



## Getting Started

*Sunday, January 22*

Classes begin tomorrow, and over the weekend I read Irvin Yalom's wonderful novel *The Schopenhauer Cure*, which Sophie Freud had recommended to me. It's about a psychoanalyst, Julius Hertzfeld, who finds out that he's dying from melanoma and has only a year to live. Wondering whether he has made a difference in his patients' lives, he contacts a man named Philip Slate, whom he had treated twenty-three years earlier for a sexual addiction. Arrogant and unlikeable, Philip has become a philosophy professor and a disciple of the nineteenth-century German intellectual Arthur Schopenhauer. Philip identifies strongly with Schopenhauer, a dazzlingly original thinker who was notoriously gloomy, embittered, and misanthropic. Philip, who claims that he was not helped by his analysis with Julius, is now training to become a psychotherapist, and he agrees to enter Julius's therapy group for six months in exchange for the analyst's clinical supervision. The two men clash over everything, including the value of human attachments, trust, and openness. Both explore their feelings about life and death, and both have an impact on the other members of the group.

Yalom is a distinguished "existential psychiatrist" who has written several classic psychiatric textbooks as well as one of my favorite novels, *When Nietzsche Wept*. He seems to know continental philosophy as well as he knows psychotherapy, and he understands that the former can teach us as much about self-healing as the latter. (One of the achievements of the novel is to show us how Schopenhauer's writings influenced Freudian theory.) Many passages from *The Schopenhauer Cure* are relevant to Love and Loss. Yalom's awareness of the centrality of the therapist-patient relationship parallels, in my view, the teacher-student relationship. "It's not ideas, nor vision, nor tools that truly matter in therapy," Julius tells Philip. "If you debrief patients at the end of therapy about the process, what do they remember? Never the ideas—it's *always* the

relationship. They rarely remember an important insight their therapist offered but generally fondly recall their personal relationship with the therapist” (62–63; emphasis in original). Yalom makes a similar observation in his celebrated book *Love’s Executioner*, which contains fascinating clinical narratives of his relationships with ten patients: “It’s the relationship that heals, the relationship that heals, the relationship that heals—my professional rosary” (98). The same is true about education. As I suggest in *Empathic Teaching*, students remember best those teachers who have made a difference in their lives, who have encouraged and supported students rather than simply imparted knowledge to them.

Several passages in Yalom’s novel affirm the importance of death education: “Death is always there, the horizon of all these concerns. Socrates said it most clearly, ‘to learn to live well, one must first learn to die well.’ Or Seneca, ‘No man enjoys the true taste of life but he who is willing and ready to quit it’” (69). One of the best descriptions of “death denial” appears in *Love’s Executioner*: “As we grow older, we learn to put death out of mind; we distract ourselves; we transform it into something positive (passing on, going home, rejoining God, peace at last); we deny it with sustaining myths; we strive for immortality through imperishable works, by projecting our seed into the future through our children, or by embracing a religious system that offers spiritual perpetuation.” To those who insist that they do not deny death, Yalom responds, “The truth is that we know but do not know. We know *about* death, intellectually we know the facts, but we—that is, the unconscious portion of the mind that protects us from overwhelming anxiety—have split off, or dissociated, the terror associated with death” (5–6). Yalom might have quoted Montaigne’s observation that we should spend our lives preparing for death rather than confronting it only when it approaches us.

Yalom realizes that the therapist-patient relationship becomes more authentic when each feels able to self-disclose to the other. Thus Julius muses: “Jung had other things in mind when he said that only the wounded healer can truly heal, but maybe honing patients’ therapeutic skills is a good enough justification for therapists to reveal their wounds” (252–53). While reading *The Schopenhauer Cure*, I recognized for the first time that I am a “wounded teacher” and that I am exposing my wounds to my students. Yet these wounds, while still raw, are also healing, and I hope my students can see that reading and writing help one to survive a grievous loss. As D. H. Lawrence observes in a letter, “One sheds one[’s] sicknesses in books, repeats and presents again one[’s] emotions, to be master of them” (90). Yalom’s awareness that therapists heal themselves when they heal their patients describes perfectly the feeling of exhilaration I have when I am teaching, how I seem to be magically released from whatever is troubling me:

One of the major side benefits of leading a group—a fact never stated in the professional literature—is that a potent therapy group often heals the therapist as well as the patients. Though Julius had often experienced personal relief after a meeting, he never was certain of the precise mechanism. Was it simply a result of forgetting himself for ninety minutes, or of the altruistic act of therapy, or of enjoying his own expertise, feeling proud of his abilities, and enjoying the high regard of others? All of the above? Julius gave up trying to be precise and for the past few years accepted the folksy explanation of simply dipping into the healing waters of the group. (95)

