



Losing The Unexpected Friend Of Your Life

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I was traveling overseas when I learned of Justice Antonin Scalia's death. After 30 years he had become keystone in America's legal system. But for me his unfortunate passing was overshadowed by the loss, just a few hours earlier, of a dear friend of mine, who I had known for almost that same 30 years.

My father was in the Air Force and during high school we were stationed in Great Britain. I had a great time visiting castles, wandering around London, and traveling with my parents to the far reaches of the UK. They started buying antiques and I joined in, putting my limited funds toward swords, other militaria, and chess sets. None of them were very special — bagging groceries and cutting lawns wasn't particularly lucrative. But I ended up with some bric-a-brac for my first home. While I gave up purchasing weaponry back in the U.S., I scanned the want-ads for chess sets, occasionally picking up someone else's discards.

Around three decades ago a friend who'd seen my accumulation gave me a small ad in a local penny-saver from someone selling chess sets. Which is how I met Steve, a firefighter and inveterate collector. His girlfriend (and later wife), Julia, was at his house my first time over. Steve and I dickered over prices and I bought several sets, a major boost to my collection. A few months later he dropped me a note and said he had a few more to sell. I purchased most of them as well.

Then he called up and asked if I wanted to spend a Saturday hitting "the shops." He needed a travel companion since Julia preferred not to spend her weekend traipsing all over the mid-Atlantic visiting antiques shops, the more decrepit the better from Steve's perspective. I've always believed that there is a special collecting gene. It doesn't matter what you collect — it could be chess sets, steins, hair pins, paintings, porcelains, Beanie Babies, or even the macabre — you either are thrilled by "the hunt" and especially the conquest of capturing another desirable item, or you just see clutter. Steve saw beauty in a pre-World War I German regimental stein. Julia saw a big, pricey dust collector. Most of my friends looked at my collections the same way, while I shared Steve's perspective.

When I arrived on the appointed day Julia greeted me: "I hear you are taking my boyfriend away from me today." I noted that it didn't require much of an arm-twist from me to get her 6'5" beau out on the road. Steve and I had a fun day — and then Julia and I found lots to talk about other than collecting at dinner that evening.

From that developed a routine. Steve and I would take day trips around Virginia, West Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Maryland. Sometimes we'd spend an overnight in Pennsylvania or elsewhere. We'd have dinner with Julia when we returned. They were a bit older than me and along the way I met their kids, all now adults a bit younger than me. Then came the grandkids. And a wonderful friendship developed. I would talk with Steve about collecting and with Julia about her beloved Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordan. I helped him rake up the accumulated leaves in back of his house and he drove me home from a medical test. Slowly but naturally they became family. With my parents and sibling (and her family) on the other side of the country — and the latter sometimes overseas — I'd spend Thanksgiving with Steve, Julia, and the combined clan.

In the super-heated partisan environment of D.C. they provided me with an escape from politics. Steve and Julia sometimes had strong opinions on government and the world but that wasn't their life. What drew us together were not the latest machinations on Capitol Hill. I could avoid the intense "hive" which many in Washington inhabit. My social world was centered elsewhere, most importantly around my church and Steve and Julia.

One of our standing jokes was how Steve had corrupted me (along with several other mutual friends!). Before I met him my acquisitions were occasional and inexpensive. But while visiting shops I found other items that interested me — Soviet propaganda cigarette cases, icons, eagle/hawk carvings, and more. My house quickly filled with dust collectors. Lacking Malcolm Forbes's millions I couldn't amass a valuable, signature collection of anything. But I could pick up the intriguing, interesting, bizarre, and unique.

Or at least, what I thought was intriguing, interesting, bizarre, and unique. I once showed a friend some cards, apparently issued nearly a century ago in opposition to the League of Nations when the Senate was debating the Versailles Treaty, that I'd picked up for a dollar. I found them fascinating and thought he would too, since he had a PhD in diplomatic history. But his contemptuous response was: "You just had to buy them, didn't you." The answer, naturally, was "Of course!" I mean, did he really think I could leave them sitting forlorn in a cabinet in an antique shop somewhere?

Steve's and my adventures were many. Spend hours driving around, wandering dumpy and swanky shops alike, visiting auctions, attending antique shows, and sharing online offerings, and the stories of the stupid, weird, fantastic, hilarious, and frustrating accumulate. Added to that was my time spent with Julia, who managed to soften a few of the edges of the man I jokingly called "Mr. Diplomacy." (His apparent gruffness covered a wonderful heart, evident to those who really knew him.) She became as much a friend as him, someone I could talk to about something other than collecting after spending a day on the road with Steve. And the kids, too, I knew as they married, had children, moved, and suffered the vagaries of life. My time with everyone became among the most enjoyable moments of life in the midst of largely fruitless efforts to make even a slight impact on the course of today's Leviathan.

In recent years Steve, especially, slowed down. Moreover, I traveled a lot and the number of antique shops dwindled with the rise of the Internet. So our antiquing travels ebbed. He suffered through cancer, stroke, diabetes, and MRSA (drug-resistant) infection. He beat them all, but

emerged weaker and more vulnerable. His mind and personality remained sharp, but his body began to fail. Congestive heart failure added another challenge, landing him in the hospital before I left on my latest trip. He also was fighting another foot infection and other ailments, but remained determinedly irascible and I was sure I'd see him on my return.

Surgery left him drained, however. His kidneys started to shut down. And he passed, peacefully, last Friday. His departure from life didn't garner the national attention of Justice Scalia's death, but it meant so much more to me, then thousands of miles from home. It was a tough trip back.

Hardest, though, will be saying goodbye graveside to him Saturday. His departure leaves a void that cannot be filled. After three decades an important part of my life has disappeared. As with the death of my parents, I'm sure the pain will ease over time. However, that's small comfort after losing what had become such a challenging yet, yes, loving presence.

What does provide solace are the relationships that remain, of Julia and the rest of the family. My life will continue to be enriched, despite his departure. And that may be the most important thing to celebrate with his passing. He has physically disappeared from my presence. But so many of those in his life remain. Joyous times will continue, only without the original conductor.

RIP Steve.

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