

On An Early Tuesday Evening in May

Me and Hanrahan were gingerly descending the richly carpeted, yet formidable staircase leading to the Main Street ground entrance of Mechanics Hall in Worcester, after attending the Annual Meeting of the United Way of Central Mass. Jim was there to see his law partner, Mike Angelini, receive a distinguished award. I attended to recognize the support SMOC has received from the United Way over the years and to witness Mike's award.

After checking to see if our physical impediments were slowing anyone's smooth transit from the staircase, I remarked to Hanrahan, "You know, it's going to be 40 years soon. Hard to believe."

Hanrahan's quizzical look quickly faded, replaced by comprehension.

Years ago, early in our friendship, we discovered that late May 1975 carried a special significance for both of us. Jim's kid brother and me were involved in separate, horrific motorcycle accidents in different parts of Connecticut. I survived. Dennis did not.

Emerging into the bright early evening sunlight, we linger in front of the building for a few minutes. The past fades replaced by Jim's busting my chops about not using the adjacent Bowditch & Dewey parking lot.

"I called the attendant and told them you were coming."

"Ah, I came in thru 146 and parked on the other side of City Hall. I can get out of here quickly and not get lost. I'll talk with you tomorrow."

I proceed up Main Street, my thoughts return to Brian, his sudden death and his two kids.

When I reach the traffic light at Front Street and prepare to cross and cut across the Common Park/Plaza I sense someone looking at me. I half turn and sure enough find myself staring at a young, neatly groomed African American man wearing glasses.

"Hey, do I know you?"

"Yeah, I was just thinking the same thing. First I thought you were following me."

"You look really familiar. You're from Framingham."

"Yup," a smile starts to slide across my face. I still can't remember his name.

"The unemployment office?"

"Close."

"Oh, I know. SMOC. You run SMOC."

"You got it. I can't remember your first name."

"Mark." "Hey, I never got a chance to - (we shake hands) to thank you guys. You really helped me. I was in a really bad place. I was hanging out there every day."

"Were you at the shelter?"

"No, no - but I was in a real bad scene with my landlord. I'm trying to remember the guys I talked to a lot."

"Yeah, I used to talk with Moses a lot. And then there was this big, tall white guy, bushy hair, I can't think of his name. Also talked to another guy. He had a red face and not much hair on the top of his head. Yeah, they really helped me."

"So, Mark, how are you doing?"

"I'm doing great. I'm working for Fallon and, actually I just came from a meeting. They want me to be a mentor. I'm going to be training other people that are coming to work for us. It's a great job. I love it. I've got a great place to live. Honestly, things couldn't be better."

So, Mark and I talked for a few minutes about working in Worcester, his new place, etc. He asked me a couple of questions about our new building. His time with us had been spent at the old building. "It was so good that I got connected with you guys and I got to a different place in my life."

As we turned to walk away, I turned back, I looked at Mark and said, "You know, I'm so glad that I ran into you today. Thank you for recognizing me. I'd been thinking about someone who did not make it. Seeing you made my day."

I continue to my car and return to the ruminations. It basically boils down to meditating on a question. How could Brian do this to himself? How could he do it to his kids?

Yesterday morning, Brian, the star graduate of our Sage House program, never woke up. His two kids, 10 year old Raymond and 5 year old Chrystal, found him. He OD'd. Brian was a star. He went through the Sage House program. He got his kids back. He reunited with them. He got a job. He and the kids moved to an apartment. He was really active in the Sage House alumni group. He was around and usually in a real good mood. I would run into him when he came in to talk to the Housing Coordinators. He was the poster child for how this can all be done, how someone can move through addiction, gain sobriety, get their kids back, become a real father, have it together.

Relapse. Death. Everybody in his life simply sits there stunned.

Our folks were great. They did everything they possibly could, but it doesn't take away the sting of their loss. One of our Housing Coordinators who was close to Brian told me, "You know, he always said that he didn't want to put his kids through what he had gone through. He discovered his father dead of an overdose. He never wanted to put his kids through that. He never wanted to do that to his kids. That's why he was so proud of regaining custody, regaining sobriety, and putting his life together."

Poof - it's all gone. There's simply a big hole that can't be filled.

Interestingly, these ruminations start to be flooded by images of Mark at our old offices. He's hunched over a computer or walking in and out quietly, silently nodding to me as I walk down the hall, and of course, sitting with Moses in his office.

That's the one that gets to me, of course. It hits me when I reach the car. I sit in the driver's seat, put my head down and let the wave of grief wash over me.

When the universe nudges me, I know what to do. Most of the time I welcome it.

First, I ran into Mark the next afternoon. "Hey, do you remember a guy who used to come to the Career Center last year, hung around for a while, used to sit at one of the computers?" He didn't remember your name, but remembered your red face and that you didn't have much hair." We talk a little bit more. "He really wanted me to thank you. He pulled his life together . . ."

Next, I see Matt. "Hey, you know who I ran into yesterday? He couldn't remember your name, but he remembered what you look like. He really wanted to thank you." Matt proceeds to tell me - "Oh, I've got a really funny story about how his landlord was jammin' him up and we got him out of the scene."

Finally, at the end of the day, I stopped by to see Tania. "Hey, something really interesting happened to me yesterday and I want to share it with you."

Early on in my journey along the river of time, I got asked, sort of confronted, with this question. "Why did you go into that field (social work)? I thought you were going to be a coach and a teacher." The tone was perplexed, not hostile, perhaps a perplexed curiosity. We were standing on a little dock, newly constructed of green wood and twine, just a temporary structure. My response, "I don't know, I always wanted to work with kids and this seemed to be a good way to do it." The dock was actually a dinner attended by a few hundred people that this fellow had helped put together to honor me for my work coaching various basketball and sports teams. I was 22 years old.

The only person who has asked that question in a long time is me. I still don't have a better answer. I don't think I ever will. I'm not sure it even matters much.

So, let me end this with a wish. First, for Mark, and then for Raymond and Chrystal. I want to run into Mark again, maybe in

six months, maybe in a year, maybe in two years, but definitely some time before my journey of doing these kinds of things ends. I hope to hear him tell me about his promotion. I hope to hear him talk to me about his significant relationships. I hope we can share a laugh in addition to whatever thanks he wants to give me, a laugh because the time that he spent with us appears as a speck in his rear view mirror due to the distance he has traveled.

And for Raymond and Chrystal, it's a little bit more complicated. Certainly, one of the biggest wishes is for them not to shoot for the trifecta, not to repeat history, not to fall into the traps of fatalism or mechanistic determinism where free will doesn't exist in their life paths. In order to get there, I know they will need someone to love them, someone to hug them, someone to pat them on the back. They need teachers to care about them and to stimulate them. And they need a significant supporting cast of others around them so they emerge into adulthood in a different place, not fated to be struck by the DNA curse that seemed to befall the two generations that preceded them. I wish that one of those people will teach them the beauty of teamwork, in whatever manifestation it occurs. It would have special meaning to them, if they learn the beauty of the give and go, the sound of the ball swishing through the net, and the grace of the back-door cut, followed by the sound of a voice saying "What a great play," accompanied by a pat on the back.

Somebody once told me that if you wish hard enough for something, it will come true.

Jim Cuddy
July, 2015

Note: I have changed the names of Brian, Mark, Raymond and Chrystal.