Other passages from *The Schopenhauer Cure*, expressed by both Julius and Philip, offer insights into confronting one's terror of death. Thus Philip says, "Spinoza was fond of using a Latin phrase, *sub specie aeternitatis*, meaning 'from the aspect of eternity.' He suggested that disturbing quotidian events become less unsettling if they are viewed from the aspect of eternity. I believe that concept may be an underappreciated tool in psychotherapy" (101). I'll want to discuss with my students the value of trying to develop and maintain this cosmic perspective, something I need to work on myself. I haven't read Schopenhauer since taking an introductory course on philosophy in college. Yalom quotes a passage from the essay "On the Doctrine of the Indestructibility of Our True Nature by Death" that strikes me as containing the highest wisdom, an insight that will help me deal with my own fear of death: "If in daily intercourse we are asked by one of the many who would like to know everything but who will learn nothing, about continued existence after death, the most suitable and above all the most correct answer would be: 'After your death you will be what you were before your birth'" (210). Yalom makes only one observation in his novel with which I disagree: "Schopenhauer had one further method of keeping death-anxiety at bay: death-anxiety is least when self-realization is most. If his position based on universal oneness appears anemic to some, there is little doubt about the robustness of this last defense. Clinicians who work with dying patients have made the observation that death-anxiety is greater in those who feel they have lived an unfulfilled life. A sense of fulfilment, at 'consummating one's life,' as Nietzsche put it, diminishes death-anxiety" (340). Barbara's death-anxiety was intense throughout her life, and it rose to panic levels after her diagnosis, but all who knew her would agree that she had a deeply fulfilling life in her family and career until her death at the age of fifty-seven. Perhaps this death-anxiety would have diminished had she died in her nineties, like her parents and grandparents. Despite this one disagreement with Yalom, I would have included *The Schopenhauer Cure* on our reading list had I known about the novel a few months ago.

Monday, January 23

This morning I spoke on the phone with James Peltz, the interim director of SUNY Press. He told me that *Dying to Teach* will appear in both cloth and paperback editions and that I can include up to 20 photographs of Barbara and our family. I'm elated, for this will be my most important book. I'm sad it's finished—it was easier writing about her every day than *not* writing about her. Nevertheless, I'm delighted that others will soon be able to read about Barbara and her impact on her family and friends. I feel almost as much joy over the book's acceptance for publication as I did when my granddaughter, Talia, was born last week. I had little doubt that Jillian would give birth to a healthy baby, but I had a great deal of doubt that my book would be published, mainly because it's so personal.

A few hours after speaking with James, I met with the students in my Love and Loss course. Most of them had read the description appearing in the English Department's spring 2006 booklet of course offerings:

Love and Loss in Literature and Life

Love inevitably ends in loss: this is one of the oldest themes in literature. In this course we will focus on the ways in which writers portray love and loss and seek to find consolation through religion, art, or memory. The reading list includes selected eulogies and elegies, several Emily Dickinson poems, the Book of Job, C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, John Bayley's *Elegy for Iris*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Anna Quindlen's *One True Thing*, and Jeffrey Berman's *Empathic Teaching*. There will be several short essays (which will constitute 50 percent of the final grade), a midterm exam (25 percent), and a final exam (the remaining 25 percent). This course will be emotionally challenging without, I hope, being depressing.

I knew from experience that some students do not read course descriptions: they sign up for courses that fulfill distribution requirements, meet at convenient times, or have interesting titles. Consequently, I wanted to be as specific as possible on the first day of the semester. I told them that I've never taught this course before and that I am teaching it because of Barbara's death. I also mentioned that I will be reading aloud passages from *Dying to Teach*: both the course and the book are part of my effort to celebrate Barbara's life and memorialize her death. I anticipate that teaching the course and later writing a book about it will help me to grieve her loss. But there are other less personal motives as well, including helping students learn more about a subject that surrounds us daily but that is rarely discussed in the classroom. There is a world of difference between fictional and real death. The course will be an experi-

ment in “death education,” I added, and like any experiment, we can’t predict whether it will succeed or fail.

Part of the experiment will be to see how everyone reacts to the intense emotions surrounding death. Students in other courses—especially my Expository Writing course—tell me that they have never seen anyone cry in the college classroom except for events such as the assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Before Barbara’s diagnosis, I can recall crying only once in the classroom (see *Empathic Teaching* 234–47), though over the years I have sometimes found myself misty-eyed when discussing an emotionally charged essay or story. There seems to be an unwritten rule that teachers do not cry—and, therefore, students are also reluctant to cry. But why should we be ashamed of being “moved to tears” by powerful events and words? Why should it be appropriate to laugh in the classroom when something is funny but inappropriate to cry when something is sad? Most people regard me as “intellectual,” but I would characterize myself as 99 percent emotional. Academics fear the “sentimental” (excessive emotion) far more than they fear the “cerebral” (excessive intellect). Ideally, there should be a balance between emotion and reason, but generally the scales are tilted toward the latter in the college classroom. If any subject demands to be taken emotionally, it is death education.

I passed out the syllabus [see appendix D] and the course packets. Everyone listened attentively and respectfully as I spoke about the requirements of the course and the emphasis on writing assignments that personalize death. As usual, I was self-disclosing, acknowledging that I have become a “crier” as a result of Barbara’s death and that there may be moments during the semester when some of us will become teary-eyed. I wanted to indicate to them from the beginning that this will be an intense course, with seven unusual writing assignments: writing an obituary of a classmate; a eulogy; an essay on how their religious beliefs (or disbeliefs) affect their attitudes toward death; a list of “Ten Things to Do before I Die”; a letter from Cathy Linton to her mother who died in childbirth in *Wuthering Heights*; an essay on euthanasia; and an essay on my former students whose writings appear in *Empathic Teaching*. Since the writing topics are highly subjective, with no right or wrong answers, I will be grading not on content but on quality of writing.

I knew that some students might question why I was teaching one of my own books. The reason, I told them, was because I wanted them to read how students their own age, studying at their own university with their own teacher, have written about different forms of loss, including the loss of one or both of their parents as a result of death or divorce. Realizing that some students might object to buying one of their professor’s own books, I told them that I have given up all my royalties from the book to keep the price as low as possible. I also informed them of my unusual “refund” policy: if students tell

me after I have submitted final grades that they have found the book disappointing, I will refund the purchase price. But first they must look me in the eye and say, "Jeff, your book sucks." The class laughed when I said this, but I was serious: I want them to believe that the book was worth buying.

