Remember that you will die

by Miroslav Volf in the April 7, 1999 issue

A metal door opened, and we were invited in. Draped sloppily in white linen was a body on a table, frozen and immovable. I immediately recognized the feet, and then, after taking a step, I saw the beloved face. I bent over and gave the cold forehead one final kiss. A wind of deep sadness shook my whole body and my eyes welled up with tears. I had just arrived in Osijek, Croatia, where my father had died three days earlier. I wanted to see him and touch him one last time. Him? "He is not here," I said to my sister after I had composed myself. "This is only his body."

Back in the U.S., the news of his departure had left me numb. My mind oscillated between a deep sense of sorrow and the inability to believe the indubitable. Once I saw and touched his dead body, I was able to let loose a bit of the present drenched in mourning and make excursions into the past, his and mine. In this life, death has robbed the two of us of our common present and future. What remained was our past. Now that I could no longer escape it, his death began to gather together his life for me, and from the most striking memories a portrait emerged. I was a bit surprised at what I saw.

I was aware, of course, that life looks different from the perspective of its end than from any of the points along the way. As a spiritual exercise, I would occasionally try to elevate myself imaginatively from the present and see my life from the perspective of its end. A few years ago, when I was on a sabbatical in Tübingen, Germany, I would walk through a graveyard on my way to and from the office. As I entered the gate, I would pass the tomb of the Goes family. The letters were written in capitals, and I could not help myself but read the text in English: "MARIANNE GOES, HEINRICH GOES, OTTO GOES," and then I would add, "And eventually we all go!"

At the other gate, on my way out of the graveyard, I would pass by the tomb of the famous Tübingen theologian of the last century, Ferdinand Christian Baur. During the minute that it took me to walk between the two graves, I would place my work as a theologian in the light of my own imagined end; I wanted to make sure that I

was not seduced by day-to-day pressures or contemporary concerns to betray what truly mattered. This was my own way of extending to myself the old greeting of the Trappist monks: "Remember that you will die!"

My father was a man of few words. For him, talk was cheap and bothersome; deeds mattered. I expected that I would remember him by his accomplishments. After all, he was a successful man. In addition to being a well-respected pastor for over 30 years and a prominent church leader in the former Yugoslavia, he was a translator of theological literature, founder and editor of a magazine, and a theological educator. Yet in the portrait my memories had drawn of him, his accomplishments formed only the background. Dominant was his person, not his work. As I was leaving the morgue after having kissed his lifeless body good-bye, I saw more clearly than ever before what an extraordinarily good person he was.

At his memorial service I said, among other things: "My father was one of the best persons I knew. Above all, he was a man of integrity; he practiced what he preached. I can't remember hearing him speak ill of anyone, and he certainly never sang his own praises. He was a humble man who readily admitted his mistakes and asked for forgiveness. I never noticed envy in him nor heard him put down anyone. Although he was a leader, I never saw him manipulate his subordinates. In many ways he was a perfectionist, yet he was thankful for what he had and content with the state he was in.

"He was generous; rare was a table prayer in which he did not ask the Lord to give him and his family open hands toward those who suffer want. Finally, there was nothing forced in my father's goodness; he did not try to protect it either by surrounding it with inflexible laws or by pushing others into conformity with himself. Like true holiness, his goodness attracted rather than repelled.

"Whenever my father spoke of his father, he always mentioned his extraordinary goodness. My father seems to have inherited that goodness. Born in a shabby little house with a dirt floor in a tiny village called Sirac, he rose to become a prominent church leader, known to many not only in Europe but throughout the world. In his success, however, he never lost the goodness his father had exemplified. My father's greatness lies in that goodness which remained unspoiled by success. Absence of goodness calls into question every success, but nothing, absolutely nothing, calls goodness into question. The greatest compliment one can give to a human being is not that he or she is successful, but that he or she is good. My father deserved that

compliment."

When my sabbatical in Germany was over, tombs no longer helped direct the light of the end upon my daily life. But occasionally my disheveled face, after just awakening from a night's rest, would look at me from the mirror and greet me: "Remember that you will die!" Next time I hear those words, I'll make them a challenge not so much to what I do, but to who I am. Does doing well not matter then? No, but my father's death has reminded me unforgettably that being good matters more. And just as a good tree brings forth good fruit, so being good will take care of doing well.