

MY FRIEND BILL
A Midsummer Reflection on Friendship

My friend Bill Murray died last week. On Sunday, I attended Bill's wake and his funeral Mass on Monday. Bill was 89 when he died, a lifelong resident of Providence, Rhode Island, where I grew up and where my mom still lives. Up until the onset of an illness, Bill had been in relatively good health. The obituary that appeared in the Saturday edition of the Providence Journal depicted a man who had lived a full and good life. He served his country during World War II, including a period of time as a Prisoner of War. He was a family man, raising two children with his late wife that subsequently grew into an extended family that now includes grown grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He spent his working life with the railroad as a foreman and, importantly, devoted a significant amount of time to working with youth groups in Parish activities sponsored through the Catholic Youth Organization. The obituary clearly and accurately depicted Bill as being a mentor to many young athletes who passed through the gym and playing field used by St. Augustine's Parish for its sports activities.

This is how my life intersected with Bill's. In the fall of 1965, I entered college. I had been an athlete in high school, playing on the varsity basketball team as well as in various sandlot leagues. I came from a fairly prominent athletic family. My father was a well-known basketball coach and sports figure. I didn't have the skills to play collegiate sports, so I decided I would be a coach. Back then, there were no year-round AAU basketball teams, and in Rhode Island, which is heavily Catholic and based on a Catholic Parish system, CYO sports were really the big thing. So, at 18, I became a CYO coach, both in basketball and baseball. Although I coached a number of different age levels, my primary focus was on coaching at the grammar school level (up to grade 8). So, when I started coaching, most of my players were only 5 years younger than I. I was so young that the Parish assigned an adult mentor, sponsor or advisor to assist me. That was Bill Murray. That's how our relationship began.

I coached the St. Augustine's sports teams between 1965 and 1970. During that period, Bill served as the teams' adult advisor. We became close friends who turned a sleepy, suburban parish into an athletic powerhouse. We were very successful, winning numerous state championships and playing all over New England. And I don't know how to state this without bragging or coming across as somewhat egotistical, but when I ended that phase of my life in 1970, the Parish sponsored a well-attended testimonial dinner for me. I think my mom still has pictures of the event in one of her scrapbooks.

Bill and I were nearly inseparable during that period. I became close to his wife and his two children, who were only a couple of years younger than me. I spent a lot of time at his house. He was just a great guy who seemed to effortlessly move between the adult, nearly adult and adolescent world. We drank a lot of beer and ate a lot of his wife's lasagna as we discussed strategy and tactics and team play and scheduling, etc.

Through our efforts, the group of elders got a gym built in the school so we would no longer have to hold practices outside or at a local children's institution. A number of the young kids that we coached played ball in both high school and, in some cases, college. In fact, I still remember the night in 1970, after winning our final state basketball championship, when Bill and I drove around visiting each of our players' houses and celebrating with their parents. In retrospect, I think we both, on some levels, realized that we were celebrating not only that victory, but the end of an era.

Shortly after that, I left for the military. Graduate school followed the military, my life changed and I never coached again.

That all ended 42 years ago. In the intervening years, I could probably count the number of times on my hands that I saw Bill. We would occasionally speak over the phone. He would talk to me about his son and daughters and his grandchildren's successes and his life. We would reminisce about some of the teams. The phone calls were always somewhat short, always enjoyable. But that's really what they were; intermittent, brief contacts.

About a month ago, I learned that Bill was in hospice care at a nursing home, and asking for me. I was able to visit him twice and spend a few hours each time with him. During my first visit, he was awake and alert, lying in bed, and as I walked into the room, he looked up, a big smile crossed his face and he said,

"Jimmy Cuddy."

For the next couple of hours, we caught up on his family and reminisced. His body had betrayed him, he knew he had a very short time, and was semi-at peace with it. His body was failing him rapidly, but his mind was sharp as a tack. He had to remind me of the names of a couple of our key players and a couple of the key experiences we had during the successful five-year run. A couple of hours into the visit, one of his grown grandchildren arrived with her daughter, and I gradually excused myself, saying I would be back.

Rather than make that just an empty promise, and knowing there wasn't going to be a lot of time, I returned the following Saturday to visit. As I walked into his room the following Saturday, he was asleep in his chair. The effects of not eating for now more than a week were clearly reflected in how he looked. I sat in a chair and watched him sleep and, after a while, the noise in the facility startled him awake. He opened his eyes, looked at me and smiled and again said, "Jimmy. How long have you been here?" Our conversation took much the same path as my initial visit, although this time there was a bit more urgency to it. This time we talked more about his Army experiences, his experiences growing up. His kids and grandkids had brought him a bunch of articles and papers and pictures that related to that period in his life. He was still sharp, but obviously failing quickly. He seemed more at peace with it this time, saying to me,

"It's not going to be long now, Jimmy."

In one moment when the conversation stopped and we were both sitting there quietly, I looked at him and said,

"Willie, I love you."

He returned my gaze and said, "Jimmy, I love you too."

We sat there quietly for a few minutes before one of his more distant family members and wife showed up, one that I didn't remember, which led to a bit of an awkward moment, and led me to simply putting my hand on his leg and saying, "Willie, I'm so glad we were able to connect." He just smiled and, with that, I exited and let his nephew sit in the chair I had occupied across from him. The next day he fell into a coma and died a couple of days later.

During his wake and funeral, I obviously connected with a lot of folks that I had not seen in more than 40 years; some of my old ballplayers, some of my contemporaries who had also been influenced by Bill, and several family members of the ballplayers that Bill and I had coached. It all felt good. I was able to reflect on how important Bill's presence and his friendship were in my life at that time. I came to the realization that our friendship represented to me, in many ways, the path not taken. I almost became a teacher/coach. Instead, I chose a very different life. When I have looked back on that life choice and the decisions made subsequently, I have never regretted them, and while I may reflect on them, I almost never obsess on them.

I don't have a lot to offer around the meaning of friendship. I don't have any special insights. I don't have any words of wisdom, except to say that I was so thankful that, at the end of his life, Bill and I were able to reconnect and do so in a way where you acknowledge that time hasn't stood still, but, importantly, acknowledge that the same bonds that existed 45 years ago make their way into the present.

I just want to say this, to acknowledge Bill, to acknowledge his family, to acknowledge the importance of Bill in my life, and to simply say to anyone who reads this - please remember to cherish your friendships, especially and importantly, those that may rest dormant but are still an important part of you.

Jim Cuddy
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