

Eulogy for Jim Johnson

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I have known Jim almost as long as Carol has. In January 1964 when we were freshman at Purdue—we were young back then, 52 years ago—Carol told several of us that she was going on a blind date with this guy named Jim. It wasn't long after that that I was introduced to him, and from then on, he was a part of my life, too.

A couple of years later Jim decided to ask Carol to marry him. He bought a ring and planned a lovely romantic dinner at which he would propose to her. But on the way to the restaurant he could not wait. So he impulsively asked her to marry him and gave her the ring at a stop light. Carol said "Yes." My husband Tony and I were two of a small group of people who were there 49 years ago when Carol and Jim got married in a lovely ceremony at the church where her cousin was the pastor.

A few months later, we visited Carol and Jim at the married student's housing at Purdue, and Carol showed me a bottle of pre-natal vitamins with her name on it. That's how she announced that she and Jim were going to be parents. When Scott was born, Jim drove over to his old dorm where he still knew a lot of people and drove around the building yelling, "It's a boy. I'm a dad. I have a son." I remember when Scott was born, I noticed a change in Jim. He seemed a little calmer, a little more centered. I suspected that being a husband and a father made him feel a little less different and more like everyone else. Not too long after that there was another son, Aaron, and after that a daughter. I still remember that excited call from Jim telling us that he had a baby girl.

Through the years we have spent weekends in each other's homes several times a year. We were together during the joys and struggles of child rearing, the bittersweet experiences of kids getting married and leaving home, and the wonderful new experience of welcoming grandchildren.

Jim's role as a husband and father was more important to him than anything else. Several years ago Jim wrote his autobiography, and near the beginning he said he wanted to...

...detail many of the things I have been able to accomplish in my life, the most important of which is raising a happy family and achieving some measure of success in my business life.

Jim's children describe him as very dedicated dad they could always count on. He set an example that taught them how to be dedicated parents themselves. He was always there for them, attending their sporting events, helping them with their homework, etc. Kathy recalled that in high school, he proof read all her papers. When she went away to college, she used to call him and read her papers to him, including the punctuation, and he would proof them over the phone.

They remember that he was funny and would always have a joke or story at dinner. Aaron remembers him talking about his day, sharing his life at work.

They said he was always there if they needed something, even small things. Kathy hates to make phone calls and would sometimes ask him to make them for her, and he would always do it.

They said he “knew things.” This love of knowledge probably began when, as a child isolated at home, he read entire World Book Encyclopedia from cover to cover, including the annual additions. We remember the he would watch Jeopardy, and the majority of the time would give the answer before any of the contestants did.

Jim’s family is convinced that he had ESP because he would always show up where they were. For example, one day Carol took a different way home from work, and ran out of gas. She was beginning to get nervous about a guy who was walking toward her. She looked around, and lo and behold, there was Jim. He had also taken that different route with no knowledge that she had gone that way. Another time Kathy went on a school trip, and when it was clear they were going to get back 2 hours early, the teacher told them what they could do to pass the time until their parents arrived. Kathy said, “My Dad will be there.” Sure enough, there he was. He said he had a feeling she’d get back early.

Kathy said he taught her things that most kids don’t learn, things he couldn’t do for himself. For example, he taught her to check the oil in the car and use jumper cables by talking her through it. When Kathy got to college, she found she was the only person who knew how to do these and many other tasks her dad had taught her.

Jim loved to tell stories...and he told them in great detail. But the detail was never boring or tedious. His stories were always a high point of our visits.

We were all remembering the other night how Carol would start to tell a story, and he would interrupt her, and say she wasn’t telling it right. Then he would tell it with all the details she was leaving out. We will all miss these stories.

However, Jim was also a good writer. Several years ago he began writing a series of articles about his childhood for the Elnora newspaper. These are Jim’s stories written down and saved for posterity. I want to encourage all his children and grandchildren to read and re-read these stories. Along with the autobiography, they are a wonderful legacy he has left to all of you. These stories emphasize his experience with polio, the 9 months he spent in the hospital, and the limitations polio put on his life, but he also emphasizes life in the 1950s, his attachment to Elnora, his childhood activities—reading, attending movies alone every weekend—and relationships, especially his close relationship with his grandparents who cared for him while his parents worked. I’d like to share a few excerpts from these writings.

