

Tribute to Jim Steyer... My Lifelong Friend

Jim Steyer, and my wife, Ruth, are the two best people I have ever known. I have known both for the same amount time (since early elementary school) and they are the two people who also know the most about me. This tribute to Jim is about what a great friend Jim has been and continues to be.

The Elementary School Years

Francis James “Jim” Steyer moved into the Arcadia Local School district (Hereafter known as The Academy at Arcadia, or The Academy) in the middle 1940’s while we were both in elementary school. His parents had purchased a farm between Arcadia and Fostoria (Ohio) and Jim joined our small class of twenty or so pupils. He fit right in and was one of our most popular classmates. We played sports together, but didn’t do much socializing after school as he lived five miles east of The Academy and I lived five miles west. Both of us were farm boys who had many chores to do both before and after school.

I had an older sister at home and a married sister who lived nearby, and Jim had what was to become ten brothers and sisters (Most of whom subsequently graduated from college). When we entered high school, we both became very active in school activities...band (Jim played the trumpet and I played the clarinet), orchestra, choir, student council, class officers, Future Farmers of America (FFA) (we both became State Farmers), football, basketball and

baseball. During the fall of our senior year, Jim's father gave us each an application blank for the Naval Reserve Officer Training Course (NROTC) he had picked up at the post office. We both applied and were accepted for the program at The Ohio State University program. Up to that point, no one had ever talked to either of us about college and I had only the faintest dream of attending college. My only plan before the NROTC opportunity was to go to Findlay College and attempt to play football, basketball and baseball....and I doubt Jim's plans were much more concrete than mine.

The College Years

Several weeks before we were to start college, Jim and I went to Columbus and found a place to stay. It was an attic room at 72 West Woodruff Avenue, at the end of College Avenue, right across the street from campus and only one block from the NROTC Armory where we were to have daily classes. Jim and I lived there for four years...in that third floor room barely big enough for two beds and two desks, heated by a gas stove with no pilot light and hotter than one might imagine in the early fall and late spring.

The rent was \$40 per quarter, a price we could afford. The only time my mother ever visited me was the day Jim and I moved into the room our freshman year...and, after seeing the room, she returned to the car and cried. My father never saw the room and that was my mother's only visit. Jim's folks never visited either. Mrs. Malone was the owner and treated us like small children. She evicted us during the last quarter of our senior year for stealing meat from her freezer! We told

her we were innocent and didn't rat on her son who constantly stole from her. (I returned to graduate school after the Navy and knocked on her door and asked if she would rent me a room for the summer...she was glad to see me and apologized for kicking Jim and me out as she had found out the truth. I stayed with her three summers, but was able to afford a single second floor room).

Jim and I never had an argument while living together those four years, nor have we ever had one. We went home every two weeks, using Jim's green two-door Chevrolet (I didn't have a car). When he would drop me off on Friday evenings, my mother would have our dinner waiting for us. It was usually fish, or macaroni and cheese, for Jim was a Catholic and observed meatless Fridays. My father hated fish, but never said a disparaging word about the meals because he knew it was important to Jim.

On Sunday evening, my father would often put gasoline in Jim's car and my mother always gave us a large bag of food for the coming weeks...food that would not spoil as we did not have a refrigerator. Jim and I had a goal to eat on \$2.00/day and all the extra peanut butter and apples and pie and cake helped us achieve that goal for four years. The NROTC Scholarship paid for all of our books and fees and we were given \$50.00 a month to help with expenses. Both Jim and I finished college with no debt because of the Navy and the money we had saved from selling our FFA projects (cows and pigs and grain). Jim's frugal nature was apparent daily as he entered every penny he had spent that day in a little book before he went to bed...a practice he has

continued his entire life he told me recently. I had saved \$900 prior to entering college and the final dollars were expended the last week of my senior year! It is hard to believe, but probably one of the reasons we were able to be so frugal was that neither of us drank alcoholic beverages...you could have contained all of the beer, wine and mixed drinks we consumed in college in a gallon jug.

