In “No Man is an Island,” John Donne wrote, “…Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind…” But, in my less metaphysical world, some deaths have more impact than others.

Among the latter was the death on September 14 of Ted Vanitallie. I only knew Ted for the past few years – about ten percent of his long life – but I came to know a remarkable individual, an “oner,” as Will Shortz, the New York Times crossword puzzle editor, might say. He was a talented medical research doctor – the retired Chief of Medicine at St. Luke’s Hospital in New York – whose last research paper was published when he was age ninety-eight, yet he would talk knowingly on Anthony Trollope with my daughter-in-law, an author fifty-two years his junior. His eyes twinkled and a soft smile crossed his face when he corrected one of my frequent errors.

I recall when an Old Lyme neighbor, Belton Copp – no slouch himself when it came to brain power – pointed out Ted as the smartest man he knew. I was intimidated, but then, like the father in “The Night Before Christmas,” I got to know him and soon learned “I had nothing to dread.” His intelligence was graced with gentleness, so that he never embarrassed his less astute companions.

Ted was a man who never stopped learning; he sought out new ideas, new thoughts, new people, new books. He read widely in his professional field, but also history and literature. His long life provided anecdotes, like going to a speakeasy in New York with his mother during Prohibition and working with Japanese doctors in a Tokyo hospital just weeks after the war ended.

The last time I saw Ted was August 15th at the Phoebe Griffin Noyes Library in Old Lyme. I was giving a reading from my new book “Dear Mary,” and he was kind enough to attend. As always, he was gracious and greeted me warmly but seemed a trifle tired; however, given the fact he was well into his hundredth year that seemed unsurprising.

Ted was a renaissance man who was comfortable in the company of doctors, scientists, academics, young people and old, businessmen, authors and every-day working people. He was a graduate of Deerfield Academy in 1937, Harvard in 1941 and Columbia Medical School in 1945. While small of stature, Ted was a giant of a man. I am fortunate our paths crossed.

I shall miss him.

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1 The name is usually spelt Van Itallie, but the Ted I knew preferred to make the first “i” lower case and remove the space after the “n.” in Van.