

Seeing life whole

By Dana Cook Grossman

During the 11 years that James O. Freedman was the president of Dartmouth College, from 1987 to 1998, his name appeared in these pages a couple of dozen times. Usually, we were dutifully reporting something administrative—that he had spoken at the dedication of a new building, had sponsored a lecture series, or had named a new dean for the Medical School.

But twice his name appeared here as a byline—once on an essay and once on a feature. There was nothing the least bit dutiful about our decision to publish these two articles. No one leaned on us to commit to paper some ponderous presidential pronouncement. Instead, we eagerly sought the privilege of sharing with DARTMOUTH MEDICINE's readers these compelling pieces—both of which he had originally written for other purposes.

That's because in these two cases he was writing about cancer. About a cancer—non-Hodgkin's lymphoma—that eventually claimed his life, at the age of 70, on March 21 of this year.

Everything Jim Freedman wrote was eloquent and literate—even the requisite presidential pronouncements—but these two pieces were especially powerful. Although for many years “cancer was a disease to be spoken of socially in the most hushed of tones, if at all,” as he put it, he was forthright in sharing his own experiences with the disease.

In our Fall 1995 issue, he traced the metaphorical and literal use of the word “cancer” through the ages and the scientific advances made against the disease during the 20th century.

And in our Fall 1994 issue, he wrote about learning that he had cancer. “I came to concede for the first time the certainty of my own mortality. . . . I also came to appreciate more fully that the time allotted to each of us is limited and precious, and that how we use it matters. I knew these things before, of course—intellectually, even emotionally—but never with all my being.

“I have been struck by two realizations,” he continued. “First, that life is a learning process for which there is no wholly adequate preparation. Second, that although liberal education isn't perfect, it is the best preparation there is for life and its exigencies. . . . Liberal education has helped me in that most human of desires—the yearning to make order and sense of out of my experience. I have

come to understand, for example, that literary modes—romantic, tragic, comic, satiric—are not mere academic constructs to which plays or novels may conform. Rather, those narrative categories exist because, as the Greeks and others have understood for millennia, life tends to play itself out in ways that seem romantic, tragic, comic, or satiric—or perhaps all four.

“When the ground seems to shake and shift beneath us,” he concluded, “liberal education provides perspective, enabling us to see life steadily and to see it whole.”

There have been many other encomiums written about Jim Freedman in the three months since his death. He was a person whom it was easy to admire. He was unwavering in standing up for what he thought was right. He was the epitome of the scholar but loved and knew sports. He exuded gravitas but had a great sense of humor. And he was articulate in a way that wasn't off-puttingly erudite but that cast the familiar in a new light.

The romantic, the tragic, the comic, the satiric—he put his finger on the elements that, in turn and sometimes all together, are the essence of life. These emotions play themselves out every day in the birthing suites, examining rooms, and ICUs of DHMC. And, to the best of our abilities, in the pages of DARTMOUTH MEDICINE, too.

We are pleased to have a new way to share the stories—and emotions—of this place. Our online edition now contains **WEB EXCLUSIVE** extras. For example, this issue includes a video Q&A with Dr. Ira Byock, director of palliative care. He talks about the emotions that accompany serious illness, something Jim Freedman knew a bit about. See dartmed.dartmouth.edu/summer06/html/we.php for this issue's web exclusives, and page 13 for the associated article (it takes a few weeks after a print edition is out before its contents are posted, but the online extras are available as soon as you read about them). Now you can see expressions, hear voices, feel emotions—“see whole” the life of medicine at Dartmouth.

You can also go to this issue's listing of web-exclusives to read the two pieces that bore Jim Freedman's byline. I now rue the fact that we shared his insights into “life and its exigencies” only twice, but I'm very glad that we did so at least twice. ■

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