

Friend John

How do you love someone whose self has become a defense? My friend John found it easier to present outrageous escapades than the longings of his heart. At times we wondered: are gay sex and drugs really that important to him? We needed mercy to remind ourselves that the real John was much more than both.

I first met John 35 years ago, before AIDS even had a name. He then lived in West Hollywood from which he bounced to San Francisco then back, a ricochet driven by failed attempts at rehab and happiness.

The very fact that he could stand me at all was a miracle. Touched by the afflictions that drove him, I committed myself to self-restraint. What I surrendered he flaunted. Still he respected the faithful and adored his devout mother. He surprised us at times with extravagant gift-giving; he also demonstrated a sound mind and caring heart in his vocation as a nurse.

The healer could not bind up his own wounds. There were many: a precocious kid, John skipped grades early on and suffered a poor social adjustment. (His dad was in the war during much of his childhood.) He got kicked out of a church youth group and the Air-Force. He nearly lost his life when struck by a motorcycle from which he endured lifelong pain.

You could say the 'gay self' and its addictions were John's way of easing pain and navigating desire. That 'self' thickened and became prickly as years passed. He became more remote. Phone calls consisted of his rambling monologues that resisted real conversation. Possessing the frustration level of a child, John could not say he was sorry.

I saw John a few years back and could see the shadow of death on him. I asked him of faith: he admitted he had started going to a Catholic Church but said 'he believed none of it.' Just like him: never admit the need for common grace.

We lost track of John until we discovered a couple months ago that he had been hospitalized, was belligerent, and soon discharged. We flew to San Francisco where we found him living in near squalor. Suffering softened him a bit; his 'bad boy' bluff was fading. I found a small cross hanging in his apartment and he agreed in prayer that God in Christ was good and loving toward Him. He took our lead that we re-locate him to a place of dignity. He received our help as never before.

Two weeks ago, I received a call that John was found unconscious on the floor of his assisted-living apartment. I spent the day with him while he was taken off life-support. The staff assured me that he could hear what I said. (Wishful thinking? Who knows?) I said out loud everything that I had ever prayed in quiet for this previously armored man: battle prayers for his soul, imploring Jesus' mercy for him, honoring this one whom Jesus loves. He died a few days later.

Mercy frees us to love someone whose guarded self makes the true one hard to reach. Living water finds its ways around defensive walls. We who have been touched by mercy can see and summon what's real in others, however hidden the real has become. I pray that mercy has finally sated John's soul.

'This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all that He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.' (JN 6: 39, 40)