

San Francisco - Jim's Story

Jim was a man of the cloth.

I met Jim at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

I was in "Baghdad by the Bay" for the last two days of a conference on HIV. It was a very technical medical conference, so I passed on the first two days.

I read about medical advances, but I don't pretend to have a quiver full of jargon and expertise.

The third day was focused on the care of people fighting for their lives. I knew a couple of people who were going to present, so I thought it worthwhile to pay the discounted price and join the conference.

The fourth day was split between service at Grace Cathedral and pull-out groups exchanging papers or whatever they did at the mini-conferences.

I had not attended a service at Grace Cathedral since the days long ago when I lived in the city. I opted to head up the hill and join the service.

Grace Cathedral has quite the history. The church was begun during the gold rush in the late 1840s. Over time it grew until its destruction during the 1906 earthquake and fire that ravaged the City.

City elder Crocker gave his devastated property to the church for its reconstruction.

Grace Cathedral is gothic, matching the moods of various events that have taken place in and out of the church.

Since 1994, when the Peace Walk was established on a medieval labyrinth, many have trekked to the church to partake in a meditation. We, the conference attendees were invited to listen to a talk in the AIDS Chapel, partially designed by Keith Haring, who died of AIDS in 1990 and take a walk on one of two labyrinths.

Grace Cathedral drags up old memories. When I was in secondary school, I casually knew Jim Pike. Jim was the son of the well-known and controversial Bishop James Pike, the Bishop of the California diocese. The Bishop used his pulpit to support the ordination of women, racial desegregation, and the acceptance of LGBT people within all the churches. He was outspoken about "matters of faith," which brought him many headaches over the years.

I don't recall paying any attention to any of this though I remember Martin Luther King speaking at the Cathedral in 1965, even though I wasn't living in the city anymore.

Jim Pike, the Bishops son, killed himself in February 1966 in a hotel in New York.

It was big news.

The conclusion of it all was that he might have been coaxed towards such a decision by his drug use.

Later, the Bishop began to believe he was getting messages from young Jim from the beyond. I recall the sadness and the ridicule that surrounded him as he searched for answers.

Within three years, the Bishop lay dead in the Judean desert. He and his wife were on a trek to prove the historical reality of Jesus.

When I visited the church, I was reminded of all of the crazy antics we used to pull on the streets of San Francisco.

I thought about all the people who were no longer around to laugh at our capers.

I thought a lot about that red head that had dodged my amorous pursuits.

I sat for a while on the steps outside the church, recalling how my brother and I, in the early '80s, would breakfast on 24th Street in Noe Valley on Saturday mornings. We'd walk down Castro Street to 24th in pursuit of the perfect spot for a cup and some pastry.

Our secondary destination was Star Magic, aka Cosmic Wizard. A store full of galactic wonder. We would always walk 24th, enjoying all the street vendors offering everything under the sun. Without fail, we would return to my brother's place with a pound of pistachio nuts we had bought from a crazy Persian street vendor.

I distinctly remember seeing people suffering from AIDS though I don't think we recognized precisely what we saw at the time. (The "sickness" was initially referred to as GRID: Gay – Related Immune Deficiency before being called ARC: AIDS – Related Complex. Now known as AIDS.)

We knew about the "epidemic" and how Castro Street was at the epicenter. What we saw were people suffering from Cachexia, the wasting syndrome.

People so weakened they were in wheelchairs or escorted by friends holding them up as they shuffled down the street. I remember the discoloration on their skin. What I remember most was their sunken eyes. Eyes of desperation, sadness, and despair at what had dropped out of nowhere into their lives. Those were the beginning years.

I left my memories on the steps.

The service in the chapel was very moving. Part of the "original" quilt was on display, as were selected photographs. The preacher, Jim, did a wonderful job reminding everyone that we are on this voyage together and should not turn away from those most in need. While he was speaking, I kept thinking he looked like a combination of Ichabod Crane and Abraham Lincoln. Tall and gangly, with lots of presence. I laughed to myself at the image, as he didn't actually look like either of them.

