

Who Can Get the Story Right?

The young rabbi said prayers in Hebrew and English. Then the widow and her three sons removed the white gauzy cloth covering the headstone. Next came a short eulogy.

Beyond the obvious, the rabbi knew nothing of the man's life. The departed was short, vigorous, well dressed and prosperous. He ran a successful manufacturing business founded early in the 1900s by his well-respected parents. He belonged to the synagogue, was devoted to his family's welfare and gave to charity. A few more praises and that was it.

I left the cemetery dissatisfied. What I heard was true (mostly), but painfully incomplete. The man I knew was hardly recalled. Later, someone who also knew him asked what I thought of the rabbi's remarks.

"He was so much more than a short, well-dressed, Jewish businessman," I said. "How can anyone talk about his life and not mention sports? Chicago playground medals as a boy. A boxing champion in college. Speed skating, basketball, bowling. His kids called themselves 'golf orphans.' In later years he coached hockey. The White Sox put him to sleep in front of the TV. A baseball knocked out his front teeth, for God's sake."

"He was also a great lover of beauty, both natural and man-made. He planted flowers and loved to make things grow. He collected antique porcelain cups and saucers. His house was filled with classic painting and sculpture. Near the end he cried over the tragedy of Beethoven's deafness."

The questioner agreed.

"And there were so many contradictions about him," I said. "He was tight-fisted with money, yet secretly generous. Tough and quick to anger, yet loving and sentimental. He put his family first, yet neglected them in many ways. Proud, sometimes arrogant, yet modest and self-effacing. He loved to laugh and joke, but life was serious to him."

And so much more. As well as I knew him, others even closer knew him better. And differently. Ernest Hemingway once told a young writer that the full story of any man's life, correctly told, would make a novel.

While the rabbi can be faulted for not attempting to know his subject better, can anyone know enough of a man's 70 years to get it right? Does anyone know you well enough to get your life right?

Walt Whitman said, "I contain within me multitudes." So did he. So do we all.