Jim’s story, as far back as he could remember, starts in June of 1948 when the Elnora newspaper printed the following:

“Last week, 4-year-old James Emerson Johnson, Elnora, was admitted to Riley Hospital with severe paralysis and the hospital confirmed the case was polio. Four other [less severe] cases were reported in Elnora. Citizens of Elnora were reported today to be considering closing public meetings.”

This is the short version, not at all the way Jim tells it, but it includes a little hint about life in the 1940s and early 1950s. For those of you who are much younger, every summer was polio season. Parents were terrified all summer that their children would contract this dreaded disease. And when a case occurred, things tended to shut down—not only public meetings, but also public swimming pools and other places where the disease could be spread. I was a kid then, and I didn’t know about the terror parents went through until my mother told me years later. Jim and his parents were only one of many families for whom the dreaded nightmare was reality.

Jim shared many of the details of the experience of getting sick and being rushed by ambulance from Elnora to Riley Hospital and not leaving until 9 months later. He says:

“I walked out of the hospital... With the aid of leg braces and crutches I was on my feet ready to face the world. Other polio victims weren’t as lucky.”

But this was just the beginning of Jim’s struggle. For example, he would be home schooled all through elementary school, spending much of his time alone reading—most people didn’t have TVs then--while other kids were playing outside. He first attended school at the huge Elnora high school building.

In another place, Jim writes about the ending of the yearly summer polio terrors. This is in a piece about going to the movie theater to watch movies alone every weekend. Each year there would be a March of Dimes donation drive, and they would pass containers around the theater to collect dimes. Yes, the March of Dimes really did begin with dimes. It was ordinary people like our families and Jim’s who collected and donated as many dimes as they could to try to eradicate polio. It is a wonderful story of Americans coming together to do something that needed to be done. Jim’s mother would always give him an extra dime those weeks to put in the container. One week, they did not seem to be passing the container so Jim thought he had an extra dime and went to the concession stand to buy a candy bar. But when he returned, to his horror, they were passing the container. He talks about the humiliation of having to pass that container on without putting anything in it. He felt so bad that, for the rest of the fund drive, he also put in the dime his mother gave him to buy popcorn. Jim ends this section with the result of that all-American effort. He writes...

“Thanks to Dr. Jonas Salk, polio vaccine finally became a reality in 1955, seven years too late for me, but in time to prevent millions of other children from having to hear the diagnosis my parents heard on that fateful June day in 1948 when I became afflicted. Polio has been all but eradicated in the United States and most parts of the world, and

the March of Dimes has changed its focus primarily to children born with birth defects. I still give.”

Once Jim began attending school, he had to deal with many flights of stairs...a daunting task to say the least. I'm sure that as he struggled to climb those steps each day, he must have felt like all the eyes of the world were on him, thinking the kinds of things kids think when they see someone who is different. He tells the story of one student who definitely was watching him—although he wouldn't know it until many years later—Jan, a girl with a form of dwarfism who was a couple of years behind Jim. He hardly knew her and doesn't remember ever having a real conversation with her. But she emailed him many years later to let him know that she was watching him all those years ago and that he had had a profound influence on her life; he had been her inspiration. He writes...

“Several e-mails later, Jan telephoned me and we had a wonderful conversation, discussing the old days in Elnora. Then she got sentimental and told me what a great influence I had been on her life. She said, ‘You were with me when I graduated from high school, you were with me all through college, and you were even there when I walked down the aisle.’ I was dumbfounded.

Jan has spent her career teaching and working with adults afflicted with cerebral palsy. She said I was the inspiration that gave her the ‘can do’ attitude to accomplish anything she sets her mind to. I had no idea she was watching all those years ago.

Hopefully, we're all conducting our lives in a manner that merits other people watching us.”

I'd also like to share Jim's thoughts on Christmas music.

“I think everyone's most memorable Christmases are probably the ones recalled from...childhood. With one or two notable exceptions, they are all there in a big mental collage, without chronology or indexing. It does not matter, because we can see and feel them, even without the details. They are like warm thoughts and gifts that fit.

