

Mixing Tolstoy with Mother's Day

May 11, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Several years ago a student in my “Masterpieces of World Literature” course contacted me in the middle of the semester to say she’d be missing our next class. Her father had just passed away after a long fight with cancer, she said. She’d be staying home to “take care of” her mother for a few days.

As I walked to class a couple weeks later, it dawned on me that we might be headed for a disaster. This particular student might well be back with us, and what classic literary work were we to begin discussing that night? None other than Tolstoy’s poignant novella, “The Death of Ivan Ilyich.”

We were about to begin class when the young woman walked in and took her usual seat in the third row. I groaned inwardly, put my Norton Anthology aside, and gestured for her to step into the hallway with me. There I told her we were about to plunge into an involved narrative about a man, a father of a family, who becomes mysteriously ill and dies a miserable death after a prolonged struggle with an illness that could have been cancer.

“The timing for you here is all wrong,” I said softly. I suggested she not subject herself to more pain by staying in class with us. I suggested that she avoid the Tolstoy novella and read an alternative work at home. I’d create an exam for her different than the one her classmates would face.

“Oh,” she replied. “I already read this story. I like it, and want especially to be here for it.”

Later I realized her instincts (not mine) were right. Looking straight in the eye at death might well be a step toward healing when we’ve lost a loved one.

Just this week I finished Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” in still another course. I asked the students to write down their reactions to the novella. One of my young friends wrote the words you’re about to read. She kindly gave me permission to quote her here.

“The situation of Ivan ‘forces’ me to think of something which I am not used to thinking about. My Grandma is almost 90 years old. Although she’s still healthy, I am afraid of her death. Writing this to you, I feel a little bit afraid, for Chinese are not used to talking about ‘death’ . . . We think talking about death

brings bad luck. Yet, I still want to express my fear here. I don’t have a chance and I dare not express my fear about this issue in my family. I am sure that I am not the only person who is afraid of my Grandma leaving us. From this work, I learn that I must cherish time with my family. And . . . the importance of cherishing the present.”

Now, I know a reader or two out there may not at all want me to even touch the word “dying” today, of all days. Mother’s Day in Taiwan is surely not the appropriate day to even think about d-e-a-t-h, for pity’s sake.

I stop in my tracks, however, when young people tell me that they don’t dare talk about a certain subject in the security of their own family. When a student such as this one shows by example that she is afraid, but will not allow her fear to control her, I nod and say “yes, yes, yes.”

We all have a right to our cultures. We’ve all a right to make our own decisions in life. Whether to talk of this or that is largely our own business. But in Taiwan, this reluctance to utter the word “death” truly makes me wonder. How can we adequately show tenderness and love to someone and not face, together with that person, the fact that one day the curtain will fall, and death will separate us?

We Christians may have an advantage in that we believe that death is only a transition, and not an end in our life. Nevertheless, Christian or not, we ought to find ways to let the people we love in life know that we love them. One big reason, of course, is that death will take away that opportunity to talk of love and to show it, at least for a while.

In an odd but very humane way, perhaps my timing here isn’t off at all. Today is Mother’s Day, yes. And Tolstoy’s “Ivan” is about dying, agreed. What day could possibly be better than today then to contemplate the gift of life our mothers have given us?

And what better moment could there be to seize than this moment to let the special people in our life know just how special they are to us? (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This column acknowledges Mother's Day as a special day for all of us. The writer encourages us, however, to tell not only our mothers our true feelings for them. The column says we should let the people we love in life know we love them. This seems like very beautiful advice, but is it practical? Is it possible to tell others how we feel about them? Isn't that an embarrassing thing to do?
2. The writer connects a sad story about death and dying by the Russian author Tolstoy with Mother's Day. Communicate! See life not only as about work, but about people, about the people we love. When sickness comes and perhaps dying, too, talk about it as a family, and face fears openly and bravely. Again, advice that sounds good. But is it possible to talk about dying and death in family life?
3. The writer quotes (with the permission of the student) words a student wrote about the Tolstoy topic of dying and death. Do you feel your professors want to know your ideas? Do professors ask you for your responses, your honest feedback? Do students want to be asked about their own ideas and experiences, or do they prefer to be left alone?

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