

TOO MUCH SPACE

By Fred Hobbs

A few Christmases ago, I was standing in line at the post office holding a box ready to be mailed. A woman in line standing behind me startled me by proclaiming in a less than friendly tone: "Do you mind? You are taking up too much of my space!" True, the box I was carrying was rather large and cumbersome, but surely she should have known that it would be in "her space" only a few minutes more and never cause her consternation again.

The wise action was to shrug off the incident, but somehow it triggered thoughts about why the woman was so concerned about "her space." And what was "her space" anyway? Had the post office proscribed, at penalty of a fine or jail term for an infraction, a specific amount of space each customer should be allotted while in line? Of course not. But this person apparently was among a growing number of individuals with a hang up over space, in the physical or psychological sense or both.

A common complaint among couples in broken relationships today is "he/she didn't give me my space." As ill-defined and self-centered as it sounds, that's an explanation often provided when a union goes sour. Not being too sensitive to protecting "my space," I submit that a strong case can be made among the senior population that too much space exists: the empty spaces in the heart, mind and ongoing human inter-reaction that once were occupied by the physical presence of loved ones and cherished friends. Memories may continue to dwell in the mind; emotions may still be present poetically in the heart; but the space once occupied by a living person is vacant.

Two such spaces are much on my mind at this moment, concerning life long friends who fell victim to cancer. My friend Dick died two months ago. Dick and I had been buddies since fourth grade. In the early years of our friendship, I had the special position of "honorary" member of his family, with a standing invitation to stay for lunch or dinner anytime. My mother was a widow, working full time in those World War II days, so with her blessing, I took them up on the offer on numerous occasions.

Dick's family allowed me to stay with them for three months just before I entered college. My mother had remarried and my stepfather had taken a job out of state so the temporary arrangement was worked out. Over the years, we saw each other frequently. Bless him, Dick was not too lucky in matrimonial matters. I attended two of his four weddings. (Maybe the wives failed to give him his space!)

Just two days ago, I received a phone call from Julie, the daughter of another friend, with whom I roomed while in the Army back in the 1950s. I have written previously about Bob and those youthful days and his current illness. The hope then was that he would beat the pancreatic cancer that was ravaging his body. Julie says the end is near and the effort now is to make him as comfortable as possible. Always a great writer, Bob has maintained his humor and somewhat sardonic nature even while enduring dozens of tests, multiple operations and hospital procedures. He now has difficulty talking on the phone. She asked me to send him an e-mail message. I chose to write some admittedly corny bits of humor that may give him a chuckle or two or even cause a hearty, healthy groan at their inanity.

The loss of these two great friends will create even more empty spaces left by the recent deaths of my wife, several relatives and others close to me.

Those complaining about needing more space in their lives should concentrate instead on spending their time on earth with resolve, maturity and less self indulgence. Because one day, they, too will be contributing to "Too Much Space!"