

Norbert Hirschhorn: 'Until you go home'

By Norbert Hirschhorn

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Paul Nagel died on May 25, at the age of 85, from pancreatic cancer - a swift and vicious disease - just two months after his ophthalmologist noticed jaundice. Paul's wife, Joan, had died almost a year to the day before Paul's own "catastrophe," from a wretched kind of slow cancer, and that on top of a stroke five years earlier that left her dependent on a walker and a wheelchair. Paul had cared for her tenderly, for her bodily and emotional needs, even as her mind began to fade. Yes, it exhausted him, and it was with some relief that he could return to his writings after she died. But relief was obscured by grief, a year's worth from which he was just emerging. In medicine we know all too well how grief impairs the immune system, how grief makes its own rules.

Paul was an eminent historian, writer, author of many acclaimed books: on the Adams family of Massachusetts, the Lees of Virginia, and he wrote Midwest histories. (Although a Minnesotan for decades, he, like Truman, hailed from Independence, Missouri.) In the too-crowded field of biographical writing, Paul may not have achieved glitzy stardom; that is, not until September 2010 when he was given the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Adams Institute, the third so honored after historian David McCollough and Sen. Edward Kennedy. His books are his legacy. The strength of his work was in his capacity for empathy, for getting under the skin of the people he wrote about, not just glossing their achievements and externals. "You can never understand a person until you go home with them," said Paul.

Paul was my friend and mentor. The term mentor comes from Homer's Odyssey, where an older man, Mentor, was guide to the youthful Telemachus. Paul introduced me to the opinion page editor of this newspaper, from which this series of essays has sprung. Paul provoked, critiqued, encouraged and above all supported me in all my writings on the health and illnesses of famous persons of the 19th century - even when some of my conclusions seemed controversial. He went home with me, and I with him.

Paul brought an Old World courtliness to his being, as if he were back in the 18th and 19th centuries of his subjects. Thus he would often sign off emails, 'Forever thine' - but I suspect this demeanor was just a way of teasing himself. I failed Paul in only one respect that I know of: I couldn't get him interested in poetry, no matter the number of fine, accessible poems I showed him. He simply didn't have the patience for it, he said.

Ah, but there was one he did like, sort of - Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar":

*Sunset and evening star
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,
But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.
Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there be no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;
For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.*

Rest in peace, Paul.

Norbert Hirschhorn, a poet and retired physician who taught at the University of Minnesota and headed the Division of Family Health in the Minnesota health department, lives in London. His column appears occasionally on these pages. His e-mail address is bertzpoet@gmail.com. He notes that memorials for Paul Nagel may be directed to the Joan Peterson Nagel Memorial Fund at the University of Minnesota Anderson Library.