

views: The Obituary Page, A Year Later

It used to be said there were only two certainties in life: death and taxes. Now that the Republicans are back in charge, you can scratch taxes off the list — that is if you're really, really rich.

But secure on the list of sureties in life ... is death.

The thing that really sucks about death is, no one is ever really ready for it. Even to lose a grandpa or great aunt who lived well beyond any projected life expectancy table, who had a full and active life, who made their peace with those they knew and whose twilight years seemed to offer little more to do than eat and sleep — we're just not ready for them to go. We still cry at their funerals like they had their whole lives ahead of them or because we want to freeze time and remember them as young, vibrant and healthy.

Even when we see death coming to someone we love in the form of old age or extended illness, grief comes for several reasons. First, it is said that a little bit of us dies when someone we love passes away. It just hurts, damn it! Also, we may have

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Thousands of victims were lost in the terrorist attacks — many without even the dignity of a traditional funeral. Ground Zero, the Pentagon and a hole in a field in Pennsylvania are now the final resting place for the ashes of many of our fellow citizens.

And while those victims, and all of our departed family members and friends, are remembered with memorial services and funerals, there is also that written record which notes their passing: the obituary.

I don't know if it's a Southern thing, an aging thing or just a morbid pastime — but my mother makes it a reading routine to check out the obituaries in the newspaper every day. I've seen her do this from time to time over

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regrets for how we did — or did not — relate to that person before he or she died. And finally, we get a brief yet bitter taste of our own mortality — with visions of dreams not fulfilled and our own uncertain time clock, ticking down.

Just a little over a year ago, the nation experienced one of the most horrendous days of death we've ever had to endure.

the course of years. Some days she just scans the names for any long lost relative or former bridge club partner. Other days it would appear that she reads them word for word. I've never asked her why she reads them so faithfully. Maybe the whole death thing is too scary to talk about with her, even in this way.

But a while back, I realized that I often do the same

thing. For whatever reason, I find myself perusing the obits page to see who's died. Maybe it's to make sure no one I know has gone and to breathe a sigh of relief each morning, since little else in the paper lets me do that. But whatever may possess me, and my mom, to engage in this practice, there's one part of it that fascinates me.

The nature of an obituary requires that the sum total of a person's life must fit in a very limited space. There's only so much space and ink that can be spared. In the *Washington Post*, for instance, there are three basic kinds of obituaries. Some are full-fledged articles, for celebrities and former members of Congress. A second form is written in two or three paragraphs. And the rest are in the "Death Notices" section with very small, "Classified" type.

The ones I focus on are the two- to three-paragraph obits. Mainly because after the headlined name of the deceased, and before the body of the obituary, is a sub-headline that is usually a one to three word title or phrase that describes "who" or "what" that person was. "Lawyer," "Medical Records Supervisor," "Poet," "Church Member," "Freighter Pilot."

I guess what gives me pause each time I browse through these is how our lives are going to be ever so briefly summed up some day. And so the question occurs: What will our verse be? If we had to write our own obituary, how would it read, and what would that sub-heading say? "Closet Case," "Circuit Party Patron," "Serial Monogamist?" Or maybe "Volunteer," "Gay Rights Advocate," "AIDS Philanthropist?"

No one likes to think about death. Most of us avoid writing a will or know what to say to a friend who's grieving. But among the lessons from 9/11 was the unpredictability of our security and life itself. Maybe death wouldn't frighten us so much if we tried to make life a little richer for more than ourselves. ▼

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support a Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in Vermont. "I believe marriage is between a man and a woman and I believe in a Defense of Marriage Act that would describe that," he said on Vermont Public Radio's Switchboard program. "I still think that that is a reasonable thing to do and if I had the opportunity, that's the kind of legislation that I would

support."

If no candidate in the race for Governor or Lieutenant Governor receives more than 50 percent of the vote, the Vermont Legislature will decide the outcome of the race by secret ballot in January. ▼

Political correspondent Paul Olsen also writes for in newswweekly.

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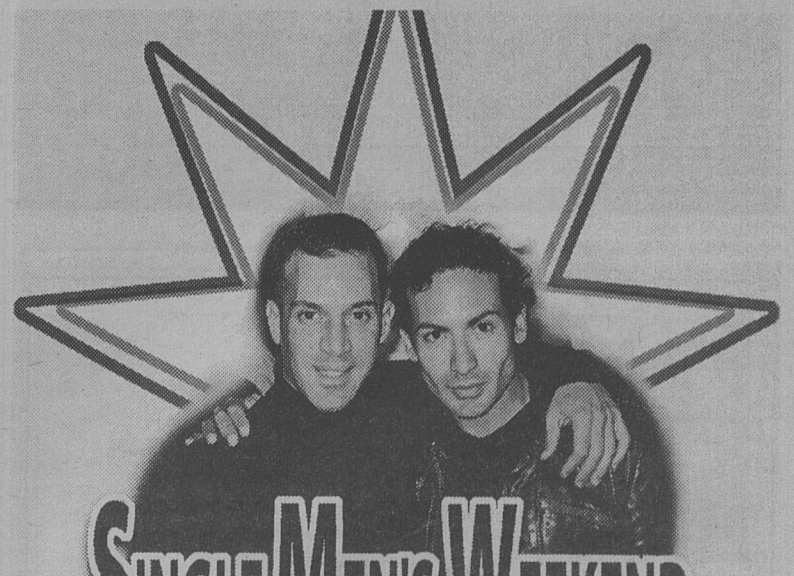
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Civil unions also separate the three major candidates for Lieutenant Governor — Republican Brian Dubie, Progressive Anthony Pollina, and Democrat state Sen. Peter Shumlin.

While Pollina and Shumlin support the law, Dubie says he would