

Surrounded by life

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

Heiko Augustinus Oberman, born 15 October 1930 in Utrecht, died in Tucson on 22 April 2001. He was as notable as anyone could be in the field of Christian history—a field that he helped make rich and notable.

I knew him well, but not real well. For years he shared the leadership of Harvard's history of Christianity field with another major figure, George H. Williams, who also died recently. A year after I began teaching at the University of Chicago and often when we met thereafter Heiko would tease me, in his Dutch accent: Why had I not chosen to come teach at Harvard? "You could have been the swing vote in our department," he said. It is one thing to admire two colleagues who admired each other but did not always see eye to eye on policy or substance and another to swing-vote between them. But all that is another story.

Oberman has been much on my mind these months. For a particular project, I am doing a good deal of research, a.k.a. remedial and required reading on Martin Luther in the form of texts by him and texts about him. Most helpful and memorable among the books on Luther, and the most readable since Roland Bainton's classic *Here I Stand*, is Oberman's *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (Yale University Press, 1989). Oberman does not try to turn Luther from the late-medieval figure that he is into a person of our time.

I'll tuck away in memory the good times I had with the Obermans, during a weekend in Florence at the time of Vatican II in 1964, or during a foray into the shops of turquoise sellers when I last spoke in Tucson. After Harvard and stints in Europe, the Obermans found the Arizona climate to their liking. By dint of will power, skill, intelligence and whatever the Dutch equivalent of chutzpah is, Oberman turned the University of Arizona into one of the places to go for Reformation studies.

This month while I was reading Oberman and planning to consult with him I, along with others, received a letter from him saying he had two kinds of cancer, and they added up to "terminal." My real excuse for this column is to share with you one of Oberman's favored passages from Luther, one that adorns his death announcement

and figures substantially in his book.

Background: for Luther, “Law” meant all the ways and words of God that put humans in their place, that accused them. “Gospel” meant the promises of God.

If you listen to the Law,
it will tell you:
“In the midst of life
we are surrounded by death,”
as we have sung for ages.
But the Gospel and our faith
have changed this song
and now we sing:
“In the midst of death
we are surrounded by life!”
Media morte in vita sumus.