Jim and I joined a fraternity our freshman year but soon realized that we had neither the time nor money to continue fraternity life. The college years were maturing years for both of us, but not really fun-fun years as we had to average nearly twenty credit hours per quarter to complete our required courses and the extra required Navy courses (the Navy required courses totaled 48 credits) each term. I think these difficult years really prepared us for "the real world." Some of the important learning experiences during college for each of us were the midshipman cruises we took to Scotland, England, Ireland, Spain, France, Cuba...and the Marine training in Little Creek, VA and Aviation training in Corpus Christi, TX.

I learned that I could always count on Jim to do what he said he would do. He was always polite, honest, industrious, fair and fun. His faith was very important to him and I never knew him to break one of the Ten Commandments during college or during his entire life. The only time he was even near losing his temper with me was the time I turned a cold shower on him while he was taking a hot bath. He only said, with a note of resignation, "I thought you might be thinking of

doing that.” We never spoke of that episode once until in later years.

As college was ending and we were about to enter the Navy as Officers in the Naval Flight program, we decided we would be each other’s best man as he was marrying Marilyn and I was marrying Ruth. When Jim asked his elderly priest in Fostoria if he could be my best man and I could be his, he was told that the church would not approve of this arrangement.

When Jim mentioned the denial of his wishes to a campus priest, the campus priest said he would approve such an arrangement. Jim explained to me that although he did not agree with his parish priest’s decision, he would not go against the decision he had been originally given. This is the kind of man was then and is now...he would not go around you, over your head or behind your back to obtain the decision or outcome that best suited him. This is one of the reason he was such a successful businessman and parent.

The Navy Years

Jim and I were newlyweds when we started Flight School in Pensacola, FL. We had only finished four months of training when the Navy informed us that if we did not agree to extend our contracts for three more years, we would be sent back to the fleet as line officers. After much discussion, eleven of thirteen OSU officers decided not to extend. Jim was sent to the Atlantic Fleet and I was sent to the Pacific Fleet. This was the first time Jim and I had been separated for nearly

fifteen years, but we maintained contact through the mail and infrequent telephone calls. Upon getting out of the Navy, Jim called to tell me that we could join the Naval Reserves and make \$50 for each meeting we attended. Since I was making \$4300/year as a teacher, this seemed like a real windfall and I signed up.

Both Jim and I continued in the Naval Reserves, retiring as senior officers. (Jim and I even took two week Naval Reserve duties together when our civilian careers permitted...one to New York City, one to Norfolk, another to the Bureau of Naval Personnel, one to Little Creek, VA and one to Annapolis, MD.) Jim still puts on his dress whites and serves as the honored Marshall of his community's Memorial Day Parade.

Our Later Years

During our child raising and early professional years (Jim, an owner of as many as three large grocery stores, and me in psychology), we only saw each other several times a year...but still kept in contact by letters and telephone calls. Just as I was about to retire in 1996, Jim mentioned during one of our calls that he had been diagnosed with prostate cancer and would be undergoing treatments.

He didn't seem alarmed, but that was Jim, always cool and collected under pressure. The aggressive treatments didn't stop the cancer and it spread to his bladder. Jim was undeterred, even when a doctor told him to consider hospice about five years ago (2006). Jim, the eternal optimist, was

apparently not blessed by God's Prime Minister of GENEs, as he over the past fifteen years has been hit by diabetes, kidney stones, neuropathy of his feet and hands, heart issues (eight heart stents), a pacemaker and finally prostate, bladder and lung cancer. At the same time Jim was fighting his health battles, Ruth's sister, Mary, was fighting her own cancer battles and the devastating effects of many years of psychotropic drugs to fight off depression, and was placed in a nursing home near where Jim lives. Since Ruth visited her sister several times a month, I tagged along and visited Jim.

This practice went on for many years and after Mary's death several years ago, we have continued our visits, and weekly, sometimes daily phone calls. The past five years, we have ended every call by each of us saying, "I love you."

