

“Jim ”

--James Lewis Stoll, 1936-1994

In early September of 1969, about a hundred young Americans and Canadians gathered at Camp LaForet, near Colorado Springs, to confer about the times, argue politics and religion, gain encouragement in a difficult year, and, with luck, maybe, get laid.

We were there for the annual Continental Conference of Student Religious Liberals. SRL was a loose grouping of young adults with some kind of tie to U-Uism. Like the LRY (Liberal Religious Youth), SRL was in those years an unruly child of the UUA, willing to take the money but not much direction from the over-30 fogies at 25 Beacon St.

The camp staff liked us (one told me) because we didn't treat them like servants. That was right Liberal of us. But we shocked 'em. Like this: news of the deaths of both Sen. Everett Dirksen and Ho Chi Minh reached us on the same day during that week, and at dinner that night we had a moment of silence in honor of . . . Ho. Far out, man, but like, wow, *heavy*.

We shocked ourselves. Betty Reid (UU songwriter and singer) sang *America the Beautiful* to us, which turned out to be divisive, since half were not sure if America was still beautiful in this year 1969, the first year of the Nixon presidency, and the height of Vietnam war anguish.

And Barbara Merritt, up from the U. of Texas, gave many of us a friendly but firm encounter with a new, more militant feminism. For some this was an introduction, for others, continuing education. Almost all departed with consciousness raised. (Barbara was later my classmate at

Starr King, and is now the senior minister at our Worchester, Massachusetts church.)

I had arrived at Camp LaForet from San Francisco with the Rev. Jim Stoll and two other longhairs in Jim's VW fastback. Though Jim was now 33, he was on our side of a generation gap that seemed real at the time. He spoke the language, enjoyed the music, & lived the life. In addition, because he was a bit older and had had some professional success, he was welcomed as a trustworthy mentor to many of us.

Despite his chronic obesity, Jim was full of energy. His mind was quick too, delighting in wordplay and new coinages. (World Serious)

He had a deep, rich voice, which, combined with his wit and confidence, made him a persuasive speaker. He had initiative and leadership and style.

He was both fun to be with and a counselor of uncommon empathy and clarity. Many people brought their problems to Jim, because the affection was real and the advice was good. Wherever he went a group formed around him, people who didn't mind his weight, appreciated his personality, and felt affirmed by him.

(However, it must be also be said that if you were a young man you had to learn to cope with Jim's smutty double entendres, or the good natured but lewd suggestion, or even the unwanted advance. All of these came as part of being in Jim's company.)

* * * * *

He was born and raised in Old Saybrook, CT, and as a clever New England boy should, he attended a proper New England

prep school. Jim said many of the boys fooled around with each other at these schools, but he was one who was caught, disgraced, expelled. After a year at Penn, Jim moved west, to San Francisco, where he studied psychology at SF State, then ministry at Starr King School, graduating in 1962. As an illustration of the fear and isolation many—not all—gay people experienced in those days, Jim told the story that while at Starr King, he lived for two years in a house with another gay man, but neither found out the other was gay until years later.

Jim served a church—mine, by chance—and quite successfully (if membership growth means anything) from 1962 until 1969. His ministry and personality had a wonderful healing and strengthening effect on me, and many others. He brought the Bay Area, and Starr King School and its teachers. He brought the new humanistic psychology, and the Beats, Camus and Tagore, Kahlil Gibran and *The Little Prince*, Cummings and Eliot. A wide array of his interesting friends dropped by, some in person, some by description. He brought fun, fresh air, and nurture.

He let me drive his car, which he knew freed me from my father's control. When I slightly damaged the car, he shrugged it off, and I understood for the first time that forbearance and patience were forms of love.

He had an enthusiastic, infectious, nearly boundless love of people. He delighted in helping this friend become a friend of that friend. "I want you to meet this friend," he'd say, "I think you'll dig each other."

He was the first to call when he'd heard news of success, or of pain.

Jim was real big and real real. He was, I dare say, a great soul. An enormous warm and caring presence, and with that voice--low and slow and easy to follow, he explained and comforted and healed and understood and forgave, and tried to bring out the best in everyone.

His home, wherever it was, was a welcoming place, dimly candle-lit, with many cats and prolific plants, and, always, after 1966, a joint nearby for any who wished to share a smoke with him.

* * * * *

In early 1969 Jim was forced to resign his pulpit, partly on account of what he was "discovered" to be, bolstered by accusations of sexual misconduct, but more on account of what he had done openly: embraced the counterculture, counseled draft resisters, grown a beard, smoked dope, and allowed an exclusive inner circle to form. Jim was self-indulgent in these ways, and it cost him.

San Francisco was where it was at in 1969, and Jim returned there, took a flat with three others (me the draft counselor, Nick the cabinetmaker, and Peter the Communist revolutionary) and for a full year we four hosted an unending stream of young visitors, all come to look for America or something.

