

Michael Trottier

Jim and I met when he first moved to Ottawa to cover the Hill and, quite by chance, we ended up living beside each other on Fourth Avenue. Before long we realized we had a lot in common – we liked the same writers, laughed at more or less the same things and had a very similar world view. What had started out as a passing acquaintance became a friendship, then a close friendship and then, after Jim returned from Africa, more like having a brother.

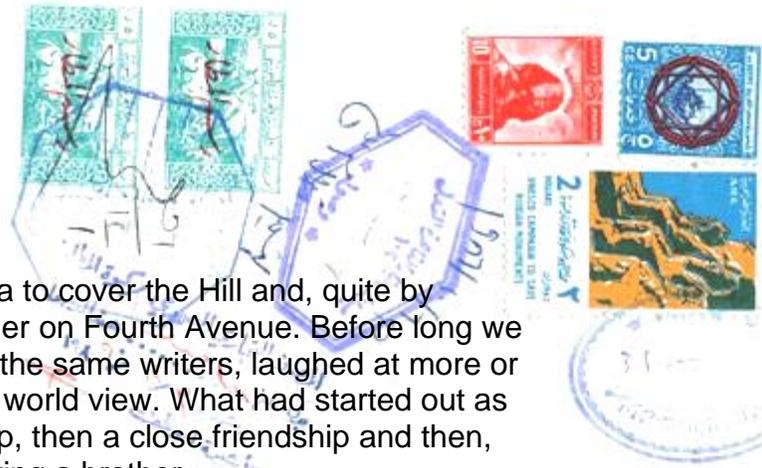
As everyone who knew Jim has said, he was not only very smart and very funny, he was also very accomplished. He seemed to know something about everything and to be good at everything he did. He was an expert skier, sailor, cyclist, cook, literary critic and, of course, a gifted writer. Jim seemed to find it easy to pull together a series of disparate facts that painted a compelling picture of what was really going on. His ability to connect dots was astounding.

He used to say it was important to leave little presents for the reader all the way through a column and that he did with joy and wit. His ability to conjure up a sentiment in one or two words used to amaze me – as in the time he wrote the word “Yikes” to describe a once and not future politician. One word to summarize public sentiment takes some kind of talent!

His humour could be biting but was never malicious, an amazing feat when one considers how often he rubbed away at the chalk of social convention and cant. He had a joyful contempt for those who abused their authority, the self-obsessed sycophancy concerned only by what he used to call “the My Wonderful Life gang”. He used to say, with a mixture of disgust and sadness, that most people would be amazed at how often petty personal considerations influenced big decisions.

More than these amazing qualities however, was Jim’s love of family and devotion to Joan, Patrick, Ben, his sister Wendy and his mother. He had an unending capacity to nurture and protect – a genuine father hen quality if such a thing can be imagined – and seemed to be always clucking about making sure everyone was ok - and not taking themselves too seriously. He was very proud of Patrick and Ben, of course, but it was not so much for what they had and will accomplish. Jim talked glowingly of the quality of their character and who they are as people. That was most important to him.

When Em came along he told me “I think I have a daughter now” and that was exactly how he thought of her – another person to fuss over, tease and envelop in those big gallooty (what the heck – it ought to be a word) arms. When Sarah entered the picture it was as if he said: “Well, alright then, come on in, lots of room in here for one more” and the clucking and fussing included her as well. A heart as big as his nose!



Jane and I loved it when Jim cycled by on Saturday mornings, dropping in for coffee and croissants and of course some good political chat. We would hear Jim whooping long before we saw him trundle up our walkway decked out in one of those ridiculous outfits cyclists insist on wearing. Jim was quite proud he had reached the “apogee of sartorial ridiculousness” as he put it. His capacity for joy and laughter in the moment was a great gift he gave freely.

It was almost as if, in the last few years, Jim's protective impulse, so strong in him, extended to the entire country. He had deep roots in Canada – the name Travers appears on the monument at Vimy Ridge. Jim's uncle died there. Jim, much like Ulysses, the mythical hero who leaves for great adventures in exotic lands, returned from Africa and the Middle East with a wisdom he shared with his readers and his friends. I asked him once what he had learned in those years “away” – what had been the main lesson – and he said: “The veneer that separates a society that works from one that doesn't is very thin. It doesn't take much to destroy it.” In the last few years I think he was trying to warn Canadians to “be careful, watch what you're doing here, don't be too dismissive of the foundation on which we're built and that got us here”. The National Newspaper Award he received for his work on the demise of democracy in Canada was the culmination of that protective instinct and a great vindication for him.

Well, what else can one say? I loved him very much and will miss him dearly. But I know that one day, probably when I least expect it, I will hear something on the radio or read something in a magazine or watch the Canadiens cough up the puck in their own end YET AGAIN and laugh out loud. And that laugh will be the magical and generous gift Jim gave to me – and everyone he met.