



## Query

**M**y uncle died last week. He had been ill for years, but started his death spiral this past year with multiple hospital admissions as morbid markers by the mortal roadside. He had three kids. One became a teacher, another a chemist, and the youngest followed in his father's footsteps and entered the construction field. He is survived by these kids and by his wife, whom he married when he was 19.

A large part of his life was community: he coached baseball and hockey tirelessly, sometimes coaching two teams on one night. He was successful in his work, in demand as a foreman for local and remote construction projects.

But Jimmy smoked, several packs a day, and he died from it. But it's the type of man he was not to ruminate too much: on his death bed, he said, "I did it to myself." Not to moan, not to indulge in self-pity, just a clear-eyed statement of fact.

I write this not to eulogize my uncle, for that has already been done and by someone far more important in his life than me. I do it just to reflect upon how powerful one man's presence can be, how important it is to live a decent life, how a genuine interest in the people of one's community can finally translate into an equally powerful testament to that presence.

Jimmy's funeral, it was said by the priest later, was the largest he had ever seen — and he had been in the community for over ten years. The church, by no means a cathedral but not small either, overflowed. Jimmy's wife was inundated with people who attested to how Jimmy had touched their lives as a coach. It really did seem like my uncle, who taught me how to properly swing a bat, was far more powerful an individual than I had initially thought him to be. That swing lesson must have been duplicated over a thousand times for other kids, and for most assembled they were bidding their best coach farewell.

As a doctor in a smaller community I attend the funerals of all my patients. Sometimes these are sad affairs, with finances uncertain and anemic crowds. The unexpected deaths are hardest. Admittedly, even the expected deaths are hard in their way. Yet none of the deaths I've been to are celebrations of the person, at least not in the way that Jimmy's was. Many thought him a hero — that quiet man who one Sunday corrected my bad stance.

It's my regret that I never held him in the high regard I should have, that I missed what was obvious to everyone else and what was definitely obvious on the day of his death.

— *Dr. Ursus*