I'll try as hard as I can to make this course meaningful to my students. I want it to be as powerful for them as I anticipate it will be for me. I believe, with Henry Adams, that "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops" (300). I know that this course will make a difference in my life, and I hope it will make a difference in my students' lives.

### *Is There Anything Worse Than Death?*

During class I spoke about the emotional resistance that we feel toward death. Most people intellectually accept the inevitability of death but remain emotionally in denial about it, especially when they are young. As Tolstoy's masterpiece *The Death of Ivan Ilych* reveals, we can accept others' mortality but not our own. Sometimes this denial is healthy, while other times it is not. "Is there any subject that awakens more terror in you than death?" I asked rhetorically. After a few seconds of silence, one woman said that she was more frightened of rape than death. "This is a terrible question to ask, but would you rather have your mother raped or murdered?" She said that she never thought about that question but agreed that murder would be worse than rape. A male student said that working with brain-damaged children has convinced him that losing one's memory or mental functioning is worse than death. I hadn't expected this answer, but I immediately agreed with him, for I fear Alzheimer's disease more than I fear death. I ended class by predicting that there will be more smiles than tears in the course. I hope this is true.

I thought the introductory class went well, and I'll be curious whether many people drop the class. [Three students dropped the first week.] Even though the course closed at sixty students, there were several people trying to add the course, including Baxter, who came to my office before class and pleaded to get in. "I've taken three courses with you and got A's in all of them. I know this will be the highlight of college for me." I didn't give him a definite answer, but I told him to come back on Wednesday, when I would have a better idea about the class size. [I did allow him to add the course.] Two graduate students, Gladys and Ava, both of whom took my Thomas Hardy/D. H. Lawrence course last year, are also taking Love and Loss as independent studies. I'm happy to have them. And I'm delighted that Richard Bower will be assisting me. A doctoral student in our program and a tenured assistant professor at Cayuga County Community College, Richard took my Age of Freud course last summer. He will be attending every class, offering me his own

insights on Love and Loss, teaching two classes, and interviewing several students to learn about their perspectives on the course. Richard observes in his opening diary entry that “first days are often survival days for students and professor”:

“The personal experiences are those that are interesting.” This is one of the tenets by which Jeff makes his classrooms matter, and certainly there is much importance for individual students to be allowed a space where they can investigate personal experience—their own and each other’s. In all the organizing that must occur in this large class of sixty people on the first day, it is not the newness or nervousness that people remember. First days are often survival days for students and professor. What people may likely remember is not the syllabus or introductions, not the awkwardness of the room or artificial lighting, not the initial noise or roll call. They may not remember exactly how large and long the class is. . . . Many will not remember how the class is mostly female—I count twelve males and must note how many are attending by the course’s end. [There were eleven men at the end of the course.]

What people may likely remember from this first class are two answers to Jeff’s question: Is there anything worse than death? He asks this as a claim to the usefulness of taking this course, how he is glad there are so many people interested in what he confesses will be the most challenging teaching experience of his career. When he asks the question, he rises on his toes, wondering if there could be anything worse. For me, it’s unclear if Jeff has thought through such possibilities; I admit that I cannot think of anything worse. But then, two students surprise me. One woman says “rape.” And there is a moment when the class’s importance may be undercut before it starts. Jeff asks apologetically what he says is a terrible question, would you rather have your mother raped or murdered? Truly, it is a terrible question, and a question most would not ask. In fact, I think most would avoid answering such a question. The student admits she’d prefer to have her mother alive. This is a genuine and gutsy response. It’s honest and what we would all prefer, though we ardently wish something terrible like rape never to happen at all. It’s a terrible fear with which many women in the class probably live, yet all are likely to agree that this is not worse than death. David Foster Wallace has commented on this in his book *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

Another student tells how he worked with a person who is mentally disabled and how he can’t imagine living this way. The young man paints the sadness of experiencing life this way with a few words and the weight of experience; his opinion doesn’t come across as self-serving at all, only sincere and serious. No one says much, and Jeff lets everyone make their own conclusions in respectful silence before using a personal anecdote about his classroom to move the material back to the course.

“What would your dying words be?” One doesn’t often get the chance to answer this question, but Jeff has asked us to think about it as we’ll be expected to write them next class. Caring is maintained in his voice as he moves to issues and hopes for retention, how he will not grade on content of one’s ideas, only their written presentation. Most of the students appear “sold” on the course; they are interested in the logistics of how class will work, but not just those. They seem to genuinely care about being there. Are they engaged?

Jeff comments on how crying may be a part of this course. Invariably, he says he will cry when it comes to his wife. “Hope it won’t freak you out,” he says.

Students had no questions in the end, but the explanations of what to expect seem to prepare them well for what is to come. After class, Jeff comments on how the two student answers have given him much to write about in his journal. He says before leaving, “Yes, there are things worse than death.”

*Wednesday, January 25*

Today was the first full class, and I began by asking the students to fill out an anonymous questionnaire:

Why I’m Taking Love and Loss in Literature and Life

I’m interested in knowing why you are taking this course—both the academic and personal reasons. Please spend a few minutes responding to the following questions. Write your answers in the space below each question. (Use the back of the sheet if you need more space.) Be as truthful as possible—and don’t sign your name. I’ll read some of the responses aloud next class. Please write legibly.

1. What are the academic reasons you’re taking this course?
2. What are the personal reasons you’re taking this course?
3. What do you hope to learn from the course?
4. Do you have any special fears or concerns about the course? If so, how can I help you to deal with these fears or concerns?
5. What if anything should I know about you?
6. What if anything should you know about me?

