

Hovering Between Life and Death

“At that time she (Tabitha, also called Dorcas) became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.” Taken from Acts 9: 36-42

Whether we call her Tabitha, her Hebrew name, or Dorcas, her name in Greek, the lady was graceful. Both names mean gazelle. *“She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.”* She was beloved by many in Joppa, and so when those who followed Jesus in Joppa heard that Simon Peter was nearby, they asked him to come.

When Peter arrives, he goes upstairs to the body. And he’s not alone. People are gathered for what we call a wake or visitation. *“All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.”*

I was involved in something like a wake recently, but the person still had vital signs. A classmate phoned me from out-of-state. She wanted to know if I knew anything about another of our classmates who lived here in Albuquerque. She and several others had been corresponding with him when, all of a sudden, there was nothing. Not a word from him.

I found him in a local ICU connected to a ventilator. His eyes would open, but he didn’t know anyone, couldn’t speak. I contacted his son and found out that my friend – we’d known each other since 2nd grade – had had an accident. The accident, although not serious in itself, seemed to have accelerated his declining health. A few days later – he showed no improvement – the decision was made to gather family and friends in five days to say goodbye at the ICU room; then, take him off the ventilator.

My graduating class from Roswell High School has a website. We can leave messages for one another. We can post a message for all our classmates. I made a post. I provided an address for sympathy cards to the family – this if and when death occurred – but also said I’d collect any e-mails they sent me and take them to our friend’s bedside. The emails could be more of a statement of what people wanted to say to our classmate.

It worked out better than I thought. Classmates, who never posted a message on the website, suddenly sent me an e-mail expressing what our friend had meant to them. Some addressed him specifically. Some were for all to read.

Here’s one of the better ones: “It is hard for me to comprehend ____'s condition. The entire time we were going to school, he was the one who was always full of life and looking for a party. His enthusiasm helped keep all of us loose during sporting events and added to whatever crazy thing we were attempting. While I only saw ____ at reunions after graduation, he was always the same great guy that I enjoyed being around in high school. Please give my sincere condolences to his son and the rest of his family. Again, thanks for taking the time to notify me. I would have felt

terrible if I had not been able to at least express my appreciation for ____'s approach to life and the fun he provided.”

I typed all the e-mails into a letter (a stack of e-mails are so unwieldy) and put it inside a card. The card said “Thank You,” on the outside, and on the inside, “For Everything...” It was addressed to our friend % of his family. Another classmate went with me to the ICU to say our goodbyes. Others of his friends had come by earlier, and while we were there the family came in. We gave them the card on behalf of our class and left them to their last few hours with their dad.

It was a reverse-wake – an unusual but beautiful experience and as close to a funeral service as we will get for our friend. The family will have a private service at a later date. - DJ