Jim has endured many medical procedures during the last few years...three courses of chemotherapy (nine treatments each time), resulting in loss of hair and grave sickness. He has had forty hyperbaric chamber treatments for a diabetic wound that wouldn't heal on his foot.

He has suffered repeated flare-ups of cancer and treatment related issues resulting in hospitalization. He even suffered major burns to his arm because of an infiltration of the strong chemo medicines...burns so great that the amputation of his arm was seriously considered. But Jim is rarely down and always positive. Several years ago when we were both in Florida on extended winter vacations with our wives, Jim got so sick that Marilyn called us and it took Marilyn, Ruth and me to get him into the car to go to the Navy Hospital. He was in great pain and a delirious. When he was finally able to

leave the hospital, I said, "You really had a tough time." Jim said, "So they say, but it was really not that bad." I said, "You were really out of it." Jim said, "Oh, were you there?" When I told him that Marilyn, Ruth and I had been there most of the time, he said, "I guess I was sicker than I thought I was." This was about as close to Jim gets to saying he was, or has ever been sick. He just didn't, and doesn't, complain about his health issues.

During this period, I often told my friends who did not know Jim, that if Jim and I were to stand up before a crowd and those folks were to select the person undergoing all of these medical issues, the strangers would select me rather than Jim as he nearly always looked good during these times...black hair, tall, fit, smiling...his positive attitude always shining through.

Jim isn't perfect! When we went to FFA camp as freshmen in high school, we had to pass a swimming test to be able to go beyond "the ropes" in lake. The test involved swimming to a dock fifty yards away, treading water for five minutes, and swimming back to shore. Those who could pass the test were awarded "Trout" badges to wear on their swimming trunks and those not passing had to wear a "Turtle" badge. Jim couldn't swim any better than most of us farm boys, but he had the God given ability to float...and I mean float!

Jim could float vertically in the water, somewhat like a spar buoy. He looked like a pencil floating upright in the water. A big breath and his shoulders would show...when he would let his breath out and he would sink down to his mouth. Jim

decided to take the test, and passed, by floating out to the dock using a dog paddle, doing a five minute spar buoy imitation, and floating back to shore. He not only won a "Trout" badge, but bought extra copies and wore them on his Jock Strap for his entire high school career. I haven't checked with Marilyn, but I imagine he still wears Trout badges on his pajamas and underwear. Talk about a "superiority complex!" We took more swimming classes in college and both of us passed our half mile swimming test in flight school (I still think he floated for most of it!).

Jim and I have had the kind of friendship than many can only hope for in their lives. Knowing someone always "has your back" is comforting and rare. Jim and I were/are just two farm kids who tried to live a life that would make our parents proud. Just last week, Jim and I were talking about our parents and we both felt we had never disappointed them. We both agreed we had never lied to our parents (although we didn't tell them everything we might have).

We talk on and on...and our conversations are like...Is there really an afterlife? Will we once again see friends and family who have preceded us in this life? Will the Browns ever win a championship? Why secrets of the universe aren't explained in the Bible? Why Marilyn won't agree to buy a dog. Why Ruth doesn't like Conan O'Brien. Jim and I have resolved many of life's biggest issues (I still can't figure out the dog thing) and still have a few to work on in the coming months and years. We probably won't get them all solved...we may not even address a few of them. The important thing has been/is the process...two friends trying

to figure out what life is all about. We always seem to come to the same conclusion. It is all about love...love of our families and friends, love of our fellow man, love of nature...just love! When it is all said and done...it won't be about how much we have accumulated but how much love we have given away...for love is about the only thing that grows when you give it away.

I can imagine that when both Jim and I are no longer on this earth, I will be able to see Jim, from my place in purgatory (or worse), standing in Heaven, right behind St. Peter, making sure Marilyn and his family are alright, encouraging Job and Paul and John to be more positive, making entries into his Daily Financial Log and wearing another of those damn Trout badges on his halo. I have never known a better friend...or man.

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