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Remembering Professor Luis Leal

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I want to reflect on the death of a good friend, extraordinary human being, and outstanding scholar, Professor Luis Leal, my colleague here at the University of California, Santa Barbara who died on Jan. 25 of this new year. Prof. Leal, or Don Luis, as we affectionately called him, was 102 years old and his age finally caught up to him.

For most of his life, he was in great physical and mental health, but in the last few months, after a fall, he had deteriorated. Don Luis, a literary scholar born in Mexico but educated in the U.S., was one of the early senior literary critics who championed the notion that Chicanos or Mexican Americans had a literature and that it should be recognized as part of the American literary tradition.

Whether in Spanish or in English, people of Spanish/Mexican descent in places such as New Mexico had been writing in journals, chronicles, letters, newspapers, poetry, memoirs, and novels to say nothing of a rich oral tradition for centuries in areas that became parts of the United States and this tradition continued after the U.S. conquered and annexed previous Spanish and Mexican territories such as California. His writing not only on Chicano literature but also in Mexican and Latin American literature are exhausting. Among his many award are the National Humanities Medal presented to him by President Bill Clinton.

Don Luis' death has reminded me of his compassion for others and especially his tolerance for the views of others. "Everyone contributes," he would often say meaning that everyone's views were relevant and contributed to a dialogue. I wish we, as Americans, would embrace such a view in a political era where no one seems to be listening to each other. Of course, Don Luis' condition also reminds me of my own mortality and of trying to keep in focus what is important in my life and life in general.

We need to marginalize those things that are really not that important such as office politics and

annoyances by others. We also need to stop living our lives by how others want us to. One wise Chicano once advised me: "What does Mario want to do?" I remember those words but I have to admit I haven't always practiced them. Don Luis's death reminds me of the same sage advice. Live my life?our lives?based on what is really important for us beginning with our loved ones and with how our work can contribute to a better and more just society. I have only a few years left myself and what a shame to waste them on trivia and minor issues. I will miss Don Luis but I thank him for reminding me of the meaning of life.

For more information on Prof. Leal, see my book, "Luis Leal: An Auto/Biography" (Univ. of Texas Press, 2000).

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