

Eulogy For James Spencer Smith III

My brother-in-law, Jimmy, died yesterday on Christmas Day at age forty five. The legal cause of death reads "self-inflicted gunshot wound." It should have read "died after a lengthy illness." My wife's brother suffered from a disease called manic depression. He suffered from it for all of the thirteen years that I knew him, and for many years before that. Suffered is indeed the applicable word, for his life had long periods of torture interspersed with brief moments of peace and happiness.

For some reason, those peaceful times come first to mind when I think of him, as I do now, flying to his funeral. Jimmy was a strong, handsome, athletic man of superior intellect and great humor. He reminded me of Mickey Mantle. Jimmy had that innocent country boy smile pictured on Mantle's baseball cards in my youth. But even more, Jimmy's voice was Mantle's voice. I was unaware of that until a couple of years ago while watching a program about the Yankees. There was Jimmy's voice answering the questions directed to Mickey Mantle. Jimmy was surprised but pleased with the comparison. For like most boys of our generation, he grew up wanting to be like Mickey Mantle.

The poet John Donne wrote long ago that "No man is an island entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Manic depression makes islands of people, makes them unapproachable except for moments of high tide. The illness caused Jimmy's life to have streaks of violence and anti-social behavior giving an appearance that some evil puppeteer controlled him. Those times caused great pain to those that loved him most. The disease also made him an emotional dependent on his family. Enthusiasm and determination to better himself always fell prey to the reappearance of the puppeteer that was his illness.

We are taught from our earliest days that we have free will, the right to direct our lives for good or evil, as we choose. I know that Jimmy didn't have that right, that we assume is issued by our creator complimentary with life. Because of that, I find it easy to forgive him for the many moments of fear and tension that his disease brought to my family's life. I find it easy to forgive the act which caused his death.

It is said that people who take their own lives create anger and resentment among their survivors because the act is viewed as such a selfish undertaking. That feeling is absent in our family. With the impaired limited ability to reason that Jimmy possessed, he must have viewed his choice as an act of love toward us. I am sure of that. He was unable to suffer his pain any longer, but he also appreciated the consequences of that pain on those he loved. This he saw as the only way to stop hurting us as well as himself.

"Every man's death diminishes me," Donne's poem continues, in one of the most concise statements of Christian community. We are all diminished by Jimmy's death, but not his life. A loving God knows far better than we what purpose his agony served. But his good times could light up a room, and I'll remember those best. Godspeed, my friend, may you rest in peace at last.