

Requiem for Thomas Wood

b.3/10/65 d.6/27/19

"Sometimes I feel, sometimes I feel
Like I been tied to the whipping post
Tied to the whipping post, tied to the whipping post
Good Lord, I feel like I'm dyin'"

- Allman Brothers Band. Whipping Post

The last time I saw Tom Wood alive the scene played out this way.

I was heading down Bishop Street when I spotted Tom on the side of the road across from the MWRTA's headquarters.

I'm thinking maybe he was lookin' for a lift to cover the last 700 yards from the Turning Point to the mother ship.

First I groaned, then hesitated, yes hesitated before pulling over to the side of the road and rolling the passenger side window. "Tom, hey Tom, do you want a ride, are you OK?"

Tom's eyes are cloudy and unfocused, they appear to be spinning in his head.

"You may need to go to the hospital. Come on, let's go see your caseworker."

No way, Tom dismisses me.

His eyes focus for a moment. "I'm OK. I'll walk."

As I pull away, the twin throbbing guitars of Duane Allman and Dickey Betts accompanied by the futile existential wail of sorrow by Gregg Allman starts playing between my ears.

The Live at the Fillmore version. It'll be a while before it recedes.

I learn, when Tom is lying in a hospital bed with the electrical activity in his brain reduced to a mere flicker, that Tom was a heavy metal aficionado. One of our staff convinced the nurses to switch the music from AOR to Metallica.

Somehow I think that Tom would regard Butch, Berry, Dickey, Duane, Gregg and Jaimoe the older brothers of his screaming heroes.

"But nothing seemed to change, the bad times stayed the same.
And I can't run."

Tom had one of the worst cases of the 'disease' I've ever seen in my three and one half decades at SMOC. My usual similes: "it's like he's got a bad cold," "he's got the flu," or "he's got a persistent case of pneumonia" simply don't cut it. My usual attempt to describe someone who's really sick, "it's like a raging forest fire that can't be extinguished or even contained", seems inadequate.

I retreat to a seminal image from our failed and flawed attempt to intervene in the Vietnamese Civil War. The Buddhist monk, sitting lotus-like, immolating himself in the Town Square.

That's Tom on fire, standing in front of our Bishop Street entrance. That's Tom caught in an inferno while sitting on the bench outside of Tesoro's Market on Hollis Street.

**This has been a day to die for
Now the day is almost done
Up above, a quiet seabird
Turns to face the setting sun
Now the evening dove is calling
And all the hills are burning red
And before the night comes falling
Clouds are lined with golden thread**

The disease of addiction killed Tom Wood, now I envision him sitting on a bench in the Bardo, standing in the queue, for his ticket to Purgatory or returned to Nature, perhaps as a flowering citrus tree in a perpetually warm climate.

I'm trying to cover several major belief systems in my efforts to pay homage to Tom.

**We watched the fires together
Shared our quarters for a while
Walked the dusty roads together
Came so many miles**

Here's the thing, while I may have groaned and hesitated . . . our staff never did. Not once. Every time I watched them, I witnessed caring, affirmation and respect.

Tom was part of our system of care for a long while. He hung out a lot with us. Our staff's relationship to him and the way they related to Tom never varied when he was hanging out, whether he was clear-eyed and engaging or whether he was in need of medical intervention. There was never a hesitation. They knew their role was to function as Tom's community and as Tom's family.

They succeeded in humanizing a man who could easily have been relegated to the status of a cautionary tale.

**This has been a day to die on
Now the day is almost done
Here the pipes will lay beside me
Silent with the battle drum
If friends in time be severed
Someday here we will meet again
I'll return to leave you never
Be a piper to the end**

This is the image of Tom that resonates with me and I want to close with. Marching in formation, decked out in a kilt, his

hair tucked neatly inside his tam o'shanter, his clear eyes focused on the pipes.

A proud member of the human race.

NOTES:

- Duane, Gregg, et al. - the original Allman Brothers lineup
- MWRTA - Metro West Regional Transit Authority
- AOR - Album Oriented Rock
- Piper to the End - Mark Knopfler