

Jim and Job

Karen Dabaghian

On Friday afternoon I packed a tote with my laptop, a few favorite books and my iPod, and drove 20 minutes down to San Jose to be with my friend, Jim.

Jim is one of those men who, try as you might, you just can't take your eyes off of. I'm pretty sure it's OK with his wife, Bunnie, if I say that. She'll roll her eyes at me and shake her head and pretend she doesn't really know what I'm talking about, but deep down she's conceding my point. It's not just that he's handsome, although he is. It's that he glows. He has eyes that see right through you, every facade you construct, and yet he still manages to communicate in a mere glance that he thinks you are A-OK as far as he's concerned. His eyes also suggest something slightly disconcerting, namely that he knows something the rest of us don't, and more to the point, whatever it is ... it is GOOD. Jim is ever-so-slightly sacrilegious, like me, and I will go to my grave believing that Jesus was this way too when he walked among us, to the horror of the well-heeled religious crowd.

Jim is, as Bunnie calls him, a "mortuary man." Jim's work – far more than a job – is to help people bury their loved ones. Jim is the first person you meet in that unutterable moment when you arrive at the graveyard you've chosen as the place you are going to lay your spouse or parent or God-forbid your baby in the cold, unfeeling ground. Jim is the man whose eyes you first look into, the man who meets your bloodshot, searching gaze with a fearless compassion that flows right from the throne of God Himself. Many times he's been the first place a person has started down the long road toward making peace with a senseless loss, a wracking grief. He is the man who takes your hand and walks every aching step with you.

The irony of this is not lost on me as I drive to Jim's house, climb the stairs of the porch and quietly knock at the front door, despite the polite request posted at eye-level that explains "Jim is not receiving visitors at this time," followed by instructions for where friends can leave the meals they bring every day to support Jim, Bunnie and their children.

Jim is dying.

It's not a kind death. He is not growing old and slowly slipping away, gently going into that good night that Dylan Thomas railed against so hauntingly. This dying is ugly. It is fast. It is beyond horrible. ALS. Rapid onset Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis has left my strapping, 59 year-old friend completely immobilized from the neck down, struggling to pull every breath through a ventilator, fully able to feel – but not move -- his aching legs, his edematous hands. He can't scratch where it itches, he can't feed himself, he can't control his bowels. He can't hold his wife in his arms or wipe his teenage daughter's tears from her face. He can't lay a hand on the strong, sure shoulders of his grown sons to assure them he's standing by their side through this terrible ordeal.

But he can talk.

This is a miracle of sorts, because for presentations of ALS like the one Jim has, there is a better-than-average chance that the paralysis will affect vocal chords and throat muscles to the point that the person can neither swallow nor talk. In an extreme act of mercy for Jim and blessing for the rest of us, God saw to it that Jim retained his ability to speak. It is decidedly more difficult because he needs a ventilator to push air into his lungs so he can force it across his vocal chords to make sound. So conversing with Jim takes on a unique rhythm – ventilator, then big breath in, a quick sentence or two, then pause to let the ventilator do its work once more. It is a conversation in staccato that leaves me with the distinct feeling of sharing stolen words.

There are further complications too. The ventilator requires a mask that covers Jim's nose and mouth, making it very hard to hear his words – weak as they are – through the plastic of the mask and over the whirling noise of the ventilator. To hear, I have to lean close, get my face down nearly to his. We are eye to eye in a way we never have been, less than 12 inches apart, and today, as I visit, we sit like this for nearly 3 hours. My entire right side has gone to sleep after an hour in this posture, and I couldn't care less.

When I first arrived Bunnie gave me strict orders not to let Jim talk too much because it wears him out and he needs to rest. This is akin to telling me to make sure the sun doesn't rise; ALS or not, there is no way I am the boss of Jim and we both know it. I related Bunnie's moratorium on speech to Jim, and he actually laughs and then, with what little motion he has in his neck and head, gestures for me to lean close. "Karen," he says, "This might be our last time together and there are stories I want to tell you."

