

Final Words
May & June 2024

I had a feeling that I would be asked to write the last formal words. Sure enough, the phone call came. It was Carl, Ellie's stepson. Ellie would not appreciate my using the "step" part. From the day she met him as a teenager, she saw Carl as her son. The love clearly grew both ways.

"I figured since you'd written your book about her," Carl said, his thick Wyoming rancher's accent making me smile with affection, "you might be the best person to write her obituary." For just a few seconds, more thoughts than could be imagined crowded my head and forced my tongue to a complete halt. Yes, I had just completed a 108,234-word biography of Eleanor Prince. Yes, I grew to know her and love her even more than I had as, many years earlier, one of her riding students and then one of her close friends. Yes, I had "all the facts," as Carl said, but Ellie and I, in the writing of her biography, when both of our memories went fuzzy, knew we could slide a date a bit to the future or the past and still maintain integrity and truth. There is no sliding in an obituary.

But—"the best person?" Did I know this genre well enough? I am merely a writer of essays. As such, I pick and choose topics and directions. I come at them from various angles. I embellish with opinion, conjecture, and sometimes judgment. I leave out some details and crowd in others. I write with a literary purpose, which may include nudging readers to join the written experience and, if moved, to conjure stories and thoughts of their own. I write with a commitment to write the truth, but I write from my perspective. I answer to me, to that truth. I can often be center stage in my essays, but I balance that self-absorption by whispering earnestly in the ear of my reader, thus breaking that theatrical fourth wall. I have that freedom. Essay writing is dynamic. It is playful. It is not an obituary.

And—"to write her obituary?" If I agreed to write the obituary, I would be making a commitment to tell the truth but from a far grander perspective, that of Ellie herself, and that of her friends and family. Clearly, I shared that perspective, but its magnitude, that of a woman who lived life fully and honestly, with a deliberate focus and goal, for nearly 97 years was beyond me. It would be hard enough for me to wrestle in. It would be even harder for me to capture it all on a mere slip of newsprint. And would I honor those who read and treasured Ellie's obituary? The fourth wall would be closed. The obituary would carry a silence, a solemnity, a distance, as would perhaps those who tucked it away in some little shrine. Such a weighty responsibility would come with the task. A responsibility to both the deceased and to those who mourned.

All these thoughts roiled in my mind, crystalizing into the simple *Could I really do this and do it well?* My tongue leaped into action before my head could catch up. I heard myself agree to the task. I thanked Carl for asking me. I told him I would be honored to write Ellie's obituary. We talked a bit more, mostly of Ellie, and then we said goodbye.

I went into my study, slowly pulled out the chair, slowly sat at my desk. I looked out the window at the familiar cottonwoods that had signaled seasons and daily weather as, for over two years, I furiously scribbled Ellie's words into thick spiral notebooks, my little recorder whirring away as

it caught Ellie's voice and frequent laughter. During those long winters, the road to her ranch impassable, we relied on our phones to complete many interviews. She sat at her card table in her living room, staring out at her own cottonwoods as my interview questions carried her from one scene of her life to another. Now, her voice and laughter would be no more. I would no more tap out her phone number and hear her high and lively, "Hi, Pam!" We would no more steal time to talk of her animals or fuss about Wyoming's wind and winter. She was gone, and I alone now held—in my heart and in my mind and in my sense of obligation and desire—the final words. I wept.

The next day, I sat down at my computer, created a file, and then stared at a blank screen. It wasn't that I didn't know what to write. I just didn't want to write, to close the book on my intimate time with Ellie. She would laugh. She would say, watching us carefully as we, on our horses, circled her, the teacher, in the riding arena, "Heels down, heads up, keep your horse moving." She stressed quiet hands as we held our reins. I corrected my posture, looked up at the computer screen, and gently situated my hands on the keyboard. I typed "Eleanor Fracker Prince passed away..." and, as if giving the horse a signal to trot, I typed an obituary.

I think of Ellie's obituary as "final words." But are they? I am not exaggerating when I say that Ellie had a massive number of loving friends and admiring colleagues. In fact, no one was ever a stranger to her for long. She trained many of us to ride, respect, and love horses. To love all God's creatures, for that matter. She left her mark of excellence in horsemanship in this area. She worked with fellow ranchers and neighbors to maintain the pristine nature of the land. She would still be moving mountains if God had not called her. No, the obituary will not be the final words. Folks out here love the legacies too much and know an amazing person when they see one. The spirit and memory of Ellie will linger long and, probably, forever. And I pray that the final words elicit not grief but joy.