I have never asked students to indicate in a questionnaire why they are taking a particular course with me, so I can’t compare the results with those of other questionnaires. Nor do I know whether these students are representative of others who are enrolled at my university. Nevertheless, the results are interesting. Students cited several academic reasons for taking the course. Many chose the course because they needed to fulfill requirements for being an English major or minor, and this one looked attractive. One person wrote that

“the course covers a theme that I’ve never had the opportunity to explore.” Another found the reading list appealing: “I feel this class offers the opportunity to explore a great sample of seminal works in literature through a unique, interesting, and valuable perspective for both the personal and academic worlds.” Another registered for the course, decided to drop it, but then chose to remain: “I need to satisfy a few English requirements. I actually was planning on dropping this course and taking creative writing next year, which would instead satisfy 2 course requirements rather than this one class satisfying only 1, but after you talked about the class on Monday I’ve decided to keep it.” Another offered an explanation that combined flattery and pragmatic convenience: “I heard the teacher’s really good and it’s a Monday/Wednesday class, so I don’t have any classes on Friday.” Another student, presumably a junior or senior, registered for the course over the objections of his or her adviser: “Although I needed to take one more ‘200–400’ level course, members of advisement tried to persuade me not to take this course, their reason being that as a 200 level course it wouldn’t be ‘challenging’ enough.” Fourteen students—nearly one-quarter of the class—stated that they had taken one or more courses with me before and felt comfortable with my teaching style.

The personal reasons for taking the course were more unusual and varied. Six students were taking the course because of the recent death of a relative or friend. “The course description caught my eye because as I was reading it it made me think of a very close friend that was killed in a car accident in September, his 21st birthday was 5 days ago.” Wrote another, “One of my friends passed away in October, and I felt this class would be interesting and emotionally challenging.” Another: “I lost a person I loved to an illness. I have bottled up my feelings and emotions and I feel like this class can help me confront these feelings.” Another: “My grandmother recently passed away. I hope this class will help me deal with her death. Death, grief, and euthanasia are also topics I am considering for my thesis.” And another: “I love to write and have always dreamed of some day being a published author. My style of writing comes from my own life experiences and dreams, so the topic of this class is ‘right up my alley.’ My father and I were in a car accident a few years ago in which he died and I almost died. This experience, as well as other traumatic and emotional losses in my life, color my writing and I want to learn how to harness my emotion in my writing.” Another spoke enigmatically about a near-death experience: “Death is an intimate topic as in the past few weeks I have been face to face with the idea of my own death. These experiences have been drug induced but have brought to my attention the requirement in my own life to deal with these important issues.”

What did the students hope to learn from the course? The following comment is representative: “A deeper understanding of loss, death, and the grieving process as a means to accept death more fully.” Several wanted the

reassurance that they were not the only ones worried about death: “I hope to learn that other people are as scared about dying as myself.” Some were taking the course because they hoped it would lead to self-improvement: “I hope to become a better person and open my mind to as many new things and people as possible.” One person hoped the course would make it easier to console others who have suffered a loss: “I hope to learn how to relate to other people when they lose a loved one. I personally do not have a problem with the loss of a loved one, but when someone else loses someone they love I never know what to say to them or how to act.” Another sought a “greater appreciation for the dead and those they left behind.” Many expected the course would teach them how to become more effective writers: “Better writing skills—I haven’t taken an English course in a long time, and I’m not sure what I remember!”

To question 4, whether they had special fears or concerns about the course, more than half the students wrote the word “no” or left the question blank. A few expressed academic concerns about the amount of writing. “Both my parents are journalists,” one person quipped, “but I didn’t luck out enough to get the English writing gene! I’ve avoided taking English for one and one half years here in Albany, so I hope this one works out.” Others were concerned about the amount of reading, which they feared might be excessive for a 200-level course. The remaining twenty students were afraid that they might cry in class. “I’m worried I may get emotional during class,” one student admitted. “I don’t want to cry too much,” acknowledged another, “but I hope it will be more smiles than tears like you said on the first day of class.” One person anticipated that discussions of love and loss might be painful because of a dying relative. “My grandmother whom I am very close to is dying from fibrosis of the lungs. My family and I take care of her. We prepare all her meals, take her to the bathroom and much much more. We understand that she may not be with us much longer. I am worried that I may begin to tear up and might have to leave the room for a bit when we discuss death.” Another person recently lost a grandparent and was apprehensive that the course might evoke sad memories. “I am nervous that this will be emotionally taxing on the heels of my grandmother’s death.” Others expressed more generalized fears. “While I am very open with my friends and family about my feelings, fears, and emotions, confronting the idea of loss and pain in an open forum is somewhat intimidating. I plan on facing my fears head on, but I don’t quite know where that will take me.”

Question 5—“What if anything should I know about you?”—produced several responses. “You already know me fairly well,” wrote someone who had taken an earlier course with me, ending the sentence with a happy face. Another declared, “I don’t like to show my weaknesses, so I do not like for other people to see me cry.” Several students admitted that they have little experience with loss. Others made the opposite statement. “I have a great deal

of experience with traumatic loss. Death has been all too prevalent in my life so far. I also have firsthand experience. In my car accident, I was technically dead for a brief time, so I have ‘issues’ with death, but I am open about my experiences to a degree.” Several people are taking the course to work through grief and master fears of death. “I have dealt with the loss of many family members and perhaps this class will help me to deal with these losses.” Another made a similar comment: “I have had many people pass away in 2005, and to hear others’ experience will help.” Another: “The only major losses I’ve experienced (besides pets) were my great-grandfather and, a few months ago, my stepbrother who was terminally ill with a genetic disorder (he died at the age of 6 but was only expected to live until 2).” Another: “My grandma is very ill and will die soon.” Another: “I am completely terrified of dying before I succeed and accomplish what I desire from life.” And another: “I was diagnosed with MS while taking your Hemingway course last summer and am more terrified of losing my dignity one day than I am of dying.”