It was after just a few months of this life that Jim and I and two of these pilgrims piled into his little car and headed for the Rockies. We worried briefly about being too weird for Utah, especially because Jim, at least, had a stash, and the murderous hostility of the locals in "Easy Rider" was still fresh in our minds. But we behaved sensibly and had no trouble.

On the second or third night of the conference, after dinner, Jim got up to speak. He told us that he'd been doing a lot of hard thinking that summer.

[Ah, that summer. Among many momentous events that year, the Stonewall riots in New York's Greenwich Village had taken place the preceding June 27th. As a lot of you probably know, Gay Pride parades are celebrated in late June for that reason.]

Jim told us he could no longer live a lie. He'd been hiding his nature--his true self--from everyone except his closest friends. "If the revolution we're in means anything," he said, "it means we have the right to be ourselves, without shame or fear." Then he told us he was gay, and had always been gay, and it wasn't a choice, and he wasn't ashamed anymore and that he wasn't going to hide it anymore, and from now on he was going to be himself *in public*. He recalled a line by the rock group Love: "We're all normal and we want our freedom". After he concluded, there was a dead silence, then a couple of the young women went up and hugged him, followed by general congratulations. The few who did not approve kept their peace--for the time being.

This was at a time when the terms "closet" and "coming out" were still only gay argot. It is generally believed that Jim was the first ordained minister of any established religion in the U.S. or Canada—and possibly the world--to come out

Before deciding to take the action, Jim had sought advice separately from six trusted friends, of whom I was one, and Ron Cook—a Starr King School professor and Dean of this Conference—was another. The stakes seemed high. What would the Department of the Ministry do? Would Jim have his Fellowship revoked? Would Ron get in trouble? Would SRL get in trouble? Was it illegal in Colorado to be "an

avowed homosexual?” What would the effect be on Jim's family and friends?

But we were young, and these were radical, optimistic, risk-taking times. According to Jim, all six of us encouraged him to do it.

In fact, Jim had been coming out for years. When he felt reasonably safe with some one or some small group, he would try to de-demonize gayness. Throughout the middle 1960s Jim led many of us to see that what we had been taught about homosexuality was false. It was not unnatural. It was deep-seated, and should be a legitimate way to express love and sexuality, perfectly natural to those who gave and received them willingly, and which, like straight sex, harmed no-one necessarily.

As a result, I, and a lot of other people I know became supporters of gay liberation before there was an open gay liberation movement.

Jim had been active in civil rights, including answering Dr. King's call to clergy to join the march from Selma in 1965. Jim likened the status of gay folk to that of black folk, and made us understand the q-word hurts the same way the n-word does.

All through the 1960s and early 70s, Jim provided many people with the first real understanding that gay people were human beings, not stereotypes. And it went beyond that. As a good poet takes the particular and elevates it to the universal, Jim's gayness was the particular that helped him help others find the courage to be *their* real selves. Most of us who came close to him are the better for it.

He preached gay liberation the rest of 1969, and the first half of 1970, up and down the Pacific coast, and anywhere else in the U.S. and Canada that agreed to hear him. The goal was to get a gay rights resolution passed at GA, in Seattle.

I accompanied him on some of these trips, acting as his speaking tour manager. I got the news of my brother's nervous breakdown after emerging from one such Sunday service at First Unitarian, Los Angeles.

Another trip was to . . . Honolulu. I don't remember this room, but I must have been here, on Mother's Day, 1970. Gene Bridges' last year as your minister.

Despite my support for this important work, cracks began to appear in what had been a great close friendship. In December 1969 I got a job as a San Francisco social worker, and for the first time began receiving the income that goes with a full time work. One consequence of this was that Jim began, more and more, to depend on me financially, but without acknowledging it.

I'd like to write about the 1960s some day. I witnessed a lot of heroism on the left, a lot of idealism, and, I'm sorry to say, a lot of dishonesty. One form of dishonesty was stealing—ripping off the man. Another form was a phony small-group communism. I was the only one with a real job, so I was expected to share.

I have a Will Rogers story on this subject. As you know, the cowboy humorist from Oklahoma was in general sympathy with the plight of the less fortunate. But about one proposed New Deal program, he said

“Our own downright conscience tells us, that there's no reason why, well, why anybody should have more than you.

Somebody came along with a plan, a fine plan, well thought out. There wern't nothin' wrong with the plan, only just one little defect—nobody is gonna share with you, that's all.

I know a lot of tremendously rich people that should share their wealth with me, but they just don't see it my way, and—

And I know folks that ain't got as much as I have, that think I ought to share my wealth with them. Well, I just can't hardly see it thar way either.

That is, even if I can see it their way, I ain't doin' it!"

My father enjoyed that monologue, but my mother, whom I think may have had communist sympathies in the '30s, was less amused.

Naturally, I grew increasingly annoyed at Jim's and his coterie's presumption that I should pay for lots of things for them, simply because I could.

But there was something worse. These days, books and movies and TV shows are chockablock with examples of the good and the fun that can come from affection between gay and straight people. Certainly great good came to me in this way from Jim, and vice versa.

