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Wallace Baine: What Morton Marcus leaves behind

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One of the last times I saw my friend Morton Marcus, we were sitting together with Mort's wife Donna in the otherwise empty theater at the Nickelodeon one weekday morning. We were chatting about what turned out to be Mort's final poetry reading that had taken place a few weeks before.

I had written a story prior to that event at the Capitola Book Café that had told the community about Mort's long struggle with cancer and his bleak prognosis. And he was talking about all the former Cabrillo College students who had since contacted him because of that article and who had felt the need to tell him how deeply that he had influenced them not merely as readers or thinkers, but as human beings.

As he talked, tears flowed down his cheeks. And instead of the grief that I had felt ever since I had learned that Mort was dying, I felt a joy as pure as morning light.

For a teacher, there simply is nothing more ennobling and satisfying than to know your influence has survived beyond the semester, and to hear from a student over the gulf of 10, 20, 30 years that you have shaped their lives in tangible, positive ways -- well, there is no greater gift.

This was particularly the case with Mort, who died last week at the age of 73. As a poet, a writer, a teacher and a film critic, he sought, more than anything, connection with others -- intellectual connection, emotional connection and even spiritual connection. For him to hear that he had attained that kind

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of lasting connection in a circle wider than he would have imagined certainly gave a glow of peace and gratitude to his last days.

No one wants their life defined by their death. And over the course of his last months, Mort made sure that his fate would be the other way around, that his death would be defined by his life. So, to say that Mort showed those close to him the honorable way to die, what I mean is that he never stopped living.

Even as his condition ravaged his body and the shadow of death followed him everywhere, he made the conscious decision not to withdraw from the life he had made for himself. He got out of bed, put one foot in front of another and made it to his TV tapings, his film screenings, his discussion groups. Inevitably, his activities were diminished, but it was he who drew the outer boundaries of his life, not his illness.

During lunches at any one of the downtown or Westside restaurants that he loved, or in his living room, sipping the potent, peat-flavored scotch that he kept for just such a purpose, Mort would talk frankly about what is one of the enduring taboos of our culture -- what death looks like as it approaches. He felt it was his duty as a poet to exercise a kind of rigorous honesty in all things even if it hurt him -- and it did hurt him in some relationships over the years -- and even if it meant staring his own demise in the face.

Yet, all these discussions inevitably were not so much about death, but about life. He chose to enjoy the sunset rather than brood over the gathering darkness.

Those who didn't know Mort very well often took him for an egotist. Boy, is that ever off-base. Mort looked at narcissism the way most of us look at the H1N1 virus, a dangerous infection to be avoided at all costs. Narcissism, denial, ideology, false piety, Mort looked at all these things as the common plagues of delusional thinking that characterizes the ongoing battle between fear and love in the human soul. Poetry was his inoculation against those diseases, and though he died with an afflicted body, he left behind a soul intact, a spirit that will for years remain the envy of all who knew him.

The poet Joe Stroud, who was friends with Mort for more than 40 years, told me after hearing of his friend's death a story of Mort's generosity, how he found a young boxer in the San Joaquin Valley -- Mort was a loyal fan of that decidedly out-of-fashion sport -- who was down on his luck and how Mort regularly sent the young man money anonymously. That's certainly consistent with the man I knew, but Mort's generosity was also apparent in more subtle ways. To friends and to many students. Being with Mort was

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often like seeing a reflection of your better self, and that was no accident. It was a talent of his.

During the 15 years or so that I knew Mort and particularly during the last year of his life, I made it kind of a mission to make him laugh. Astonishingly, humor was a major theme of his experience with dying and when he was not offering up bad jokes, he was reveling in the irony of the human melodrama, a tendency that often made some close to him uncomfortable. "I just can't take death very seriously," he said more than once. "It's just so absurd!"

I hope that for years I can remember how resolute Mort was in facing his death. I hope I'll keep vivid his heroic wisdom that it is not death that you must fight when your bell tolls, but fear.

But I feel certain the Morton Marcus I'll most remember will always be that man who never disengaged from life, who never held onto something he could otherwise share, whose vigorous, aggressive, outsized soul has found a way to germinate in the hearts of thousands of students, readers, friends and family.

I'm proud to be one of that elite company.

Contact Wallace Baine at wbaine@santacruzsentinel.com.

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