About half the students did not respond to the final question: “What if anything should you know about me?” They may have left the question blank because they ran out of time—or because they agreed with the person who wrote, “Nothing. I don’t like to pry.” A few asked me silly or playful questions: “Favorite color? Shoe size? Blood type?” Others asked me general questions—“Why did you become an English professor?”—which I could answer easily: “Because I love to read and talk about literature.” The remaining fifteen students wanted to know why I was teaching this particular course. “What are your objectives in teaching this class, and what do you *hope* students will take away?” Another asked a related question: “How do you feel teaching this class and [do you believe that] letting us in your life will help us (because I think it will)?” Three people asked “coping” questions. The first wrote, “I would like to know what helped you cope with the death of your wife. I was only with the person I loved for 5 years, but to me it was a lifetime, so I feel like I am in a similar situation.” The second wondered, “after seeing death firsthand, what do you do to get out of bed in the morning?” And the third asked me why I wrote a book about my wife’s death: “What did you think writing about your wife’s death would do for you—did you do it to cope with what was going on or for other reasons?”

It will take me an entire semester to answer these questions, but I will try to give brief answers in the next week. Since there is never enough time in class to answer all of the students’ questions, I may have to provide answers only in my diary, to which I can return later in the semester if I have time. Surely one of my objectives in teaching this course is to help students learn more about the enigma of death and its impact on our lives. “All fiction takes as its great central mystery death, mortality,” Anna Quindlen writes in *One True Thing* (145). To speak effectively about these mysteries is to speak *affec-*

tively, acknowledging the power of emotions. Throughout the semester we will be talking and writing about these stories of life and death. Nearly every modern student of thanatology has remarked that death remains the most taboo subject of the twentieth—and, we may add, the twenty-first—century. In the foreword to Marie de Hennezel's book *Intimate Death*, Francois Mitterand raises the question, how do we learn to die? "We live in a world that panics at this question and turns away. Other civilizations before ours looked squarely at death. They mapped the passage for both the community and the individual. They infused the fulfillment of destiny with a richness of meaning. Never perhaps have our relations with death been as barren as they are in this modern spiritual desert, in which our rush to a mere existence carries us past all sense of mystery. We do not even know that we are parching the essence of life of one of its wellsprings" (vii). Mitterand, the former president of France, was terminally ill when he wrote these words, and thus he speaks about death with a special urgency. I hope my students will take away from *Love and Loss* an increased understanding of both death and life, along with a heightened appreciation of how beautiful and fleeting life is. This is an "objective" behind all my teaching—the belief that literature can make us more aware of what we have. Now that I have lost my wife, I am painfully aware of how little time we have with loved ones.

I see no contradiction between teaching students how creative writers reflect on love and loss and talking about my own experiences. To use an anthropological term, I teach from the point of view of a participant-observer. To separate literature from life, limiting classroom discussions to the former but not the latter, strikes me as impoverishing both. Nor do I see a contradiction between talking about how I have been able to deal with grief—in large part, by reading and writing about it—and helping my students with their own grief. The theme of love and loss affects everyone—except perhaps the unlucky few who have never loved or been loved. One of my relatives asked me, while I was writing *Dying to Teach*, why I wanted others to read the book. The question surprised me, and after a moment of silence I replied, "The short answer is because writers want to be read; the long answer can be gleaned only by reading the entire book." I am both the teacher of *Love and Loss* and a student of grief: all of us are learning about the joy and sorrow of human existence.

What helps me get out of bed in the morning—apart from my dogs, who demand to be taken for a long run? For the first eighteen months following Barbara's death, my main incentive to get out of bed was to write about her, and when I completed *Dying to Teach*, my incentive changed to thinking about my new course, *Love and Loss*, and the book I knew I wanted to write about it. I'm sure that I'm not the only writer for whom death is the undying muse of art.

*Dying Words*

I asked students to write down on a note card what they would like their “dying words” to be. Their responses offer insight into their lives, particularly what they hold most dear. Of the fifty-seven people who responded to the question, twenty-seven expressed love and gratitude for relatives and friends. The word “love” appears in nearly all these dying words:

I’m going to miss the people I love, and the people that loved me.  
 We’re birds, I’ll see you soon. I love you with all my heart.  
 Thank you to everybody who has touched my life. I will miss being here with you. I love you.  
 I love you, I’ll miss you. Don’t worry and spend too much time in sadness, we’ll be together again later.  
 I have led a fulfilling life. I have no regrets. Thank you for sharing this life with me. I love you.  
 Love and appreciate everything dear to you. I have.  
 I love you, always remember me, but move on soon.  
 I finally feel at peace. Do not feel sad. I will love you and be with you forever.

These responses are remarkable not only for the students’ love and gratitude for relatives and friends but also for their lack of bitterness, disappointment, or anger with life. They are protective of those who survive them: the dying want the living to move on with their lives rather than dwell on loss. The dying wish to be remembered but not in a morbid or depressing way. The emphasis on love and gratitude in these “dying words” affirms the students’ attachment to their relatives and friends. They are connected securely to these people, and in the final moments of their lives they desire to acknowledge the life-sustaining importance of human relationships. I imagine that one of the most terrifying aspects of death is the dying person’s feeling of disconnection from those with whom he or she is closest, along with the perception that the living are abandoning the dying. Expressing one’s eternal love helps to offset the loneliness and grief experienced by both the dying and the living.