For the next three hours, huddled together as if weathering a storm, we talked and talked and talked. We swapped stories of how each of us discovered the fathomless love God has for us. We both of us confessed our sins, one to the other through sorrowful tears and downcast eyes, only to receive grace and compassion in return, and in that way we were Jesus to each other. We told harrowing stories of youthful indiscretions and we laughed to the point of tears. Almost a year later it still makes me laugh – and cry too, to be honest – to think of Jim, flat on his back, in a living hell that few of us will ever know, yet with tears streaming from his laughing, mischievous eyes, fogging up his ventilator with the exertion of it all.

We talked about death and for Jim, its imminence and the odd reality that since he knows it is coming soon, he gets the dubious privilege of deciding how he will journey, emotionally and spiritually, into Hamlet's "undiscovered country." As if to cement his resolve, Jim related to me how in his work at the Alta Vista Cemetery in Los Altos, he loved to share his favorite psalm, Psalm 116, with the grieving people who found their way to him. "It is my life psalm," he said. "I'm living the final verses now. 'I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of His people.' God help me, I will die trusting God and proclaiming His faithfulness." A man among men is my friend Jim.

When it was time for me to go, when Jim grew too tired to talk and I was convinced neither of us had any words or tears left, we said our goodbyes. I barely made it to my car before a tidal wave of emotion swept over me, knocking me down and pulling me relentlessly beneath its undertow. I rested my forehead on my steering wheel and wept – wracking, ugly sobs, the kind that start in the pit of your stomach and send an avalanche of ache through your whole body. The kind of grief that arrives first as a scream that won't come out, can't be sounded, as if pain was less an emotion than a unstoppable, invisible force splitting you wide open, rending body from soul, robbing you of thought or perception.

I sat like that for an eternity, allowing the pain to run its course. There was no sense to be made of this horrible dying. There was no explanation, no answer to the question "why?" There never is, is there? My old friend Job teaches us this hallowed truth as he sits there, howling in agony among the ashes and fighting with everything he's got to remain faithful to the God who staunchly refuses to be reduced to an easily-manipulated, "do good to get good" deity.

We know God never answers the "why" question, but we miss the fact that neither does God chastise Job for asking – and asking with all the vitriol and bitterness and frustration and doubt that has welled up in his soul since the first servant arrived with the grimmeest of news. The very fact that God engages Job directly, man to man if you will, not in spite of but *because* of Job's anguished haranguing, tells us something important about how to suffer and how to engage YHWH in our grief.

In the end, God does answer the two questions Job is really asking, the two questions I have asked in the moments of my deepest despair, the two questions Jim asked day after day lying in paralysis:

Who are You, YHWH?

Who am I?

For me, Job is less about finding some sort of temporal meaning in suffering and more about discovering what our real voice sounds like, what our real face looks like, when you strip both of the luxury of affluence and the illusion of control. When, *if*, we ever reach the point that we have willingly laid ourselves completely bare before God, then and there we are ready, finally, to discover who God actually is -- not the God we've made in our own image but the God who made us in his. To my dying day, I will believe that this is why Job puts his hand over his mouth, not in an effort to hold his tongue to prevent any more self-pitying speech, but because speech had become impossible, pointless in the light of God's full revelation. I picture it as a gesture of awe and surprise and joyful captivation, not unlike the moment my daughter first saw the ocean and all she could do was stare, mouth agape, eyes wide as dinner plates.

Jim understood this and tried to explain it to me in halting, stumbling speech. "There is a profound sense," he said, "in which I'm grateful for ALS. I hate it, don't get me wrong. But without ALS I would have missed so much, so much about God, about myself if I hadn't ever had this disease. I would have missed the most important thing."

The most important thing. I wondered for days what he meant by that, and I think I finally figured it out. If you recall, in the epilogue of the Book of Job, we hear that Job gets his life back; his fortunes are restored, his wealth revitalized and his house once again resonates with the raucous laughter of children. We are tempted to overlook the one searing detail of the denouement: these are not the same children that died. It isn't a happy ending, not really.

