The writer Dudley Clendinen died last night of complications from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis at the Joseph Ritchie House, a hospice in Baltimore. He was diagnosed with what’s known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease in November 2010. In 2011, for nearly a year, Clendinen joined his good friend Tom Hall on WYPR’s Maryland Morning every other week to discuss the disease he called “Lou.” The series was called “Living With Lou: Dudley Clendinen on a Good, Short Life.” Tom Hall has this remembrance.

It was, by every measure, a very good, short life. Dudley’s generous, candid, and often provocative observations inspired people around the world. They sent letters and e-mails. They posted messages on blogs. They thanked him for saying what they couldn’t bring themselves to say, and for giving them new ways to ponder their lives, and the illnesses of their spouses, their siblings, themselves.

On Christmas Eve, 2010, Dudley came to our house for dinner. That evening, he told my wife, Linell and me that the diagnosis we had feared for several weeks, was in fact, correct. His disease, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, has no treatment, and no cure. But he didn’t dwell on that. Immediately, he told us that he wanted to tell this story. This was his first impulse: To reflect on what he had learned as a reporter and a writer, and to, in his words, “defang” the subject of death.

He began appearing regularly on MM in February, 2011. For years, Dudley’s friends knew him to be an elegant, fascinating raconteur, and when we started the “Living with Lou” series, his gift became known to listeners, who immediately warmed to Dudley just like those of us who have known him for a long time. It wasn’t just the fact that Dudley was talking about intimate matters, in an often stark and open way. It was the grace with which Dudley approached the subject of his living and his dying, and his sure command of the perfect way to describe the complex intersection of mind and heart and love and possibility. His observations were always inflected with humor, trenchant insight, and poignant charm. Last July, he published an essay in the New York Times, where he had worked for many years. He wrote about many of the things he had discussed with me in the MM series. The websites of the Times and WYPR exploded with hits. He had broached a subject that none of us wants to confront. He wrote this:
We obsess in this country about how to eat and dress and drink, about finding a job and a mate. About having sex and children. About how to live. But we don’t talk about how to die. We act as if facing death weren’t one of life’s greatest, most absorbing thrills and challenges. Believe me, it is. This is not dull.

When Dudley wrote those words, he was contemplating if or how long he would choose to take advantage of the technology that might keep him alive. His thinking changed somewhat when he received a contract to write a book. In February, when he could no longer swallow comfortably, he accepted a feeding tube to get enough nutrition to keep him sustained so he could write. Yesterday morning, he agreed that being admitted to a hospice facility was best for him, his family, and his housemate and friend, Joshua Batten, who gave Dudley extraordinary care in his final months. He was there for only a few hours before he passed away peacefully. In our last few interviews, Dudley talked about how conflicted he was about employing medical interventions he had once thought he wouldn’t want to use, but also how happy he was to have the opportunity to write this one, last book. For as great a talker as Dudley was, he was first and foremost, a writer: a writer with a keen gift for story telling, a pitch-perfect sense of timing, and an unfailing allegiance to the truth, told artfully. While he didn’t live to see it published, it will be the final gift that he leaves us.

It was the gift that he so longed to leave. Next to his daughter, Whitney, and his many friends, the thing that was most important to Dudley was telling people about what connects us, what engages us, what makes us who we are. In his work as a reporter, an editor, and an author, Dudley Clendinen wanted to know, and wanted us to know, how each and every life fits into the sweep of history. He was drawn to those who are honest and humble, and he was unstinting in calling-out those who aren’t. He cared about manners. He honored those whom others overlooked.

He loved the art of conversation, because it was with him, a fine art. To be at the table with Dudley at a dinner party was to be witness to elegance and smarts the likes of which you just didn’t often encounter. He was famous for giving toasts and blessings that were designed to lift-up and celebrate every person in the room. As Dudley so often had the last word at these gatherings, so shall he have the last word this morning. This is what he called his “Secular Blessing.”

*Lord (who art the inspiration of all Faiths, and all things Divine),*
Thank you for words and writers,
for broadcasters and publishers,
for those who listen and those who read;
for art and for artists,
for music and musicians,
composers and conductors,
for dance and for dancers
design and designers;
for theaters, actors and performers
and audiences with open hearts;
for amateur sport, and athletes and coaches,
for museums and schools,
for institutions which enhance the present
and inventions that make the future bright;
for preachers and politicians
of loving vision and open mind;
for counselors of wit and wisdom
and lawyers inspired by the Bill of Rights,
for the Constitution of the United States,
and the First Amendment in particular;
for children, who keep love and faith alive,
and who are the reason that all this matters;
for the parents who create and sacrifice for them,
and the teachers who guide them;
for the cooks who give us art and joy and nourishment,
for all those who give of their assets and themselves;
for the sustaining hope and promise of Tomorrow
and the newness of the morning.

In whatever form,

may it always bring The New York Times.

Amen.

Dudley Clendinen was 67 years old.

For WYPR, I’m Tom Hall.