The dying words of an additional eleven students contain explicit or implicit references to God or heaven. These dying words vary strikingly in tone and diction, ranging from solemn and devout, on the one hand, to light-hearted and bantering, on the other:

Lord forgive me for the sin that I have committed; I am ready to move on.  
 I’m going to be with my dad again.  
 This isn’t the end, it’s only another beginning.

I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God and he died on the cross for my sins. I accept him into my heart and as the Lord of my life. I love my family and friends with all my heart. This is only a reaffirmation of my faith.

Keep your head up. I'm only dying physically.

Meet me at the stoplight after the gate.

Most of the remaining eighteen students imagined upbeat or funny dying words. They testify to the importance of remembering the dead, enjoying life to the fullest, living a good life, embracing love, and accepting the joy and sorrow of existence:

Move on, for if you don't, you're as useful to this world as I am right now.

(Dead)

I'll be back.

Teddy

Just because I'm gone, doesn't mean I'm not going to be here. What's lost shouldn't be forgotten.

This sucks, give me a beer.

Make sure there's an ice cream cake at my funeral for Lisa and play Jeff

Buckley's "Last Goodbye" & "Grace" at the ceremony.

When you have to go, you gotta go!

It is impossible to know whether many of my students will remember their imagined dying words when they are actually dying. Nor can we say whether anyone will be around to hear their dying words, which represents, paradoxically, a dying genre. [As John Updike remarks in the *New Yorker*, "Last words, recorded and treasured in the days when the deathbed was in the home, have fallen from fashion, perhaps because most people spend their final hours in the hospital, too drugged to make any sense. And only the night nurse hears them talk" (7 and 14 August 2006).] Nor can we know whether many will remember their Love and Loss course when death overtakes them. But we can say that their imagined dying words reflect the wish for a fulfilling life that, for most of my students, centers around family, friends, and God. One can infer that these are the dying words of young people who believe they have many good years ahead of them, and who therefore do not worry that they will soon be at death's door. These are, to be sure, idealized dying words, uttered by college students who are generally young, healthy, and in the prime of life. That many of these statements are expressed in complete sentences—some of them quite lengthy—reveals their assumption that neither physical nor mental deterioration will prevent them from communicating with loved ones. I suspect that the dying are unable to communicate with the living in many or

most cases, either because they are too weak to speak or because no one is around to hear them. Richard makes this observation in today's diary entry:

My own final words would not be composed of words but of facial expressions that look to gesture and imply everything I may have said to my audience over the years. It seems to me that by the time of my dying words I would have said everything I was going to say. If I could choose, I would not rush into some kind of capstone statement. I'm sure I would only get much wrong, possibly leave sentiments out for people or most probably not capture what my life could mean for them. I'd hope to speak with a smile, which some students did indicate, some facial gesture of reaching out to touch whichever loved one is at my side, and a hand grasping my wife's. In thinking about it now, I think I'm brought back to these decisions by my grandfather's death with the exception that he clenched my hand in panic. I don't know that my eyes will show anything more than his that were mixed with fear.

To illustrate how much difficulty the dying have in expressing themselves, I gave everyone a photocopy of Barbara's last written words to me, on the occasion of my fifty-ninth birthday, less than three months before her death. Several of the words were almost illegible, indicating her unsteady hand, and there were many words crossed out, misspelled, or repeated twice: "This is such a special day that I couldn't let it pass without writing. It's so difficult for me to combine letters and words. We've shared a spectacular life together, a love for one another that has only strengthened by time." In sharing with my students Barbara's last written words, I was trying to illustrate, as Richard suggests in his diary entry, a life in the process of self-extinction: "Jeff shares his wife's last written words. Meaning making was passing out of Barbara's control; for students to see this disclosure is paramount to witnessing mortality. Unbelievable! Expressions matter, first, last, and all the words in between matter. It's just that we forget sometimes how much. The sharing of the last words is dramatic for some students—a curiosity to witness mortality; for others like myself, the last words reveal how life is an act of writing that matters to those we can get to listen. We need caring to be able to complete this rhetorical act; we need empathy in order for any communication to matter."

I saved the last twenty minutes for the reading of my eulogy of Barbara:

Eulogy for Barbara

Barbara and I met in the fall of 1963 in our freshman English class at the University of Buffalo. She was not yet seventeen years old. For me, though not for her, it was love at first sight: I couldn't take my eyes off her long flowing hair, green eyes, high cheek bones, olive complexion, and delicate nose. She had a

natural, unself-conscious beauty that never faded, not even after her illness. Two of the black-and-white photos I took of her in 1967 now hang on my office wall at the university; students who walk into my office invariably comment on her exotic features. Barbara and I could not have been more different in class: I spoke incessantly, enraptured by my own words, while she remained silent like the sphinx, which only increased her mystery to me. I was annoyed that she received higher grades on her essays than I did. Early in the semester I told our English teacher, Len Port, how much I liked her, and not long afterward he summoned us to his office. I didn't realize it at the time, but he was a matchmaker: he deliberately failed to appear, and she and I were forced to speak to each other for the first time while waiting for him.

Our relationship began inauspiciously. Our first date was November 22, 1963, a day that no one of our generation will ever forget. After classes were canceled because of President Kennedy's assassination, we decided to see a movie; we were among a handful of people in the theater as we watched Laurence Olivier play Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. On our third date I walked her back to the dormitory and asked if I could kiss her goodnight. "No" was her immediate reply. I turned around and left, vowing never to ask her out again. A few months later I broke that promise, and we began seeing each other. When I later told her how hurt I was by her rejection, she replied, "It was a stupid question: you should have just kissed me."

