

March 20, 1980

Dear Harold:

Thanks for yours of the 17th. You're right -- it has been a long time, and I suppose it's a measure of how busy and preoccupied I've been.

I must thank you also for your thought in sending along the 1980 Annals of the social and political science academy with its interesting symposium on the changing American attitude toward death. I read it through, and while the brief treatment of the hospice movement was rather superficial I felt that on the whole the overall subject was dealt with very well. I turned it over to Bill Lamers, the psychiatrist who is medical director of Hospice of Marin, who was delighted to have it. Heread through all the abstracts right away during his lunch hour and said he would read the rest of it that night. He said he was very happy to get such a discussion of the subject from this particular perspective. Along with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and others, Bill is one of the pioneers in the movement toward a broader recognition and understanding of death and its implications both for the dying and for their survivors

This same area has claimed more of my own attention recently, both with dying patients and those they leave behind. Your last paragraph touches on it, and its typical of your insight that you sense something which most people do not -- that the best help for a grieving person comes from someone of the opposite sex. Just as women were most helpful to me, so I've found that men somehow find themselves more helpful to women than to other men. I think several factors are at work: first, individual attention of any kind is best, of course. Second, attention from someone of the other sex automatically is more effective -- we are just built to respond that way. Third, the women I've had to do with seem startled and deeply pleased that a man can understand how they feel over the loss of a husband.

Underneath it all is the profound damage done to the ego by the loss of a spouse, and increasingly I find that the reconstruction of the ego is the central problem to be kept in mind.

Again, you are right on the nose: I've been helped more by helping these widows than by anything else, presumably because their response enables me to feel that I'm not altogether useless. All except one have really got themselves together and are dealing with their life as they find it. The exception is neurotic and doesn't really want to be helped, preferring to brood and feel sorry for herself. The most interesting one was Treasurer of the United States under JFK and is the one who has pulled herself from a most devastating loss. She has progressed farther than any of the others, which naturally makes me feel good about myself. It has helped that she likes to eat and is much interested in Chinese food. We sort of oscillate from one kitchen to the other.

Finally, I have decided to go back to China if I'm ever going, and have signed on for a tour next fall conducted by a former ABC radio correspondent I knew in Shanghai in 1949. He stayed on several years. This tour will of course include Peking and Shanghai, and such centers of archeological finds as Sianfu, Loyang, Chengchow and so on. Glad you reminded me of Elizabeth Wrono's interest in archeology. She's a stamp collector too, by the way. One should keep such things in mind.

Best to you both,

jdw