Who knows how that came to mind? He looked to be in his seventies though I know I am terrible at guessing ages.

After the service, everyone headed to the labyrinth.

Walking the labyrinth was, well, walking the labyrinth. I'd walked the original in Chartres Cathedral one winter morning when I escaped a boring meeting in Paris. When I walked that labyrinth, I was the only one in that amazing place.

In Grace Cathedral, we were so close to each other we touched as we made the serpentine turns.

I broke off from the group as soon as I could make a graceful exit. I sat down in one of the pews to grab more personal quiet time.

Jim slipped in the pew next to me, introducing himself to me as he slid closer.

At first, I was put off. I wanted my alone time.

"Hi, I'm Father _____. Welcome to Grace Cathedral." I gave him my name as we shook hands. "I noticed you sitting out front before my time on the stage. You look a little discombobulated. Everything okay?"

I laughed at his choice of words replying, "I was just thinking about all the people who are not here. My times in the City. My family. The big mystery of it all. Everything and nothing. You know, your bailiwick of teachings about how all of this is going somewhere."

"Truthfully, I have no idea where it's all going." He waved his arms in a circle laughing as he replied. I was surprised, though not totally surprised, by his answer. I had known religious people who had no idea about the big scheme of things.

"I hope for the best and try to do what I can from day to day. What brings you here?"

Realizing my first reaction to him was off, I shared the whys and wherefores of how I had returned to the City. Inexplicably, I shared family history back before the great earthquake, and other essential things, to me, that gave him a picture of why I was the one sitting there talking with him at that given moment.

He reminded me of a priest I knew in Dublin, Ireland.

That man was truly on the path.

I missed him.

He died way too early in life-

Father Jim invited me for a cup. I accepted.

We walked a couple of blocks down the hill to a Peets that offered some empty tables on the sidewalk. He fetched the drinks while I watched the flow of humanity.

When he returned with the drinks, he took a seat next to me to watch the passerby's.

"I never tire of the ebb and flow of this city. The range of people that walk these streets always amazes me."

I agreed, telling him how we, as kids, would ride bikes downtown all the way from Presidio Heights so that we could watch all the goings-on.

He was quiet for a moment enjoying the scene when he said; "You've chosen a hard road with your ministry."

I did a double-take on his terminology, telling him I had no ministry.

I was pretty vocal, denying any such thing.

"Okay, you win. You don't have a ministry. You have a calling. It's a tough one! You can look at it as one full of loss, imperfections, challenges, obstructions, failures, or as one with day-to-day successes, hope, and satisfaction."

He saw how uncomfortable I was with this line of conversation.

I responded, saying, "I am not on a mission. I'm just doing what seems right. At times I think it's nuts, as the challenges of the poor and the sick, seem too big. If I had Bill Gate's resources, maybe I could actually do something! I feel like I'm nipping at the edges, getting nowhere." I immediately wished I hadn't said that last part because I had a good idea where he might go with the opening.

He laughed at my transparent frustration.

"Have you helped anyone along the way?"

I told him about a couple of people and how they would speak to groups etc. I told him about some kids and how they had given their hearts to a very sick man waiting for the last call. I told him about wanting to write about the courage of people I had met and the people who reached out to help them.

"So, why are you so glum, my friend?" He asked while patting me on the arm.

"It doesn't feel like it's enough!"

"It's enough. Look, I may look like I know the big picture, but I really don't know any more than what I see in front of me. I have hope. People like you buoy that hope. People who are confused but still taking a swing. I know, really know that my God loves a struggler. Don't worry if you can't match Warren Buffett's contributions. He is one trail, and you're on another. Enjoy the journey doing what you can do for those you are allowed to help. Enjoy. Don't worry, be happy." He said, bringing his thumb and index together in the classic pose.