We dated throughout college and were married in August 1968. Barbara's only precondition for marriage was to have a dog. I had been bitten by a German shepherd when I was a child and therefore agreed reluctantly, hoping she would forget my promise. Barbara never forgot anything in her life, and within a few months we acquired the first of five Belgian sheepdogs. I remember little about our wedding except that I didn't want to be there: I wanted to be married but did not believe in marriage rituals. I should add that this was during my adolescent rebellion stage, a stage which continues to this day; I enjoyed our daughters' weddings far more than our own, and I still have not looked at our wedding photos. The one detail that I remember about our wedding is that I asked the bandleader to play the Barbra Streisand song "Never Will I Marry" for our first dance, but he ignored my request, perhaps because he did not appreciate my wry irony.

Two weeks after our wedding I received a phone call from Len, telling me that he was in the process of committing suicide; Barbara and I were devastated by his death. A month later we were in Cornell's graduate library, where I spent most of my time studying. Though she rarely read the *New York Times*, and never the obituary page, a premonition compelled Barbara to do so, and she saw the obituary of Len's wife, Phyllis, who had died, perhaps by her own hand, on his birthday. This was the first but not the only time that Barbara felt the existence of a supernatural force shaping her life.

Barbara began her career as a first grade teacher, but she never liked teaching, and she resigned after receiving tenure. She felt that if she continued teaching, she would never want any of her own children. She believed at the time that she could never love a child as much as she loved our dog Cybele. The night before she gave birth to Arielle in 1973, she started crying, fearing that she had made a great mistake by becoming pregnant. As soon as Arielle was born, however, Barbara felt an immediate and intense maternal bond, which only increased over time. Her devotion to her children and her dogs never wavered. I soon realized that if I were foolish enough to give her an ultimatum between choosing her husband or dog, I would be the one sleeping in the doghouse. She would have loved to be reincarnated as a dog and cared for by a person like herself.

Unlike me, Barbara could do almost everything well, and she had a multitude of talents, interests, and hobbies. Not only did she excel at her professional work, first as a teacher and then as a computer analyst, but she loved arts and crafts. She created a magnificent stained glass chandelier that would have delighted Tiffany, and no one was better at crocheting blankets or knitting sweaters. She made Arielle's exquisite wedding gown, and after finishing it, she sewed into the back of the dress a label with the following words: "For Arielle on her wedding to David Albert, October 7, 2000. Every stitch sewn with love by her mother Barbara Berman, with support from her mother, Jean Lederman Kozinn, and with spiritual guidance from her mother, Sarah Seliznick Lederman." In her diary she wrote: "I think it was a spiritual experience sitting on the bedspread that my grandmother spent two years hand crocheting for me thirty-five years ago and working on Arielle's gown and veil. She would have been proud. So many memories of my grandmother were involved with sewing and making things. I can hear her needle piercing the hatforms as she was working on her millinery. They were works of art."

Everything Barbara made was a work of art, and she was meticulous to a fault. Her eye invariably spotted misweaves and imperfections, and she demanded of others what she expected of herself, which was nothing short of perfection. Once she became upset with a stone mason because he repaired our garage wall without lining up the mortar pattern of the bricks. No one but Barbara could see the difference, but that did not stop her from taking him to small claims court. To support her argument, she took photographs of the other houses on the block, demonstrating that all their mortar patterns lined up perfectly. She won the case. Later she said that she regretted not becoming a lawyer, an ambition our younger daughter Jillian has fulfilled. It is not easy living with a person whose standards are so high; she was as mechanically inclined as I am mechanically declined, and I became dependent upon her ability to fix anything. She could repair faulty wiring, broken toilets, temperamental boilers, cracked floor tile, and leaky faucets. By contrast, I was hopeless. Her favorite

story about me was the time I spent two hours replacing a head light in our car, only to discover that I had replaced the wrong light. Once in exasperation I said to her, "You're such a perfectionist that I don't understand why you married me." Without hesitation she replied, "I didn't think about it very much." Lucky for me that she didn't.

Barbara was a good person. She befriended nearly everyone with whom she came into contact, and she never forgot to wish a relative or friend happy birthday. Mentioning Barbara's name would invariably bring a smile. If you were Barbara's friend, you were a friend for life, and several credit her for turning around their lives by encouraging them to end abusive relationships or by finding employment for them when they lost their jobs. She was never too busy to bake cookies for friends who were ill or send cards to cheer them up.

Barbara saved everything she received, regardless of whether it had intrinsic value; each object was a treasure that reminded her of a person or an experience. Many married couples argue about money; we argued about whether I was allowed to throw out what I considered junk but what she cherished as family heirlooms: a desk that she had used in elementary school, an unused tire for a car that was now rusting in a junkyard, or a broken typewriter or adding machine that her father used forty years earlier. She saved all her report cards from elementary school; marbles from her childhood; the letters her parents sent to her when she was in college; old AAA tour books; maps and globes that are now out of date; rocks and seashells from our trips; and even a bath towel, now filled with holes, which her parents gave us when we became engaged. As our children were cleaning out her closets, they noticed bags of dog hair that Barbara intended to weave into a sweater. She was thrifty and self-sacrificing to a fault and preferred to buy gifts for relatives or friends than for herself.

