was already underway when he learned he had kidney cancer. I do believe that after the diagnosis the project took on a new meaning, dare I say urgency. Richard Tristman was my teacher, and certainly the closest creature I had to a mentor during my time at Bennington College. I learned that he died today, February 12, 1998.

Richard began his academic career as an assistant professor at Columbia University in the late 1960s. Legend has it that rather than see any of his students go off to Vietnam due to poor academic standing, he gave them all A's. With this in mind, it is perhaps easy to see why he did not receive tenure. Rather, he was hired by Bennington, a small, progressive, upstart liberal arts college in southern Vermont. He taught literature there for the next 25 years, focusing on Shakespeare, Chaucer, and the Bible. Although he taught in Vermont, Richard spent most of his week in New York City. His schedule might best be related to a short period migration: driving up Monday morning, returning home Wednesday afternoon, week after week. After the recent, atrocious, political purge that gutted almost everything dear to my heart about Bennington, Richard, along with many of his colleagues, returned full-time to New York, an unemployed, tenured professor of literature.

It is very easy to read a painful irony into the story of a dying man compiling a book of writings on death. Titled, *The Grim Reader*, he and Maura labored on it through his first bout with cancer, through his period of remission, and, once he learned that his nagging cough was the result of kidney cancer that spread to his lungs, through his continuing and final sickness. Their book was published last year.

Due to both his struggle with illness, and his own morbid project, I certainly thought about Richard more than once while planning and working on this special issue. I don't think I ever mentioned it to him. We rarely spoke, and when we did I was always too scared to bring up the topic. While I was home this past summer I had no real plans to call him, mostly because I did not really know how to talk about his sickness. Instead, we just ran into each other out of the blue. As quick to dismiss any preternatural significance to the meeting as I was, we treated it as a happy coincidence. I will never see him again.

The two things about Richard that I will remember perhaps for the rest of my life are the smell that used to follow him, by no means unpleasant—a lingering mixture that I always attributed to a fusion of cologne and inner essence—and the poster of Freud he had hanging on his office door. I bring up the poster because of what it implied about his world view, in particular his profound distaste for Jungian approaches to anything, especially chance meetings in unexpected places. In light of this, one can easily imagine what his feelings were about my three years of employment as the librarian of a nonprofit parapsychology organization. Almost every conversation I had with him during that period in my life began something like this: “Ann-Dee, my man, how’s the psychic research business?”

I can easily say that, if not for Richard’s support and guidance, I would not be doing what I am today. This holds true for the many students he sent off to graduate school to start careers following in his footsteps. He was a man bold enough to keep a car in New York City. He was a man loved unconditionally by my friend Debbie. He was a man who touched my life in ways unknown to both of us. For all these things I want to dedicate my contribution to this issue, my first tentative steps into the world of print, to his memory.

In my copy of the *The Grim Reader* he left the following inscription: “To my memorable student.” In return I would like to offer him something similar—“To my memorable teacher”—and inscribe it upon my heart. Farewell, Richard, I am walking in your footsteps once more, and you are missed.