I knew ‘Jingle Bells’ and the other happy tunes of the season many years prior to hearing the heavenly “Hallelujah Chorus,” and I was singing ‘Silent Night’ long before I was old enough to grasp the wonder of its conception. The spirit of Christmas is an elusive feeling, sometimes almost ephemeral, but eventually strong enough to touch even the Scrooges among us. I not only feel it in the word of the Lord, but I also feel it in the music of the season.”

I'd like to share a short but profound email Jim wrote to me. It needs a little set up. Tony and I received another email from Jim about 6 years ago telling us he had just learned that he had pulmonary fibrosis. He told us to look it up. He didn't feel like talking about it right then, but it wasn't good. We looked it up and began the long period of support and grief as the disease

progressed. From that moment on, we all knew this day would come much sooner than we wanted it to. But there were still a lot of good times to be had and memories to be made.

During that time Carol discovered that a very promising drug was being tested. Some of you may know that Carol looked this drug up on the internet every day or two for several years as she followed it through the FDA approval process. She looked for drug trials, but Jim never qualified, mainly because he couldn't walk. Then there was one, just a year ago, that looked promising. When that fell through, I emailed Carol and Jim and expressed my anger and grief that he could not get this drug. Jim ended his reply with the following:

"Guess I was too early for the polio vaccine, too late for this treatment, but just in time for Carol. That makes it all ok."

That was Jim. Unfortunately, he was right that he was too late for the drug. It was finally approved a few months ago, and Jim was one of the first people, if not the first, in Indianapolis to be put on it. But by that time his disease had progressed too far. It was too late.

As you probably know, the Bible says that in terms of eternity, our lives are but an instant. In that vein, Jim wrote a poem summing up his life as if it happened in one day. He originally wrote it in 1973, then edited it in 1999 with a final edit in 2006. I'd like to share it with you:

MY LIFE IN A DAY by James E. Johnson

*In the middle of night, a boy-child was born.
He slept and he grew, and then came the dawn.
He awoke and went looking, and when no longer a teen,
Was married at six to his five o'clock dream.*

*At seven, a child, a cute little boy
Joined the young couple who bubbled with joy.
At eight came another, at nine came a girl.
The next hours, just loving, no child to unfurl.*

*The day passed so quickly; some thunderstorms came,
With occasional lightning to spice up the rain.
They lasted but seconds; the sun broke the clouds,
With loving, forgiving, and laughing aloud.*

*But now it is dark; the sun has gone down
To begin a new day on the far side of town.
As midnight draws near, he kisses his wife
And he knows in his heart that they've had a good life.*

During these last few years, one of my greatest pleasures was being able to witness the growth of Jim's Christian walk. He began attending this church, and he became involved in the card ministry. This was a job he took very seriously. He would talk about it and tell us what we were doing every time we visited. I know that God was a source of comfort to him during this time, and knowing that he would end up in the arms of Jesus made the inevitable less frightening. I will miss Jim. I miss him already. But there is joy in my grief.

I want to end with a Bible passage from Luke 7. This tells the story of John the Baptist, who was by this time in prison, beginning to have some doubts about whether Jesus was the Messiah. In the last part of this, I'm taking the liberty to change the order slightly, but it doesn't affect the meaning.

¹¹⁸ ...Calling two of [his disciples], ¹⁹ [John] sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

²⁰ When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'"

²¹ ²² Jesus replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard:

The good news is proclaimed to the poor. Those who have leprosy are cleansed, the dead are raised, the deaf hear, the blind receive sight...and the lame walk."

This is where my joy comes in. I get great pleasure when I imagine Jim being welcomed into heaven where a place had already been made and was waiting for him. It gives me comfort to imagine his relief at no longer having to struggle to breathe and no longer being afraid he won't be able to get his next breath. The freedom from this has to be wonderful, a huge relief.

But even better, I imagine him in his new body and for the first time in 67 years—since he was 4 years old—being able to walk. I see him running, jumping, maybe using the clouds for a trampoline as he jumps from one cloud to another... and even playing football for the first time, if they do such things in heaven. Whatever he needs or wants to do, he can now do. The sense of freedom must be exhilarating. And for that I give praise to God.