An ultimate somebody: The bow that sets the arrow flying

by Miroslav Volf in the October 21, 2008 issue

The recent death of a friend has given me much to think about. Tomislav Simic, whom we called Toma, was from Novi Sad, the town in Serbia in which I grew up. He was 58.

Over the past 20 years or so Toma spent much of his life confined to psychiatric wards. The dilapidated buildings of these depressing institutions, in a country depleted by reckless wars, were homes to his frail body, confused soul and alert mind. When living on his own, he frequented soup kitchens because he was too poor to buy his own food. He died in a hospital of a high fever and a significant drop in blood pressure. But Toma was a nobody, and so the doctors did not even bother to establish the cause of his death.

Now as Christians we all know it almost as an indubitable human truth: nobody is a nobody! Yet people are treated as nobodies all the time. Thousands die of hunger amid plenty. Some suffer from easily treatable diseases. Others are despised because they look or act “weird.” People who are mentally ill are often treated as nobodies. It is not that we relate to them merely as things—we value many things but don’t value such people. It’s not that we treat them as worthless things—we disregard worthless things but often feel an aversion and hostility toward the mentally ill. When they happen to be very poor, as Toma was, we let them—the ultimate nobodies—die with little regard to their basic human dignity.

When Toma and I became friends, he was somebody. I was 16, he was 22. He was a body builder, one of the best in the country, with aspirations and good prospects of becoming Mr. Universe. But then he embraced Christian faith and joined the church where my father was a pastor. He felt that God required him to abandon his athletic pursuits, which until then had been his god. He transposed the dreams of becoming Mr. Universe onto a religious plane: he wanted to be the apostle Paul of Yugoslavia, and maybe a new Billy Graham to the world. Within a single year he read the Bible

from cover to cover 13 times. In then-communist Yugoslavia, he spoke about Christ with unusual boldness to anybody and everybody who would listen, to a crowd gathered in a church or a communist informer poking his nose into others' affairs.

After initial resistance against reading anything but the Bible—why spend time reading books that are lesser than the greatest of all books?—Toma started devouring the great works of Western civilization written by Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Hegel and Nietzsche. He had a three-year college-level degree in theology, but in philosophy he remained basically self-taught. When I returned to Novi Sad with a master's degree in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary, we had long discussions on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. He, an underemployed Pentecostal evangelist living in a two-room shack with his mother and stepfather, had read more of that seminal work than I had, even though I had used the book at Fuller as an assigned text.

As soon as he had found his way to faith—as soon as God found a way to him—a group of teenagers gathered around him in the basement of my dad's church. Some were already church folk, like myself—maybe with an ambivalent relation to faith. Others, many from atheist families, were attracted to the way of Christ through him. His successes as an athlete, his devotion to God, his limitless appetite for the Bible and everything related to it, and his boundless self-confidence pulled us into his orbit. Many of us from that small group ended up not just in some form of Christian ministry but with earned doctorates from major academic institutions. Certainly others have helped and inspired us along the way. But his impetus was crucial—even when later we felt that he was too sure of himself for his or our good and his orbit too constricting. His vision, boundless energy and single-minded dedication became our vision, energy and dedication.

From one angle you could say that some of us, his junior friends, succeeded whereas he failed. We became ministers, professors, administrators of academic institutions, public intellectuals; after a decade or so of activity he, on the other hand, fell into mental illness. In retrospect, the seeds of his future failure were discernible in, among other things, the over-the-top character of everything he did. And yet in a strange way, the seeds of his failure were also the seeds of our success. It is not so much that he failed so that we could succeed. It is rather that through his failure, he succeeded in our successes.

Can an arrow forget the bow that set it flying? Many an arrow does, even though its very flight is a testimony to the bow's influence. It is especially easy to forget the

shaping power of those whom illness takes out of the company of the “sane” and the “respectable.” But even when I fail to remember how formative Toma was for me, the trajectory of my life is a silent memorial to him. Maybe his was a truly Christian way of being somebody—being a bow for the flight of another.