Barbara's worst quality was that she was a worrier, and here we were unfortunately similar. For decades she worried about the health of her mother and father, who are now eighty-nine and ninety, respectively. She worried about events that happened and those that did not. She was grief-stricken when we had to put a dog to sleep, and one of her dying wishes was to have the cremated ashes of her beloved dog Ebony placed in her burial casket. In therapy I learned a new word—catastrophizer—and it immediately resonated within me. Perhaps we were catastrophizers because of our parents, who had difficult lives during the Depression; perhaps we were catastrophizers because we are Jewish and therefore keenly aware of persecution and suffering. For whatever reason, we spent too much time fearing the worst. Both of us were blessed in so many ways—with our children, relatives, friends, work, and with each other.

Catastrophe finally struck on August 12, 2002, one day after our thirty-fourth anniversary, when she was diagnosed with metastatic cancer. No one can explain why Barbara, who could have been a poster child for living a healthy life, and who comes from a long-lived family without any history of cancer, was

stricken by such a virulent disease. We were fortunate to have the best medical treatment. No one could ask for a more devoted oncologist than Dr. Fred Shapiro; and we were equally fortunate to have the loving help of my cousin, Dr. Glenn Dranoff, through whose influence Barbara was accepted into a clinical trial for an experimental pancreatic cancer vaccine, which almost certainly prolonged the quality of her life by several months.

Shortly after Barbara's diagnosis I received a letter from my dear friend Randy Craig's brother, David, whose wife had died recently after a long battle with breast cancer. David wrote that the last months of their marriage were the happiest of their life, the time when they felt the greatest understanding, contentment, and intimacy. I think that Barbara would agree with me that as close as we were before her diagnosis, we became even closer afterward. Scarcely a day went by without declarations of our love for and devotion to each other. We had always been close with our children, who have also been our best friends, but we became even closer, and our admiration for their husbands became even greater. For the first time in our lives, our children began to parent us. Arielle and Jillian took turns coming home every weekend, as did their husbands, Dave and Alex, and all four unselfishly put their lives on hold in order to prolong Barbara's life. No parents have been prouder of their children than we are of ours.

In one of the most quoted lines of twentieth-century poetry, Sylvia Plath observed in "Lady Lazarus" that "Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well." It is impossible to take comfort in a loved one's suicide: the legacy—or illegacy—of suicide is lifelong anger, guilt, confusion, and sorrow in family and friends. By contrast, dying with courage, strength, and dignity, as Barbara did, makes it easier for loved ones to grieve their loss. Barbara's acceptance of death was her final gift to her family, allowing us to take comfort in a life that was extraordinary to the end. She remained fiercely protective of her children; she would often tell me that she was being tortured by physical pain, but she never expressed this to Arielle and Jillian. She wished to spare everyone from the grief arising from suffering and death. She always had a grateful smile for the nurses in the chemotherapy room, who came to feel a special affection for her. She would bring photographs of our new grandson to show the nurses, and equally important, she would admire the nurses' photographs of their own grandchildren. She always appreciated the help I provided and told me repeatedly that it is more difficult for the caregiver than for the dying person. She never gave up on life, even when life gave up on her.

Barbara and I did not spend much time talking about the unfairness of her illness. We had no regrets about anything except that we did not have more time together. She felt little anger and no bitterness. She died during what would have been the best time in her life, when her children were grown up, happily married to wonderful men, successful in their careers, and beginning families of

their own. She delighted in our new grandson, Nate the Great, who filled her heart with joy.

Premature death always raises the most fundamental religious and existential questions, and each person will answer these questions differently. Amid tragedy, those with strong religious faith may have emotional resources lacking in those without religious faith. I wish I could believe that Barbara is now in a better world, that there is a reason for her death, and that one day I will be reunited with her. What I do believe is that she will always be alive to those of us who were privileged to know her. I want to end by quoting a passage from Charles Dickens's novel *Nicholas Nickleby*: "In every life, no matter how full or empty one's purse, there is tragedy. It is the one promise life always fulfills. Happiness is a gift and the trick is not to expect it, but to delight in it when it comes and to add to other people's store of it." Barbara was one of those rare people who increased the store of happiness in the world.

I read the eulogy for several reasons: to show my personal involvement with love and loss; to describe my love for Barbara; to allow students to see me not simply as a teacher but also as a person; to demonstrate that one can survive a devastating loss and still find life worth living; to affirm the power of language to memorialize loss; to reveal that a eulogy can be both funny and sad; and to offer my students an example of a eulogy that may help them in the future when they are called upon to memorialize a relative or friend. I've discovered, along with other researchers, that self-disclosure begets self-disclosure, and I hope that my willingness to talk about my experience with love and loss will encourage students to share their experiences with the class.

I hadn't read the eulogy aloud since Barbara's funeral, on 9 April 2004, and I was surprised that I was able to read it so easily. When I read the eulogy to my Expository Writing students in March 2004, shortly before Barbara's death, I was so choked by emotion that I could hardly complete the reading. Now, however, I had little trouble maintaining my composure. I guess this is what happens when grief begins to diminish.

Coincidentally, today I received a letter from Amanda, who was in that Expository Writing course. The letter describes her response to reading *Dying to Teach*, and I'll include it in the appendix to the memoir, along with her classmates' responses. The letter comes just in time, for this week I sent the final manuscript to SUNY Press. Amanda's response to the entire book is different from her response to the eulogy when I read it in class. She now writes: "When my friend's mother died in March 2004, the semester I took your course, writing about it was soothing. At least that is how I feel about the process now, but when I was writing the essay it was painful and complicated. I can only recall my emotions at the time because I still have that essay, that time capsule of sensations. I remember writing it in the open basement of my