

Hooked On Recovery

September 21, 2007

Jimmy

“When the day is long and the night, the night is yours alone, when you're sure you've had enough of this life, well hang on, don't let yourself go, everybody cries, and everybody hurts, sometimes.” –lyrics to Everybody Hurts, REM

Tears stung my cheeks, my heart wounded by grief. My son Joshua and I had helped four other men lift Jimmy's coffin into the hearse. I got into the drivers seat of the family van and the funeral procession began. Firefighters stood and saluted at every corner. Policemen and women saluted the hearse as they controlled traffic. Firetrucks with lights flashing marked the route to the cemetery. I wept openly when I saw Jimmy's empty boots and jacket at the firehouse where he served for so many years. With an American flag displayed proudly off the top of a ladder truck, we carried the coffin again through two lines of firefighters who came to honor their fallen comrade. I could barely contain my grief after the Navy folded the American flag and presented it to his mother. Taps played hauntingly from somewhere deep in the military cemetery.

Everybody hurts in our family now. Sandy's brother James William Pearson, Jr. died last week after a battle with cancer. He was my brother-in-law, uncle to my children. The services to honor his life were held this past weekend. Now, my main regret is I didn't spend more time with him and get to know him better. As my family trudges through this time, we are experiencing all kinds of emotion. This is good. This is appropriate. This is difficult. It was hard for me to see my children with streams of tears running down their cheeks.

I've been crying more than I care to admit. Crying has become a more frequent experience for me as I mature in recovery (or maybe as I just mature). Every time I tell the story told by his nephew, I can't finish it without crying. The story goes like this. Several years ago, Uncle Jimmy took his two teenage nephews to a fireman's contest. They were watching a bucket brigade between two teams. Fill the buckets with water at the lake, get them on the roof, pour the water on the roof and into the gutter, down the spout to fill a barrel. Whoever filled the barrel to the fill-line first was the winner. Very exciting, clamorous, competitive, loud and raucous. The boys realized in the entire ruckus that Uncle Jimmy was no longer by their side. They looked around and spotted him coming out of the lake, camera still strapped over his shoulder (soaked and ruined), pager on his belt (soaked and ruined) and a small boy in his arms. Jimmy was the only one who noticed the boy drowning. He handed the boy to his shaken mother (the boy was fine) and then took his two nephews to the car where he changed into dry clothes and then quietly drove away.

At other times, we laugh, sometimes at completely inappropriate times. For instance, when the funeral director used a crank to close the coffin for the last time, Sandy's sister who is experiencing some dementia due to radiation poisoning from her own cancer treatment (that's another story) said a little too loudly, “They're screwing something into Jimmy's head!” Sandy immediately went into that strange mix of sobbing and laughing. I just put my hand on her back and struggled to keep my own emotions in check. It became more difficult not too laugh when someone asked Sandy's mom (also experiencing some dementia – really, I can't make this stuff up) if she had paid her last respects and she said, a little too loudly “Yes I did! Yesterday! I kissed him on his head and he was ice cold!”

My wife, my children, our extended family and me are all going through periods of anger, frustration, regret, grief and gratitude. I haven't always been too good at allowing myself to experience all these emotions at the same time. Today I can, thanks to recovery. At the wake, I paid my respects by kneeling at the coffin and thanking Jimmy for the love he showed me and my family. I thanked him for inspiring me through his life of service. As I prayed, I'm sure I heard his whisper, "take care of her", meaning take care of his little sister, my wife Sandy. I promised I would. Later that evening, when I told Sandy, she burst into tears (again), and said, "That is exactly what he would say."

At his service, several of his family spoke about Jimmy. I stood behind Sandy as she poured her heart out. Jimmy died just 3 days after Sandy celebrated 16 years of recovery. This is the essence of what she shared.

"I have spent the early morning hours of the past few days thinking about my memories of Jimmy growing up. He was already 21 when I arrived on the scene. The earliest memory I have is of my sisters in the kitchen with my mom, packing up toll house cookies to ship to him overseas during the Vietnam War. The next memory is when I was six and hiding behind my mother's legs in that same kitchen when he returned from that war with a big, bushy beard. I was a little afraid of him. Over the years, he would move out of my parents' home, then back, then out, and finally my senior year of high school, he purchased a home with them to ease their finances during their retirement. There were many, many Sunday dinners when we would all sit down and right in the middle of his first bite of food – the fire alarm would sound and off he would rush to the firehouse."

"I know that many of you have and will share about the tremendous acts of service that my brother did. He was the most committed person I have ever known to the organizations he believed in and to his family. However, the best memory I have of Jimmy, is the love he had for my children, my sisters' children, and their children's children. He spent hours creating books of hot air balloons, fire trucks, military planes and ships for their enjoyment. He went to every birthday party he was invited to. He entered their world slowly, allowing them to come to him when they were ready. I am sad that my younger children won't have more time to spend with him. My youngest son Matthew loves super heroes, and when you look at Jimmy's life, he was indeed a super hero."

"I have another memory to share with you this morning. Nearing the end of my brother's service to the Navy, my father began a carpentry project in Jimmy's room back home. He purchased pine green paneling (very much the new thing back in the day), and put that up in the room. Then he carefully stained, cut and nailed up the wood trim to match. He was preparing a room for the homecoming of his son, the soldier."

"The Bible shares a similar story. In the book of John, chapter 14, beginning with verse 2, Jesus said: ²In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

“I know that my brother believed in Jesus, and that faith would provide him eternal life in heaven. I know because I asked him during one of our trips to the West Haven VA Hospital. I asked him because my son Joshua had encouraged me the evening before to stop getting worked up about Jimmy’s doctors and treatment plan and to talk to him about God. So throughout the last year or so, I have been sad and angry and powerless, but I have been comforted by the knowledge that just as my earthly father prepared a room for Jimmy’s return from war, my heavenly Father has prepared a room for him in His home. Amen.”

After the services, we had lunch at the firehouse with friends, family and firefighters. All of Jimmy’s grand nieces and nephews (and there were a lot of them) were climbing through the fire trucks. Firemen, Jimmy’s colleagues, were more than happy to have the kids on their trucks. Firemen are wired that way. Kids were smiling, laughing and playing at the firehouse. It was amazing and heartwarming to see.

I’m pretty sure Jimmy was smiling too.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.