As I said, we had a close friendship. No, we loved each other. But I was straight and he was gay. Now there's no reason that can't just be. I have black friends, French friends, Latino friends, gay friends, but I don't try to be black, French, Latino, or gay. And these friends don't want me to be anything but who I am. But Jim wanted me to be more than his friend, and I found out from others that since moving to San Francisco, Jim had been mischaracterizing our relationship. My love for him was Platonic. His for me was erotic. My response? a remarkable burst of heterosexual behavior. He had tried to make me out to be something I wasn't. He was lonely. I was young and thought I had

something to prove. My response hurt him. Hurt him worse than I knew.

This break was also fueled by my learning that Jim had, if not exactly molested my brother Jeff, had certainly put a lot of pressure on him. My parents believed that that pressure helped push Jeff over the edge. But this judgment of theirs has to be weighed against their own wish to avoid taking responsibility for the family dynamics and dysfunction that, in my view, played a much greater role in Jeff's unhappy fate.

Jim and I would be friends again after the estrangement, but it would never be the same.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, as a result of Jim's preaching and organizing, he became the leader of the effort that succeeded in convincing the UUA to pass the first-ever gay rights resolution at the General Assembly that July. This past July (2010) marked the 40th anniversary of that affirmation. We were the first. I think it's something we can be proud of.

After that triumph, Jim's friends encouraged him to find another church, because parish ministry seemed to be a near-perfect fit for his gifts and personality. But some in the Dept. of Ministry were furious with Jim—unjustly . . . and justly—and worked to keep him out, and later, even the more generous and understanding officials told him they doubted they could find him a congregation, and gradually Jim gave up the idea.

For years I thought of the denomination's response as villainous. Now, with the never-ending news of pedophile

priests, I think now, in hindsight, perhaps the Dept. of Ministry was right.

The next twenty-five years saw Jim in a series of health-related jobs, usually as executive director, and he did a ton of good. He founded the first counseling center for gays and lesbians in San Francisco, under the auspices of Operation Concern. Later in the 1970s he established the first hospice on Maui. Later still he served as the director of the Russian River Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, then moved to become executive director of the Suicide and Crisis Center for Monterey and San Benito Counties. He was president of the San Francisco chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union for a couple of years in the '90's.

And yet, I always felt he was wasting his best self. After Jim left the ministry he smoked even more marijuana, and indulged other unfortunate habits, which did insidious damage to his body and soul. He grew gradually less active and less effective, and his creativity and interest in new ideas lessened. Something always went wrong at work after a few years. He couldn't seem to recognize or change his self-defeating patterns, and each new situation seemed to be a little less happy, a little less dignified, than the one before.

When I once told him he was the strongest and weakest person I knew, he nodded slowly. His appetites and habits increasingly bound him, but to many of us, especially when we were young, he had been a liberator, a champion against fear, our great good friend, encouraging and guiding us in our search for understanding and purpose and love. We wanted him to be that good again, and that appreciated.

He died on December 8, 1994, a little short of age 59. He died, not of AIDS or any other infection, but of worn-out heart and lungs. He was never able to lose much weight, nor quit smoking. When it was known he was dying, a stream of friends came to say good-bye. Friends arrived from ACLU, from inner-city social services, from Hunter's Point, from drug abuse treatment centers, from the ministry. Poet Paul Mariah, a gay man who had done prison time for homosexual behavior—in Colorado!—and who had often co-preached with Jim in that spring of 1970, but now frail and in poor health himself, drove down from Sonoma to give a reading and foot massage. Psychiatrists, lawyers, and theologians showed up, called, wrote.

Throughout his life Jim had made an unusual number of unusually close friends, almost all of whom were engaged in some kind of good work. He loved bringing this person together with that one, and by the end of his life there was a huge network of people who knew each other through him. Yet despite all this matchmaking, and though his romantic side often found appropriate expression, Jim never had for long the all-embracing love he longed for. I think I was the love of his life, and I broke his heart.

Or was it reality that broke his heart? In the movie "As Good As It Gets", there was special meaning for me in what Jack Nicholson's straight character says when Greg Kinnear's gay character expresses his love. He says "I tell you, buddy, I'd be the luckiest guy in the world if that did it for me."

So at the end there was no life partner at Jim's bedside, just dozens of dear friends.

Two days before his death, twenty of these friends, some with children, crowded into his intensive care room in Kaiser, San Francisco. Jim's favorite seafood restaurant had sent over a

free lobster dinner for him, and free chowder for the rest of us. We had such a happy, rowdy party the nurses had to shush us more than once, but they knew what was going on and didn't throw us out.

* * * *

So what are the lessons of this life? Well, like all prominent personalities, his serves as an object lesson. In one sense, like Bill Clinton, Jim's is a very good example of what to do and of what not to do.

It's a good example for having the courage to be yourself, to not let yourself be defined and diminished by others.

But it's also a good example of what happens when you don't control that self, and indulge in self-indulgence in all its forms.

We can use his life to remember that when it's over, to be thought of as a good person, the good we do must clearly outweigh the bad. My belief is he did a whole lot of good, and that he needed to.