Job spent the rest of his life gratefully loving his new family and grieving the precious children he buried, grieving the dreams he had for himself and for them that died that dreadful day. I don't think Job ever fully recovered-- either the loss of his children or of all he thought he knew about God. Would you? Would the arrival of a new baby erase from memory the pain of burying her older brother? Would a new marriage after years of widowhood wipe clean the slate from memories of the soul-mate you lost a lifetime before? Do you ever wish for a split second you could go back to those early days when you first placed your faith in Jesus, when it was all so straightforward and obvious and simple, before the doubts set in, before God disappointed you or disappeared altogether?

The most important thing then -- what Jim figured out in the closing months of his life, what I believe Job figured out too as he vomited out all the fear and anger and confusion festering in his guts to God -- is how to live broken. How to truly stop performing for God in an effort to deserve God's love. And just as important, how to stop performing for ourselves and each other in a desperate effort to buy God's favor with our obedience and thus guarantee safe, more or less pain-free passage through our lives. They are the two great reversals of our Christian faith: that God insists we offer him not our competence but our brokenness, and that there are no guarantees in exchange for good behavior. What we are offered instead, *if we will take it*, is unencumbered friendship with God. The most important thing.

Later that evening, after the girls were tucked in to bed and soundly sleeping, I went back in my memory to the hours I had spent earlier that day with Jim, and a picture came to my imagination of a day in the future, in what N.T. Wright likes to call "the life after life after death." In my imagination, Jim and I were dancing -- a whirling, foot-stomping kind of dance, the kind that when you see it, makes you wonder if the dancers have ever known a day of sorrow in their lives.

In that moment I felt a tug at my spirit, heard His voice so very, very softly say to me, “Build Me an alter with the words I will give you. Mark the moment and make it sacred.”

I grabbed a notebook and a pen and wrote my very first Psalm poem, from Psalm 116 – Jim’s favorite, life-capturing poem – which I titled “Under A Torremolinos Sky”, in reference to the place where Jim met Jesus for the very first time.

Under A Torremolinos Sky (Psalm 116)¹³⁰

For Jim

The first thing I notice is
not the bed, oddly angled as all hospital beds are
nor the pillowcase, covered in love notes.
Not the table filled with pill bottles
nor the sterile tools of a dozen indignities.

I’ll notice these things later, on my way out perhaps.
But first, my wide-angle lens pulls narrow,
as eyes meet eyes and I am seen.
How is it, before a word is spoken,
you make me know I am known and welcome?

*What can I give back to God
for the blessings he’s poured out on me?
I’ll lift high the cup of salvation – a toast to God!*

You smile behind the plastic that keeps you alive,
and as I rest my hand on your chest
we conspire together to break the rules.
The rhythm of your labored breathing will
decide our seconds, our minutes, our hours.

Tears to laughter and back again
always in that order and rightly so.
We bask under a Torremolinos sky
and hear the tongues of angels sing of sins
forgiven long before the world was made.

*I’ll pray in the name of God;
I’ll complete what I promised God I’d do,
and I’ll do it together with his people.*

¹³⁰ The italicized portions are excerpts from Eugene Peterson’s translation in *The Message* of Psalm 116.

Talk turns to motorcycles and mortuaries,
to scotch and sons who wear their father's charm
like a crown, daughters who quicken the pulse
with just a glance. Time flies and neither of us
has time to waste.

I'll make a great looking corpse, you say
because we of all people must speak of these things,
because we of all people refuse to pretend.
This doesn't bring tears – not yet. Instead a giggle,
a shared secret that life is and is not in the body.

*Soul, you've been rescued from death;
Eye, you've been rescued from tears;
And you, Foot, were kept from stumbling.*

Your chest still rises and falls but you grow weary,
my hand tells me so. It's too soon to ever say goodbye.
When it's my turn, brother, I will find you
where the streets shimmer and tears herald only joy
where we wear our true names and our true faces.

Promise me, there, the dance we never had.

*When they arrive at the gates of death,
God welcomes those who love him.
Oh, God, here I am, your servant,
your faithful servant: set me free for your service!
I'm ready to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice
and pray in the name of God.
I'll complete what I promised God I'd do,
and I'll do it in company with his people,
In the place of worship, in God's house,
in Jerusalem, God's city.*

I wept through my final exam.