

Testament

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

When my editors decades ago changed the name of this column and pulled its author out of anonymity, they asked me to use the word “I” freely, to commit myself, to get personal. For most column writers, however, “personal” is an obliquely applied concept. Their “I” is a kind of *Doppelgänger*, a persona behind whom the writer can hide.

The late Robert McAfee Brown once told me he had spotted the Marty he knew only a couple of times in M.E.M.O, notably in columns I wrote during the illness and after the loss of my wife, Elsa, 20 years ago exactly. I’m not sure which “I” is speaking in this column, but I’d like to think that what it says is transferable to the experience of others in these times of travail.

Twenty years ago during the nine months of her terminal illness, Elsa, our family and friends and I had time to say what was on our minds, to speak words of love while, first obliquely and later clearly, saying good-bye. Part of the horror of the brutal acts that killed so many innocents on planes, in skyscrapers and at the Pentagon on September 11 was that hardly any of the victims had the chance to ready anyone for their departure. What happened to them has prompted millions of us to be more mindful of those daily good-byes that are rehearsals for the unwelcome Big One that looms before us all.

I am one of the company of travelers who feel called to stay on course. My travel agent, rescheduling some of my flights in this busiest season of my year, tells me I’ll be “in the air” 22 times in 36 days. Some people have asked me, “Haven’t those events been canceled, since so many won’t fly to attend them?” Or, “Aren’t you afraid? Haven’t you yourself canceled, as so many of us have?” I answer, “Not yet.”

“Don’t you know that in retirement you wouldn’t have to do all this?” people ask. My answer is both no and yes. No because, like many people, I have a calling, and this calling takes me to distant places while I still have life, limb and energy to fulfill it. No also because I try to keep my commitments, once they are on the calendar.

And yes, this calculating coward flies with some sense and hope that these most dangerous days may also be among the safer ones for travel, since everyone is now especially security-conscious. Also yes, because I know that people on the ground are also subject to new, extraordinary and permanent danger.

The time seems ripe to make an assessment of one's life. Here is mine—an assessment that many others may share:

My last will and testament are in order.

My organs, if any survive, are ready for life-giving transplant.

My family knows what texts and hymns to use at my funeral.

Quoting blind pianist George Shearing, who, when asked, "Have you been blind all your life?" answered "not yet," I say "not yet" when asked whether I've done all the seeking and aspiring, enjoying and loving, and greeting and cherishing of family, friends and the strangers whose paths meet mine; and asked whether I've heard all the music and tasted all the wine and food and participated in all the Christian community that I'd like, I answer, "not yet."

Rereading James 4:13-17 once more, and urging others to do so, I live, in reference to it, sub conditione Iacobi.

And in a time when fear comes naturally, calculation is chancy, and hope to participate with fellow believers and fellow citizens in rebuilding the city (Isa. 58:12) is strong, I'll join the many others who invoke, after the manner of Psalm 46, "the Lord of Hosts" who is with us, "the God of Jacob" who is our refuge.