I laughed at the last line making a comment about an Indian spiritual leader, Meher Baba, who used that phrase continually in his teachings.

"Hey, where do you think McFerrin's song came from?" He asked.

We both laughed at this simple connection between us.

"Actually, the quote is something like the following, "Do your best. Then, don't worry; be happy in My love. I will help you." I use it fairly often when I'm up in front on Sundays. It's a good message for all of us."

"How long have you been at Grace?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm not attached to that church. I am a Dominican Catholic priest. I am temporarily attached to Saint Dominic's over on Bush Street. Do you know it?"

I told him my family went to church there every once in a while. I shared that it was my favorite church in the City. I liked the gothic nature of it.

"I'm a little confused. What is your role here?"

"Neo - gothic." I smiled and shrugged at the correction. He continued. "I have been involved with the fight to protect people from HIV and other diseases for years. Since the beginning, in the early eighties," He

stopped talking for a moment. "I was infected twenty-one years ago. I've been incredibly lucky. I haven't had two bad days in a row. Amazing!"

I didn't ask, and he didn't say.

He told me he had been bouncing around the globe for years. He'd spent a few years in South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania with a few short stints back at HQ in Rome.

I realized the clock was ticking and that I wanted to spend more time with him. I suggested we go over to North Beach and see if we could grab a plate of pasta before he had to get back to Saint Dominic's. He liked the idea jumping up to lead the way up and over the hill. He said he needed the exercise, so we let one cable car after another pass us by as we climbed the hills.

When we got to the top, he pointed towards the Church of Saints Peter and Paul, saying, "Ah, La cattedrale d'Italia ovest, the Italian Cathedral of the West, beautiful, isn't it."

I agreed.

"A block behind it is a great family restaurant. Oh, did you know Joe DiMaggio lived here? Married Marilyn Monroe in City Hall. She was my favorite!" He said sharing a big smile.

I wished I had met him long ago.

He wanted to go to Tommaso's, but we were too early.

"I don't want to eat in a great place if I have to rush the meal. When I leave San Francisco, I plan on leaving having eaten in every place here." He shared, turning in a circle to engulf the neighborhood.

"Are you succeeding?" I asked.

"Just about. I have three weeks to check a few off my list."

I felt disappointed that he was leaving, which was weird, as I was leaving myself in the morning. I guess I wanted to leave the City knowing there was someone still there that I would know should I ever come back for a visit. A screeching car interrupted my train of thought, or I would have asked him all about wherever he was going in three weeks.

We popped into a little joint on Columbus Avenue, where we shared a big plate of pasta with a side of fresh cracked crab.

It was great.

We talked about the city, different restaurants, people who added color to this unique city; its wild history, and its unquenchable hope.

We talked about people who were sick, treatment, cures, and vaccines, hope, and despair for those suffering.

We talked about Africa, Rome, and all sorts of mutual places we had in common.

When we finished eating we walked over to Peter and Paul's for a quick visit. We stood in the back.

What a beautiful way to end a meal, I thought. A moment of peace!

We weren't there but a moment, when he turned walking out ahead of me back to the square. "I'll catch a cab. Do you want to share a ride back to your hotel?"

The quick termination of our visit caught me off guard.

After a second, I said, "No, I think I'll walk back."

I gave him my card, asking where he was going in three weeks. "Egypt via Rome. Land of the Kings! Should be great!"

He waved a taxi over, saying he would send me his address when he got settled. We hugged.

I didn't want to let him slip out of my life.

He smiled, telling me, "Really, don't worry, it will all be okay." With that he was off with a wave leaving me standing alone in front of the church.

I walked through North Beach, China Town, and parts of downtown on my way back to my hotel.

I felt like I had lost a friend.

Father Jim never sent me his address. I've resisted trying to track him down through the Dominicans.

I worried about him when I read the news coming out of Egypt. Somehow I think this is the way it is intended to be.

Yes, I know, I'm not supposed to worry!