FROM THE ARCHIVES

Rita Hartman on the Death of Robert S. Hartman

Editorial Note: Robert S. Hartman died on Sept. 20, 1973. Ten days later, Rita Hartman wrote the following letter to John W. Davis, Head of the Philosophy Department at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville. This first letter explains the cause of Bob's death. It and the second letter, next page, written on Nov. 9, 1973, express what Rita was thinking and feeling very shortly after his death. Several added words are in brackets.

Sept. 30, 1973

Dear John:

Bob has now been away from me—no us, for he really belonged not only to me, but all those, like you, who loved him and whom he loved, for 10 days & I am still as incredulous as the morning it happened. John—he just went away, slipped away. There was no struggle, no cramp—just a quiet slipping away of his precious life. It was a liver hemorrhage caused by the hepatic fibrosis which he had & which was incurable, although he was getting better with the help of cortisone, & the last 5 days of his life he could eat again & enjoy food to a certain degree, and although the doctor had warned me not to get my hopes up too high, naturally one was hopeful. This sickness started shortly after we came home, although [neither] we nor the doctors suspected this, for he was not a man who drank, as you know, and the liver was the last thing to think about. But the diagnosis was finally made. We were in constant touch with the greatest specialist in the U.S., Dr. Schaffner in New York Mt. Sinai, & he held out little hope, confirmed all findings & treatments as correct here, and only told us that in his 30 years of practice he had only had 6 cases of this disease which killed Bob. Although the liver has immense recuperative powers, this sickness apparently is hard to overcome. Cortisone would have to be taken for the rest of natural life and would ultimately affect the brain, something which would have been insufferable for Bob.

John, I know you must hurt inside, as I do, as many do. He loved you, I know, as he told me. He always said that you had an unfailing moral gyroscope built into your soul and that it helped you to always see the heart of the matter and make the right decision. His trust in your "gyroscope" was limitless, & he transferred it to me. You are his intellectual heir—he wrote it down. This should comfort you a little & make you realize that although his leaving us is an irreplaceable loss, we must go on & realize the potentials of his legacy. There is no doubt in my mind that I shall have to do what I can to try & get out the papers, articles, & thoughts which he left. It is an immense task, and it frightens me, but this is a responsibility I recognize clearly & one I shall try to fulfill, and you must help me. How we shall go about this, I don't know yet, that is in the future. At the moment I am so busy—and so unable—with getting all formalities, which contrary to the beginning of life, at the end of it entails, that my head is spinning, for it grasps nothing or very little of all these things. I am still stressed and cannot believe that Bob left—for this is what he did—he left literally. You were here for a week, & he helped immeasurably to point my immediate activities in the right direction, so that I won't make mistakes. We have many & good & loyal friends who have been and are a great help & to whom I can turn when I am at the end of my rope concerning those mundane things. He had so little time, for he had to earn a living for his family.

He tried to get all in order, as far as he could—also for his own concern about me. I am following his directions, which he wrote down & hope I do the right things.

I want to stay here [in Cuernavaca, MX]. This is home. He is buried here, his books, his works, his spirit is here. But remember this, it is your home as well. Whenever you can, whenever you want to—come, work, think—just be.

All my love,

Your Rita.

Editorial Note: What follows was selected from a letter written by Rita to John Davis a little over a week later, on Nov. 9, 1973. One major result of their collaboration after Robert Hartman's death was her gift of all of his papers and manuscripts to the Special Collections Library of the University of Tennessee, where they are now housed. Another was the formation of the Robert S. Hartman Institute by Rita Hartman, John W. Davis, David Mefford, and Linda Laws in 1976-77.

The end of life is so utterly abrupt. And so incredibly final. I can stand the pain of losing the companion of my life for 37 years. I can comprehend that the life I helped to build has reached and end, but what overwhelms me and hurts more than anything else is to see the abundance of unfinished publication lying fallow. I am almost obsessed with the idea that somehow this must be utilized, it must go on, it must be used. There are few people who understand what it means to see such creativity cut off at the prime of a philosopher's career, if I may say so. I often said that philosophy was a demanding mistress, and one I cannot compete with. And this mistress has become more demanding than ever. So, dear John, I am sure it will help to have you here, talk about what we should do with this mistress, and act on it. I am trying to see to it that Jan also is here when you come. Then we can decide exactly.

No, I am neither depressed nor morose—sad yes, sorrowful naturally, but I also realize that I must be grateful for 37 years of constructive living, of learning a great deal, and of marvelous memories which Bob and I made together and which I hoped we could feed on, when in our dotage. Now I have to feed on them alone, which is O.K. If others can do it, so can I. And then we have Jan [their son], who is a prince of a person, warm, loving, concerned, understanding and intelligent, and full of kindness. He too has to go through his own little emotional battleground these days, but he will become a better person for it.

Lots of the best to you,

Rita