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S. Ray Granade

Ouachita Baptist University, granade@obu.edu

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DEATH AS DISCOVERY

S. Ray Granade

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They died within a month of each other. She went first; he allowed as how he'd done what he'd meant to do, then joined her. It was from their house that I was born, and I spent more time with them than many kids spend with their grandparents. Yet their deaths showed me that I'd not known them well at all, certainly not as well as I'd thought.

When your grandparents are in their 90s and you've watched them through a gradual decline, death is not unanticipated. You don't dwell on it, but you see it lurking in the background. It's always there, biding its time, for unlike us it has all the time in the world and can afford to be patient. It had certainly been patient with them, for I'd heard them remark numerous times that they didn't know why they were still alive.

Their children had helped them maintain their independence to the end; a son provided a place to live on their own and their daughter, my mother, watched out for them. My parents devoted years to their care, providing me with a model of family devotion. From 500 miles away I heard the saga and visited annually at least, but I knew that despite the solicitous care of loved ones, they were in a very real sense alone.

Friends were gone and their hometown had changed beyond recognition. The house they'd lived in "forever" had been sold and replaced by a parking lot; their neighbors across the street had been replaced by an interstate, victims of "urban renewal." The apartment in which they lived at their death was their third home in town, close to my parents but far from their old haunts. Their world was closing in on them physically, for both sight and hearing were impaired. My grandfather had quit wearing his glasses, for he said they no longer did him any good. The world they inhabited was increasingly one of their own making, as sensory input lessened.

Like millions of others, we made the trek home for the holidays. The Christmas gathering was like its predecessors, as children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren gathered, talked, ate, laughed, and paid their respects. An oddity brought us to their house alone, after the others had gone. My wife, two sons, and myself visited with them in their tiny living

room for a time. It was my first confrontation with their fatal frailty, as I watched them complement each other's weaknesses with their individual strengths, making the couple one in a sense I'd never really understood before. She wandered through the maze of her mind, drifting in and out of the room mentally as he gently prodded her in the right direction. Like a sheepdog with an errant lamb, he gently guided her through the conversation as her seated body became erect or relaxed in a reflection of her mental state. He helped her down the short hall to the front door for our parting. As we left they stood there, he standing beside her and gripping her left arm, framed in the doorway. A month later she would be dead; in another month he would be too. We had enjoyed our last visit.

My wife asked how I felt when we reached the car. In a reply more honest than I realized, I said "They aren't my grandparents. They're not the people I've known." The fleshly shield remained, but much of what I had known had vanished.

We drove home, a day's journey. Memories accompanied me along with my family. Forty years of visits back and forth; forty years of their presence; forty years of special days and ordinary ones, of quiet conversations in a multitude of locations. All that I knew of them coursed through my mind, the days slowly unwinding across my mind's screen as if in preparation for the blow to come.

Her funeral was first, and showed me just how unprepared I really was. Everyone put words in her mouth--she would have liked this or that--often in direct contradiction of what she'd said on various occasions while alive. Three of her grandchildren wore facial hair; she would have told us to shave! But my greatest lack of preparation showed in what I heard others say about her rather than her preferences. In those words I discovered a different woman than the one I thought I'd known.

My father is a minister, so our visits had rarely been on Sunday. I knew that my grandparents were Baptist and active in their local church. That knowledge had never been translated into understanding. Only in their death did I discover the range of their activity. Only in their death did I connect the very personal faith they practiced--a faith they had internalized to such an extent that it was part of them--with their lives and their church. I had seen it for four decades, watched it in action for four decades, known it my whole life. But only in their death did I discover how

their faith had been played out in their local church, and the heritage which they offered me. Now I understood what I'd known all along.